

The Didache and the Torah: A Literature Review

Introduction

THE *Διδαχή*, (HEREAFTER DIDACHE) or to use its longer (incipit) title *Διδαχή κυρίου διὰ τῶν δώδεκα ἀποστόλων τοῖς ἔθνεσιν*, had for centuries been known to exist, but only as a lost writing, by references and allusions to it.¹ With that background, it is no surprise that Philotheos Bryennios' 1873 discovery and 1883 publication of his *editio princeps* of the Didache was the cause of a mini sensation and a flurry of scholarship. What has followed in the subsequent century and a half has been an inexorable procession of academic work, generally reflecting the interests and attitudes of the scholarship of its day. It will be seen that while some great progress has been made over the decades, the Didachist's reception of the Torah, particularly in respect to his application of it to gentile converts and the implications of that in terms of church unity, have not been adequately examined. Furthermore, where they have been examined, the conclusions reached have not been tenable due to lack of clarity regarding what the Didachist was requiring in terms of Torah observance.

In this short literature survey, particular attention will be given to the intractable issues regarding the Didache's provenance and date and to the almost equally difficult questions surrounding the Didache's redactional development. The positions taken on these issues have a significant bearing

1. Various modern writers provide helpful surveys of direct references to the *Didache* as well as to quotations and allusions to it in early church literature, such as Audet, *La Didachè*, 79–90; Niederwimmer, *The Didache*, 4–17; Sandt and Flusser, *The Didache*, 1–6. In short, the chief ancient witnesses are Pseudo-Cyprian in *Adversus Aleatores* 4, Eusebius in *Hist. eccl.* 3.25.1–7, Athanasius in *Ep. fest.* 39, and *Apostolic Constitutions* 7.

on the views one might hold regarding the Didachist's community and its practices, not to mention the beliefs that those practices might imply. In particular, these issues are critical for determining the relationship of Jews and gentiles within the Didachist's community, and the relevance of Torah to its adherents. The following pages comprise a survey of that scholarship, particularly as it relates to issues concerning the community of the Didache and its relationship to its social and theological milieu.

Excitement and Expertise

Following the Didache's publication, the initial flurry of scholarship applied to it was markedly competent and prescient. Philotheos Bryennios' *editio princeps* provided an introduction, selection of comparable ancient texts, and of course a well-annotated text of the Didache itself.² Cautiously and reasonably for his time, Bryennios set the date of the Didache as sometime between 120 CE and 160 CE.

Having been given a considerable "leg up," a flood of popular literature was inevitable. Numerous short tracts were written, in various European languages, typically small in size, in pocketbook form. In such a booklet, Emil Peterson, in fifteen brief pages, hailed the Didache and its contents as a "*berühmten Funde*" comparable to the find of the Codex Sinaiticus.³ Approaching it with a bit less enthusiasm, Alexander Gordon took just three pages to describe this "relic of Christian antiquity" but then provided his own translation in his little tract.⁴ Significantly, he realized right away that "Neither Bryennios . . . nor his reviewers, have called attention to a very remarkable phenomenon. . . . The treatise is not homogeneous. It exhibits at least three distinct strata."⁵ In slightly longer format, some twenty-nine pages, J. Fitzgerald provided readers with a copy of the Greek text and translation with the barest of introduction. Taking a minimalist view, he suggested that "the 'Teaching' has no bearing upon any of the points contested among the several divisions of the Christian Church, save one—the mode

2. Sabatier pays tribute to the very first writers, saying of the abundance of literature quickly published after Bryennios' *édition princeps*: "*Il est bon de le reconnaître, ils ont été singulièrement facilités par le commentaires et les prolégomènes dont Mgr Bryennios a enrichi son édition*" (1885, 3). Hitchcock and Brown concurred with Bryennios on the date in their small 1884 tract, representative of so many at the time, titled *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*.

