

The Didache: Its Origin And Significance

Title

This Church manual of primitive Christianity, or some section of it, also bears a longer title. "The Teaching of the Lord, through the Twelve Apostles, to the Gentiles", which gives us a clue to its nature. It may be a work conceived against the background of Mt. 28:18-20, professing to give the content of that which the twelve apostles taught to the 'Gentiles' or 'Nations' by the command of the Lord Jesus. It may therefore stand in a tradition somewhat different from the one that sees Paul as the Apostle to the Gentiles and the Twelve as missionaries to the Jews (cf. Gal. 2:9); instead the Twelve, representing the whole Church, are sent to the whole world, and especially to the Gentiles.

Shorter variations of this title (e.g. Teaching [or Teachings] of the Apostles) are cited by several patristic writers (e.g. Eusebius *HE*.iii,25.4.; Athanasius, *Festal Letter* 39; the ninth-century *Stichometry of Nicephorus*), but there is no way to be sure that they are identical to the work known by this name.¹

History

This work became known for the first time in the *Constantinople Manuscripts* discovered by Archbishop Bryennios in 1875 and published 1883. It has been dated at 1056 CE. and is kept in Jerusalem.

It was then possible to go back and see that the *Didache* in Greek was actually to be found (in a somewhat revised form) in Book VII of the 4th century *Egyptian Constitutions*. In addition there are fragments in Greek (*Oxyrhynchus Papyrus* 1782), Coptic, and Ethiopic, and a complete Gregorian version. For the 'Two Ways' section there is (besides the witness of *Barnabas* 18-20) a Latin version (the *Doctrina*) the 4th century *Apostolic Church Order*, and three other manuals of the 4th century or later.

We cannot be sure that the 1056 MS represents the 'original' *Didache* or even what 'original' means in this context. As with the NT we are dealing with textual variants, but "with a developing tradition, and our various witnesses to the *Didache* merely afford us glimpses of this tradition at various stages."²

Sitz Im Leben

Scholars suggest that the *Didache* reflects a backward church in a remote situation, Syria and Palestine being the most favoured with Egypt also as a possible source. It reflects a situation in which an undisclosed number of scattered rural Christian communities are given advice on a wide variety of practical subjects by an unknown author who uses the pseudonyms of the Twelve Apostles. This may suggest that no Christian leader had sufficient authority to issue these directives under his own name.

The 'author' and communities were familiar with itinerant apostles, prophets and teachers, some of which had even taken advantage of them (*Did.*11-13). It seems that the bishops and

deacons, mentioned only once, appear in a context clearly suggesting that they are appointed by the community and are regarded as performing the functions of prophets and teachers (*Did.* 15:1-2).

The travelling missionaries and prophets had the right to be supported by the churches (*Did.* 13:1) which was all too easily abused (11:5-6;12). The NT picture of the apostles and prophets coexisting with the local ministry of bishop is reflected in the *Didache*. Note, though, that the two-tiered ministry of bishops and deacons in the *Didache* differs from the Jerusalem church that had from the start a single figure at the head of the body of elders.

The regular Sunday worship of the Christians was primarily thanksgiving as attested by the earliest 2nd century texts (e.g. Ignatius and Justin Martyr). Justin's presiding bishop was entirely free in wording the great prayer of thanksgiving, but evidently in other churches (as the *Didache* displays) a more liturgical format was expected.

Well before the end of the 1st century it was customary to 'baptise' simply by pouring water on the head three times. The *Didache* refers to this, but recommends immersion in a fast running river or in a lake. Sprinkling was only permitted in the absence of a body of water.

The use of the 'Two Ways' Jewish tract, reference to the high priest, 'firstfruits' and 'Vine of David' suggest that it is a remote Jewish-Christian community. This leads logically to the question "At what point in Church History was this text first written?"

