

In the recent exchange that I posted on the blog (dealing with the existence of Q) the document known as the Didache was mentioned – especially by guest contributor Alan Garrow, who thinks that the Didache was a source used by the authors of Matthew and Luke. I think even Alan will agree that this is a highly anomalous view; I don't know of any other scholar who accepts it (though if Alan knows of any who do, I'm sure he can tell us in a comment). The Didache is almost always assumed to have quoted the Gospels – or at least the traditions found in the Gospels – not vice versa.

But what is the Didache (pronounced DID-ah-kay)? Ah, that's the prior question. And I realized this morning that I haven't talked about it much on the blog. I better do so!

I published a translation of the Didache (the title means “Teaching”) in my two-volume edition of the Apostolic Fathers in 2003, in the Loeb Classical Library (Harvard University Press). In that edition I talk about what the book is, whether it is one book or several documents that have been cut and pasted together, when it was written, and so on. That may be useful information for the blog, and so I will give it over the course of two or three posts.

I have edited my Introduction slightly to make it a bit more user friendly (it was written for scholars and advanced students). Here is the opening of the Introduction, where I explain briefly something about its discovery and contents.

Few manuscript discoveries of modern times have created the stir caused by the discovery and publication of the Didache in the late nineteenth century. Found by Philotheos Bryennios in 1873 in the Library of the Holy Sepulchre in Constantinople and published by him ten years later, the Didache was immediately seen to be one of most important literary remains of early Christianity outside of the New Testament. For here was not only...

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For here was not only an early presentation of the ethical teachings known as the “two paths” (or the “two ways”), familiar already from the Epistle of Barnabas and later texts (see below), but also the earliest surviving descriptive account of the Christian rituals of baptism and eucharist, along with instructions involving itinerant Christian apostles and prophets in an age before the church hierarchy of bishop, presbyters, and deacons was firmly in place.

Some scholars immediately recognized the antiquity of the account, dating it to the beginning of the second century or the end of the first, before even some of the books of the New Testament were written. Almost everyone realized that here at last was a book that had achieved near-canonical status in some early Christian circles, known by title from discussions of the church Fathers but for the most part lost to history sometime after the fourth century.

Overview

The Didache is given two titles in the only complete manuscript: “The Teaching (Greek: DIDACHE) of the Twelve Apostles,” and, immediately following, “The Teaching of the Lord Through the Twelve Apostles to the Gentiles.” Neither title claims that the book was

actually written by the apostles, simply that it conveys their teachings; it is, therefore, anonymous rather than pseudonymous. The book as a whole is usually considered a “church manual” or a “church order,” the first of its kind to survive.

The Didache begins with a set of ethical instructions known as the “two paths, one of life and one of death” (1.1). The path that leads to life involves following the commandments of God, principally the commandment to love God and one’s neighbor, and to adhere to the “Golden Rule” (1.2). The first four chapters of the book explicate these commandments, first in words that reflect the teachings of Jesus (without naming him), especially as found in the Sermon on the Mount (ch. 1), then in a series of positive and negative ethical injunctions (chs. 2-4). The path that leads to death involves contrary sorts of behavior, as delineated in chapter 5.

After a transitional chapter, the author shifts to discuss church ritual, explaining how to baptize (ch. 7), fast (8.1), pray (8.2), and celebrate the communal thanksgiving meal or eucharist (chs. 9-10; giving the appropriate eucharistic prayers).

Attention then shifts in chapter 11 to the question of how to deal with itinerant Christian teachers, apostles, and, especially, prophets, indicating their special status before God but warning of possible abuses. Following then some further instructions for communal worship (ch. 14) and life (ch. 15), including the need to “elect ... bishops and deacons,” the discussion moves to a concluding apocalyptic scenario, which indicates what will happen in the final days when havoc breaks out on earth before the final coming of the Lord “on the clouds of the sky.” The text breaks off abruptly at this point. Possibly its original ending was lost.

In my next post I will discuss the book’s “integrity” – a term that, for scholars, does not refer to its “honesty” but to its compositional history, that is, whether it was a single book written by a single author or if it represents several writings cut and pasted together. If it is a cut-and-paste job, when was that job completed? And when were the writings that were cut and pasted together themselves written? Intriguing questions for the literary historian of early Christianity!



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