3. Petersen, *Die Lehre*, 3.

4. Gordon, *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, 3.

5. Gordon, *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, 4.

of baptizing.”⁶ Similarly, Gardiner and Cyrus Camp also published notes and a translation. Interestingly, on the basis of its non-Christological and non-doctrinal content, it was their opinion that the work was written for non-Christianized pagans and that it “was written before the Epistles of S. Paul . . . had become known and accepted in the Church.”⁷ In an initial translation published with notes, Roswell Hitchcock and Francis Brown claimed the document “undoubtedly belongs to the second century.”⁸ Of all of these preliminary tracts, the most substantial was that of Augustus De Romestin, who at this early date saw the signs of an oral genesis to the work, having “been taught orally and then committed to memory by those who had to teach others.”⁹ Thus it was that even from the very beginning, opinions were varied regarding almost every aspect of the Didache.

Time for reflection and research contributed to the rising flood, with more in-depth Didache research following soon after. A year later, upon considering the Didache’s evident priority to Barnabas, Hitchcock and Brown wrote in their now much expanded study “we shall be inclined to put the date of the *Teaching* not far from A.D. 100.”¹⁰ Already in 1885 Paul Sabatier was able to interact with other published scholars, carefully defending the Didache’s Jewish and Palestinian origins,¹¹ as well as the work’s priority over Barnabas¹² and placing it “en Syrie, vers le milieu du premier siècle.”¹³ At the same time, the Cambridge scholar J. Rendel Harris found a significant number of verbal affinities between the Didache and the Sibylline Oracles. He thus came to the conclusion that the Didache had had an influence on the Sybillists: “I think we may remark in each of the immediately preceding instances, that the Teaching has been directly versified by the Sibyllist or Ps. Phocylides.”¹⁴ Contrasting his view to that of Sabatier, Harris emphasized the possibility that the Didache in parts harks back to the pre-Christian era. Two years later, Harris was able to greatly expand his comparison of the Didache to other early Christian texts, as was typical of Didache scholarship in general.

6. Fitzgerald, *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, 4.

7. Gardiner and Camp, *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, 2.

8. Hitchcock and Brown, *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, v.

9. Romestin, *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, 4.

10. Hitchcock and Brown, *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* (1885), xci.

11. Sabatier, *La Didachè*, 71.

12. Sabatier, *La Didachè*, 83.

13. Sabatier, *La Didachè*, 159.

14. Harris, *The Teaching of the Apostles*, 11.

In this first flush of excitement, three scholars stood out, and still stand out today. Adolf von Harnack,¹⁵ Philip Schaff,¹⁶ and Charles Taylor.¹⁷ Harnack, accepting the Bryennios MS as reliable argued: “Die Gliederung des Stoffes in der Didache ist eine so logische und strenge, dass von ihr aus das beste Argument für die Integrität des uns überlieferten Textes . . .”¹⁸ Within a year, he translated the Didache into German complete with commentary and a full prolegomenon discussing the relevant issues of text, provenance, dating, and purpose of the document. His work would have tremendous influence in the years to come, serving as a sort of benchmark for future scholars.

Benefitting from Harnack’s contribution as well as the scores of lesser works, Philip Schaff was likewise quite positive about the value of the Didache from a historical perspective. Having carefully analyzed the work Schaff he decided “clearly in favour both of its priority and superiority” to Barnabas, as well as asserting a Syrian origin and a date between 70 and 100 CE. It is with this presupposition that he became the first to address the role of the Law in the Didache, interpreting the Didachist’s position as adhering to the Jerusalem Council and James’ “law of liberty” (James 1:25).¹⁹

In 1885, Taylor also weighed in with two lectures, which were published in 1886. Working along a similar vein, he catalogued a remarkable number of Talmudic comparisons to the Didache. Certain of its Jewish composition, he viewed it as “only a skeleton of the fuller tradition referred to in the New Testament as *The Teaching*.”²⁰ This he saw as evidenced by the Didachist’s Judaistic approach to the Torah. He observed that the “author, being a Jew . . . set himself to make a fence to the negative commandments from the sixth onward.”²¹ According to James Heron a few years later, Taylor

15. Harnack and Gebhardt, *Die Lehre der zwölf Apostel*.

16. Schaff, *The Oldest Church Manual*.

17. Taylor, *The Teaching*.

18. Harnack and Gebhardt, *Die Lehre der zwölf Apostel*, 37.

19. Schaff asserts of the Didachist: “He abstains from all polemics against the Jewish religion, and thereby differs strongly from the author of the Epistle of Barnabas. He enjoins the recital of the Lord’s Prayer three times a day, in evident imitation of the Jewish hours of prayer. He abhors the eating of meat offered to the gods as a contamination with idolatry, and adheres to the compromise measures of the Council of Jerusalem, over which James presided. He even seems to recommend the bearing of the whole yoke of the law as a way to perfection, but he is far from requiring it or casting reflection upon the more liberal gentile Christians. The whole sum of religion consists for him in perfect love to God and to our fellow-men as commanded in the Gospel, or in what James calls ‘the perfect law of liberty’ (i. 25).” *The Oldest Church Manual*, 126.