Date

Scholars argue dates as late as the 4th century, but the consensus places it c.100 CE. Some scholars have argued more recently for a date as early as 50 CE. that gives the *Didache* the widest range of dating estimates of any Christian book.

The *Didache* does not fit clearly into any period of liturgy or ministry for which we have documentation. Does it therefore belong to a period before such documentation? "This is the thesis advanced in the massive recent commentary by J.-P. Audst who concludes it was composed almost certainly in Antioch between 50 and 70."³ The case must rest on the many indications of genuine primitiveness in the *Didache* which point to a stage in the life of the church that is still that of the NT period itself.

Aune points out that the apostles mentioned several times in the *Didache* (11:3,4,6) are not associated with specific factions, a fact that suggests they belonged to an early period⁴. The prayers and thanksgiving are full of archaic terminology, echoing not only the servant (*pais*) Christology of the early speeches of Acts (*Did.*9:2f; 10:2f; Acts 3:13,26; 4:27,30) which Robinson calls "the earliest Christian liturgical sequence (*Did.*10:6; cf. 1 Corinthians 16:22-24)"⁵.

In *Did.* 9:1-3 the cup precedes the bread, as in 1 Corinthians 10:16 and Luke 22:17-19. The regulations about food (*Did.* 6:3) presupposed a period and milieu where the dietary question is still genuinely posed. We are in the age of itinerant apostles, prophets and teachers (11-13), and at a "point of transition from the ministry of prophets and teachers to that of bishops and deacons"⁶ where the former are not available for regular ministry in the local church (15:1f).

This transition is touched upon by Phil.1:1 and the Pastoral Epistles. C.H. Turner recognised that a "date between 80 and 100 is as early as we are prepared to admit" but "it does not follow that so early a date (i.e. 60) is inevitable."⁷

Like the epistle of James, it is content to leave doctrinal issues on one side. There is no polemic - as in the Pastorals - against heterodox or Gnostic tendencies within the church, merely a concern to maintain a practical distinction between Christians and Jews. The final chapter on eschatology aims much the same apocalyptic atmosphere as 1 & 2 Thessalonians (with which it has many parallels). "It displays dominical and traditional OT materials which seem to have been produced by the early church between 40 and 70"⁸. Yet in the Synoptics there is apparently no attempt to fuse this material with predictions of the destruction of the temple or the fall of Jerusalem. This, it is argued, suggests that it is composed either well before or well after these events.

There is little sign of the persecution or 'falling away' and with it the concern for consolidation in doctrine and structure, something Robinson sees as characteristic of the 60's. He is inclined to date the *Didache* between 40 and 60 assuming that all the NT canon had been written before c.80. Summing up, J.A. Kliest is honest: "If we admit an early date of composition, all the evidence is in favour of it; if we insist on a late date, we have to face a mass of conjectures and hypotheses."⁹ It appears that the pivotal point is 70 CE. The presuppositions of the scholar will determine which side he opts for: the majority cautiously hover around 100 CE.

Origin

F.E. Vokes, one of the late-date camp, in his work *The Riddle of the Didache*¹⁰, regards it as a fictitious reconstruction, but thinks that its object is to present and defend the 'New Prophecy' of the Montanist movement as 'apostolic'. He places it at the end of the 2nd century/beginning of the 3rd. Others argue for its dependence on the *Epistle of Barnabas* 18-20. He notes the similarity in the 'Two-Ways' section (*Did.* 1:1-6:2) the first half of the text having the closest parallels with *Barnabas*. The discovery of the *Qumran Manual of Discipline* has tilted the balance in favour of the view that both go back to common Jewish sources. The same applies to the much weaker case for the *Didache* is dependent on Hermas' *Shepherd*.