20. Taylor, *The Teaching*, vi.

21. Taylor, *The Teaching*, 29.

provided “the ablest and most thorough discussion of the question we have seen.”²² Such an early date suited Taylor’s position that the *Didache*’s origins are from a very early date when the church was more Jewish in composition. In concert with these views, he held that the *Didache* preceded both Barnabas and Hermas.²³ And if more “Jewish” implied less creedal in those days, it also tied in with the fact that, as Taylor says, “the theology of the *Didache* is the theology which underlies it.”²⁴

A few years made a big difference in this early phase of research. Following up on his previous publication, Harris was able to expand on his research into the place the *Didache* had in early Christian literature. Just two years later he was able to produce a substantial work that included comparisons to works such as the Oracles, Hermas, the Apostolic Constitutions, and more. Along with Harnack and Taylor, to whom he paid tribute, Harris continued the dialogue regarding the *Didache*’s source, cautioning the reader that “whatever theory may be adopted with regard to the Teaching, whether we regard it as Jewish with Christian glosses, as Christian, or as a document emanating from some primitive heresy, our judgment with regard to it will have to take account of Hebraisms in style and in thought which colour the book almost from beginning to end.”²⁵ This was echoed by George Allen a few years later, who compared the “directness of the subject matter” to “the grotesque and fanciful manner of other writings of similar date.”²⁶ Thus the inquiry into the *Didache*’s home community was in full swing, and tended to support the concept of a Jewish source. Yet, as Heron told his readers, “there is nothing of a Judaizing tendency in the book, and that though the writer was, in all probability, a *Jewish* Christian, he was certainly not a *Judaizing* Christian.”²⁷ In this first phase of *Didache* research then, an awareness of the probable Jewish source behind it began to give rise to ruminations concerning the Didachist’s application of the Torah to gentiles.

The Lost Decades of *Didache* Research, 1903–58

Paradoxically, the British scholar who first announced the publication of the *Didache* in 1884²⁸ was also one of its greatest critics. In the following

22. Heron, *The Church of the Sub-Apostolic Age*, 57.

23. Taylor, *The Teaching*, 167.

24. Taylor, *The Teaching*, 167.

25. Harris, *The Teaching of the Apostles: Newly Edited*, 78.

26. Allen, *The Didache*, xvi.

27. Heron, *The Church of the Sub-Apostolic Age*, 75.

28. Interestingly, “In England the first notice of the *Didache* appeared in the

decades, J. Armitage Robinson influentially took a minimalist position and cast grave doubts upon the authenticity and early date of the Didache. In 1912, he thus wrote in an article called “The Problem of the Didache” that “he [the Didachist] contributes almost nothing, except doubtful exegesis, to advance our knowledge of the early Christian ministry.”²⁹ A few years later, he had advanced his opinion in this regard to such an extent that he was ready to discard “the almost universally accepted theory of an original Jewish ‘Two Ways.’”³⁰ Robinson was also highly dubious of the antiquity of the text which Bryennios had published (given, of course, the indisputable eleventh-century origin of Codex *Hierosolymitanus* in which it was found). Challenging its early origin and any significant Jewish input into the Didache, he paradoxically left some threads untied. By way of example, he charged that “following his own fundamental principle” the Didachist has changed “the Golden Rule from the positive to the negative form.”³¹ In light of the fact that various negative forms are preserved in early Jewish literature, it would seem that this would have pointed him towards a Jewish origin rather than away from it.

Nevertheless, some, such as Richard Connolly, stood up for the textual integrity of the Bryennios MS,³² but this didn’t compellingly detract from Robinson’s argument for a late date. Others, such as Gregory Dix, supported Robinson’s view. Dix, viewing the Didache as dependent on Tatian’s *Diatessaron*, dated it as sometime between 175 and 230 CE.³³ So it was that Burnett Streeter finally stated “Unless somebody says something soon on the other side, the case may seem to go [to Robinson] by default.”³⁴ Reviewing cases where Robinson’s “school” took parallels between the Didache and Barnabas as proving the former’s dependence on the latter, he asked the question begging to be asked, asserting that the opposite was the case, that Barnabas was dependent on the Didache. Then, referring to the *Sitz im Leben* evident in the Didache, he reiterated the earlier date preferred by the earlier generation of Didache scholars.³⁵

‘Durham University Journal’ for February 1884, by Rev. A. Robertson, Principal of Hatfield Hall, Durham.” By this 3rd edition of Schaff’s work (1889), the *Didache* had already attracted enough scholarly interest for him to devote a full chapter to the Didache literature.

29. Robinson, “The Problem of the Didache,” 354.

30. Robinson, *Barnabas, Hermas and the Didache*, 4.

31. Robinson, *Barnabas, Hermas and the Didache*, 48.

32. Connolly, “The *Didache* in the *Didascalia*,” 157.

33. Dix, “Didache and Diatessaron,” 250.

34. Streeter, “The Much-Belaboured Didache,” 369.

35. Streeter, “The Much-Belaboured Didache,” 374.

The debate proceeding at full tilt now prompted Frederick Vokes to write in depth in a book titled *The Riddle of the Didache: Fact, Fiction or Catholicism?*³⁶ Vokes' solution was somewhat novel, and controversial in itself. Concluding on the basis of the literary evidence that it was written "in the last third of the second century or the first third of the third century,"³⁷ Vokes positioned it on the fringes of the Montanist movement, writing "This will explain many of the problems of the Didache."³⁸ In short, Vokes represents the difficulties of the time, still not completely overcome, in trying to reconstruct the Didache's place in history while suffering from what was really a paucity of data.

An interesting contrast to Vokes is provided in William Telfer's articles, published twice in the *JTS*. Propounding what he called the "Antioch hypothesis," he suggested that in the Didachist's days "Docetism was moribund, and Antioch had not yet felt the impact of Marcionism and Montanism."³⁹ Like Vokes, he testified to the contemporary difficulties in regard to determining the Didache's date and provenance. Well into the 1950s however, Robinson's influence was still to be keenly felt in the study of the Didache⁴⁰ and the field continued to falter under a cloud of unresolved questions.

Skeptical source-critical evaluations of H understandably discouraged enquiry into its Jewish sources and reception of the Torah. Indeed, Telfer considered it to be "fiction" and believed the direction of enquiry should be to uncover its "plot" as in any work of fiction.⁴¹ It is fair to say that very little of any consequence was written regarding the Didachean community or its beliefs, let alone its reception of the Torah, during this period.

A Change of Tide

The tide of crippling skepticism began to turn with the discovery and gradual availability to scholars of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The tide was turned by Jean-Paul Audet, a Canadian scholar, in a seminal paper entitled *Affinités littéraires et doctrinales du «Manuel de discipline.»*⁴² In addition to pointing out similarities between the Didache and the *Serek Hayahad* (=1QS,

36. Vokes, *The Riddle of the Didache*.

37. Vokes, *The Riddle of the Didache*, 87.

38. Vokes, *The Riddle of the Didache*, 117.

39. Telfer, "The *Didache* and the Synod," 133.

40. Moule, "A Note on *Didache* IX.4," 243.

41. Telfer, "The 'Plot' of the *Didache*," 141.

42. Audet, "Affinités littéraires et doctrinales."

=Manual of Discipline, =Community Rule), he reviewed and assimilated the discussion of the previous sixty-five years. His subsequent high quality in-depth review, source-critical analysis, and commentary was the first of its kind since the nineteenth century. Agreeing with Streeter against Robinson, he argued persuasively that “La Didachè est contemporaine des premiers écrits évangéliques.”⁴³ Rightly noting that the “patrie” of the Didache “est déjà partiellement impliquée dans leur date,”⁴⁴ he excluded Egypt as a possibility, bringing forth a series of eleven points to prove that the manual originated in Antioch.⁴⁵ On this basis, he viewed the instructive form of the Didache as “naturel” and its intent to give “instructions et des directives, sans prétendre, au moins dans la forme, au niveau supérieur de la «loi».”⁴⁶ On this basis therefore, Audet’s over 200 pages of commentary paid particular attention to the Jewish aspects of the Didache’s composition, as in his discussion of the eucharistic benediction of Did. 9 in light of the Jewish mealtime blessings preserved in the Mishnah, namely Ber. 6.⁴⁷ Pierre Nautin put it nicely: “Le P. Audet a probablement donné le coup de grâce à la théorie de Robinson.”⁴⁸