The *Didache*, like the gospels, must be seen as the product of a 'long' period in which there are at least three stages: first draft, final writing and re-writing. The Epistles, however, were written in a short period of time for specific occasions. For example see 1 Corinthians 1:14-16 for Paul's memory recall while writing. Its milieu is clearly Palestinian or Syrian and many have seen the most probable locations both for the *Didache* and of the Gospel of Matthew to be Antioch. "It is most likely to have represented the first formulated statement of 'the gospel' used by the apostles, teachers and prophets to whom the *Didache* refers (10:7-15:2), and whom Acts also mentions in connection with Antioch and its missionary work (Acts 13:1-3; 14:14)."¹¹

I see in the Gospels a type of the possible author. The Lord rebuked the disciples for hindering a man who, in faith and in the name of Jesus, was performing signs and wonders. He was not of the apostolic party, but knew enough of their mission to share in their authority. I view the author of the *Didache* as someone outside the Apostles but having enough

knowledge of their message (κηρυγμα) and teaching (*didache* - Acts 2:42) to speak with similar authority in their name. The recipients were Jewish Christians who most probably retained a certain Jewish flavour on resettling after fleeing to remote areas from persecution in Palestine and still displayed a level of primitive Christianity, not progressing as quickly with the wider Church. They were comparable to the 'time-warp' disciples in Ephesus (Acts 19).

Content

The *Didache* begins a moral exhortation for converts taken from an extant Jewish tract 'The Two Ways'. The idea of 'walking' in the light or darkness is transposed into an allegory (so *Did.* 1-6; *Barn.* 18-20; cf. 1QS. 3:20-21)¹². This section comes at the beginning (1:1-6:2) rather than at the end as in *Barnabas*. The 'Way of Life' is found in 1:2 - 4:14 and the 'Way of Death' in 5:1f, with a brief summary in 6:1-3. A traditional list of prohibitions based on the Ten Commandments is found in 2:1-7.

Did. 3:1-6 is another interpretation of the 'Two Ways'. "In good rabbinic fashion the author or compiler is 'building a fence around the law' (cf. *Mish. Pirke Aboth* i.1) by avoiding that which might even lead to sin."¹³

In *Did.* 7:1-4 the theme is baptism, with a clear indication that the 'Two Ways' material has functioned in the *Didache* as instruction designed for baptismal candidates. The Trinitarian formula of Mt. 28:19f is closely paralleled in 7:1. Chapter 8 deals with fasting and prayer, centring on a version of the Lord's prayer similar to that found in Matthew. A doxology is attached to the prayer, repeated later in chapter 9f, and is used with the eucharistic meal prayers. The prayers before and after the meal (9:1-5; 10:1-7 respectively) are traditional and very ancient, exhibiting a similarity with Jewish table prayers. The rest of the *Didache* addressed itself to the testing of travelling teachers, prophets and apostles (or missionaries) (11:1-12:5); the responsibility of the congregation to those found to be worthy (13:1-7); the Sunday gatherings for worship (14:1-3, possible eucharistic), the qualifications for resident teachers (bishops and deacons) with an appeal to have respect for them and to be at peace with one another (15:1-4). Finally there is a chapter of eschatological instruction, including a small apocalypse (cf. Mt.24) which sets forth the events leading up to the end of the age and the return of Christ (16:1-8).

Canon

Within the history of the NT canon the great Alexandrian, Origen (d.253/254), is of vital significance. "The most important thing was that for the first time, he determined which Scriptures had general ecclesiastical authority, and on this basis it could be inferred from the different classes of ecclesiastical writings were to be differentiated."¹⁴ He cites Hermas's *Shepherd* and *Didache* as γραφή, but he does not seem to have included them within the canon (although he does list *Barnabas* as part of the NT).

Eusebius of Caesarea in his *Church History* (c.303) classes the *Didache* as one of the νοθα (spurious) of his *antilegomena* class of Scriptures. Methodius of Olympus, who was an opponent of Origen in Asia Minor, quotes all 27 books of our NT as canonical, but also the

Apocalypse of Peter, and perhaps *Barnabas*, *Didache* and the document '*Concerning Virginity*' (falsely attributed to Athanasius), written in Egypt in the 4th century as $\gamma\rho\alpha\phi\eta$ also. The uncertainty concerning the limits of the NT canon was brought to an end for the Church in the East by the *39th Easter Festal Letter* of Athanasius in 367 CE. He, for the first time presented a firmly circumscribed canon of both the OT and NT. His NT canon is ours today. Along with the canonical writings he mentions two other classes, the second class being those scriptures rejected by the Church. The third class contained books to be read aloud, which may be used by the Church as baptismal instruction. The *Didache* (because of the 'Two Ways') fell into this class.

The New Testament

Dr. J.A.T. Robinson believes that the needs of teaching in the early Church would have led to a collection of sayings (e.g. Acts 10:37-41) which we call 'Q', 'M' and 'L'.

Out of these stories and sayings (under the influence of a variety of motives...) one may see emerging for the first time documents which could in a proper sense be described, not indeed as 'gospels' in the plural, a use not to be found until the last quarter of the second century, but as 'the gospel' in writing. This is the usage that appears to be reflected in the *Didache*.¹⁵

Assuming an early date (pre-70 CE.) for the *Didache*, Audst argues that the *Didache* is completely independent of our written Gospels. There is an increasing tendency to recognise that apparent quotations in this period are far more likely to reflect oral tradition. Even *Did.* 1:3b-5 which many take as a conflation of Matthew and Luke, Audst sees as representing common oral tradition. Is the *Didache*, therefore, valuable evidence for the prehistory of the synoptic problem? All this can be no more than educated guessing.

Features of the NT that demand a date in the latter half of the 1st century are: Tripartite formulae (Mt. 28:19; cf. *Did.* 7:1,3); doxology to the Lord's prayer (*Did.* 8:2) later incorporated in Matthew (6:13 marg.); the qualifications of bishops and deacons in the Pastorals (1 Timothy 3:2-13; Titus 1:5-9; *Did.* 15:1); the instructions about hospitality in the Johannine epistles (2 John 10f.; 2 John 8-10; cf. *Did.* 14:1); and maybe the phrase the 'apostles and prophets' in Ephesians and Revelation (Eph. 2:20; 3:5; Revelation 18:20; cf. *Did.* 11:3).

Matthew

Some scholars (e.g. Grant)¹⁶ have determined that the Didachist probably knew Matthew, but Grant qualifies this, arguing that "his [the Didachist's] primary authority must be tradition whether oral or written rather than documents". The authority of Christ in *Did.* 9:5; 15:3 passing on to the 'literarily fixed gospel tradition' is seen as highly questionable by W.G. Kummel.¹⁷

Although they are closest to the Matthean tradition the quotations cannot be demonstrated to depend on the canonical gospel of Matthew. Audet argues that they still reflect a period before our Gospels were completed and throw valuable light on their prehistory. Robinson, for the sake of argument, calls it proto-Matthew.¹⁸

John

Traditionally the Gospel of John has been viewed as the last of the canonical Gospels, and this view is still generally held today. One of the reasons for such late dating is the lack of clear knowledge of the fourth Gospel by early Christian writers. "Scholars differ as to whether traces can be found in *I Clement*, *Barnabas*, the *Didache*, Ignatius, the *Shepherd of Hermas* or even the *Odes of Solomon*. Most are inclined to a negative verdict."¹⁹

Dodd²⁰, on the other hand, sees points of contact between the prayers of the *Didache* and the Fourth Gospel. Moffatt²¹ suggests that if the *Didache* represents the sacramental prayers of the Palestinian and Syrian Church, they may have been known to the author of the Fourth Gospel (i.e. chapters 6 & 17).