While not settling all of the Didache’s intractable problems regarding sources and provenance, the new lines of enquiry did accentuate related questions regarding its reception of the Torah and open up new discussions. Vööbus opposed Audet’s arguments for Syrian origin, writing that “this view . . . provides no explanation for a very embarrassing problem—the silence about Paul and his work. This makes it virtually impossible for the Didache to have originated in Syria. . . . The logical choice is Egypt.”⁴⁹ On the other hand he was appreciative of the Didache’s connection to Jewish tradition, as he himself saw that the Didache’s “[Eucharistic] prayers are shot through and through with Jewish and Jewish Christian features.”⁵⁰

In addition to Audet, other French scholars also asserted the Didache’s early origins. Thus Stanislav Giet, after surveying various parallel texts, concluded regarding the Two Ways section that “Cette courte mais substantielle catéchèse juive qui se let à travers l’enseignement chrétien des deux voies, devait être assez courante, au moins dans certains milieux, au début du

43. Audet, *La Didachè*, 197.

44. Audet, *La Didachè*, 206.

45. Audet, *La Didachè*, 210.

46. Audet, *La Didachè*, 250.

47. Audet, *La Didachè*, 399.

48. Nautin, “La composition,” 192.

49. Vööbus, *Liturgical Traditions*, 14.

50. Vööbus, *Liturgical Traditions*, 159.

premier siècle.”⁵¹ Viewing the Didache not as the product of one author, but a document that must have developed and changed over time while still remaining true to its sources, he therefore assigned a variety of potential dates to the various underlying sources. This approach held much promise, but due to its speculative nature could not produce an assured result. Nevertheless, Giet had made a qualitative contribution to the discussion. These developments in French scholarship provided a basis for Willy Rordorf and André Tuilier to combine the best of both worlds. Building on Audet and Giet’s contributions, their conclusion was therefore that “il est dès lors évident que nous sommes en présence d’une tradition persistante en Syrie et en Palestine dans les premiers temps du christianisme.”⁵²

As a consequence, other scholars began to grapple with the text and sources of the Didache. B. C. Butler argued that Did. 16 was based on Luke, or “Proto-Luke,” and a form of the Synoptic tradition indistinguishable from Matthew.⁵³ A year later this was expanded into an enquiry into the Two Ways material, with Butler presciently acknowledging that if Audet was right, “There existed, say about A.D. 30, a Jewish form of the Two Ways theme in Greek dress, as different from the example preserved in The Manual of Discipline as it was similar to B [Barnabas], D [Didache], and LD [*Doctrina apostolorum*]’s examples.”⁵⁴ About the same time, A. Stuiber, comparing Did. 6.2–3 and its reference to the yoke of the Lord with the *Doctrina apostolorum*, concluded that it was “einen jüdischen Nachtrag zur Zweiwegelehre” and that “Die juden-christliche Interpretation wird dem Inhalt unserer Verse voll Gerecht.”⁵⁵ In this way, attention to the sources of the Didache was opening the door to enquiry as to its application of the Torah to gentiles.

Didache Studies Revived

What had essentially been a quiet upswing in Didache research was soon to become much more pronounced. In the first phase of this revival, Jonathan Draper completed a dissertation commenting on the Didache in light of the DSS in 1983,⁵⁶ and in 1989 Kurt Niederwimmer published

51. Giet, *L'énigme de la Didachè*, 149, 170.

52. Rordorf and Tuilier, *La Doctrine Des Douze Apôtres*, 62.

53. Butler, “The Literary Relations,” 283.

54. Butler, “The ‘Two Ways,’” 38.

55. Stuiber, “Das ganze Joch des Herrn,” 329.

56. Draper, *A Commentary on the Didache*, PhD.