Acts

Schille²² suggests that itineracy in Acts is more in line with the missionary policy reflected in the *Didache* than that of the Apostolic Age. The advice to stay only a day or so does not deal with the problem of the longer time needed for established churches. Schille, however, has not taken into account the possibility of a pre-70 CE. *Didache* and is too sweeping in his remarks on the nature of itineracy in Acts.²³

James

"The atmosphere and situation resemble the moralism of the *Didache*, the distinctively religious tenets are assumed rather than proclaimed."²⁴ The early compromise of *Did.6:3*²⁵ (perhaps reflecting the situation in mixed Antioch?) is not found in James. In contrasting James with the *Didache* there are no instructions about worship or the sacraments; James' 'Manual of Discipline' (Reickes' designation of James 5:12-20) contents itself with simple injunctions on swearing, ministry to the sick. There is no reference to orders of Christian ministry, whereas *Did. 13:2; 15:1* has a hierarchy of ministry. (All comparisons are limited and depend on the exegetes own limited understanding and ability to handle the evidence, although the comparison in this case seems valid.)

Jude

Almost the only document that presents any resemblance to Jude is the *Didache* where *Did. 2:7* recalls the similar triple sentence of Jude 22-23 (cf. also *Did. 3:6 & Jude 8-10*). R. J. Bauckham points out that although the *Didache* shows the influence of Jude, there is no really convincing case of dependence.²⁶ He argues concerning *Did. 2:7 & Jude 22,23* that "It is... possible that the *Did.* preserves a piece of traditional Christian teaching that distinguished two classes of sinners (some to be reprovved and reclaimed; others, more hardened, for whom it is only possible to pray), and that Jude rephrased this tradition in his own words..."²⁷

Revelation

There are indications that early Christianity very quickly employed, and developed in an independent way apocalyptic concepts. Still later a Christian apocalyptic literature was formed in which Jewish apocalypses were edited from a Christian standpoint and new apocalypses were written. *Did.*16 is one of these, along with the *Apocalypse of Peter* and *Shepherd of Hermas* (pre-middle 2nd century).²⁸

Pseudonymity

There is much debate over the presuppositions for pseudepigraphic writing in the NT, but

even if the Sitz im Leben of religious pseudepigraphic writings has not yet been adequately explained, there still exists in any event no ground for declaring that pseudepigraphic writings is impossible for the N.T. epistles, or that it precludes truthfulness. The *Didache* is an example of later primitive Christianity.²⁹

Other types of pseudonymity exist in Judaism. In agreement is W. Telfer³⁰ who thinks that it is a pseudigraph that is "supposed to be the work of the apostolic council of Jerusalem narrated in Acts 15".³¹

Aland appeals to the *Didache* as the key to the transition from anonymity to pseudonymity, because it claims to be the teaching through the twelve apostles³². Guthrie points out that the *Didache's* vague reference to the Apostles differs from that you would expect from an author who writes in another's name. If the *Didache* is the best example available, then we have to ask why the movement towards personal authorship went any further. "Why are the Pastorals attributed to Paul? Was this because it was seen to be more effective method than the vaguer *Didache*?"³³

Whatever the initial presuppositions in the debate about pseudonymity in the NT, the *Didache* can be used either way with much depending on the assumed date of composition.

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⁵ Robinson, 325.

⁶ Robinson, 325.

⁷ C.H. Turner, cited in Robinson, 326.

⁸ Robinson, 326.

⁹ J.A. Kleist, cited in Robinson, 327.

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¹² S.S. Smalley, 'I,II, III John', *Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol. 51. (Texas: Word, 1984), 23.

¹³ Michaels, 207.

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¹⁵ Robinson, 96.

¹⁶ Grant. *Cambridge History of the Bible*, Vol. 1. (Cambridge: CUP, 1970), 291.

¹⁷ Kümmel, 480.

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²⁴ Moffatt, 471.

²⁵ cf. Acts 15:20.

²⁶ Richard J. Bauckham, 'Jude, 2 Peter', *Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol.50. (Texas:Word, 1983), 16.

²⁷ Bauckham, 111.

²⁸ Kümmel, 455.

²⁹ Kümmel, 363.

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