

On to the Past, Back to the Future
(What needs to be discarded, challenged, or radically renewed?)

Paradoxical title not only calls for critical look at Didache before attempting to project it into the future, but also begs the question of priority: is Didache oldest Xn document?

3 rivals: Q, Th, 1 Thess. – all have been assigned dates of 40 to 50 CE – 20-30 years before Mk, half a century before Jn. °Didache reflects early form of Xty that predates even Paul° (CJ); °Holds the secret of how an insignificant Galilean Jew came to attract and convert the world° (AM). Some “hear echoes” of Mt *et al.* in Did – esp. 1:5 (other cheek, coat & tunic, second mile). But Mt used Q and shares parables w/ Th; and the “rapture” in 1 Thess likely came from Jewish apocalyptic – perhaps same source as that reflected in Did 16.

“Echoes” may be of oral traditions first recorded in a MS from a now unknown Jewish-Christian community that was eager to convert Gentiles to a new and better way of life. Besides, like Q and Th, Did evolved from oral roots and shows signs of revision and expansion; thus what we have is the final copy of a work long in progress (40 – 110?) . Worth noting in this regard that chs 9 & 10 present two quite different eucharistic liturgies, and that in 9, the later of the two, we find the only use of “Christ” in the text. Crossan and others see this likely an insertion / addition reflecting a later version.

Who wrote it? Likely Galilean “Jesus Jews” (incl. original followers?), possibly incl. some of the native-born administrative scribes who are likely the source of Q (WA). Whoever they were, their church manual was lost for c. 1500 years until in 1873 Archb. Philotheos Byrennios discovered a copy in a bound volume of early church documents in Istanbul.

What does it contain? 100 verses (about same length as Sermon on the Mount – 110). 1) A detailed catechism, The Way of Life and the Way of Death – four chs of “do’s” and one of “don’t’s” – constituting 44% of the text. 2) Five chs that prescribe correct ways of eating, baptizing, fasting, and praying take up 24%. 3) Two chs tell how to deal with visitors – welcome and unwelcome (15%); and 4) three govern the distribution of goods, community governance, and offering proper sacrifices (10%). 5) The final ch contains both apocalyptic warnings and the hope of salvation for those who persevere in the faith (9%).

What’s “missing”? Most of what you expect in a gospel. Not even the collected sayings of Js that comprise Q & Th – and like those early gospels, no biography, no divine sonship, no death, resurrection, second coming, afterlife, or substitutionary sacrifice for salvation of believers. No rqr. beliefs! Instead, repeated demands for actions that show obedience to “the Lord” (usually God, occasionally Js) and reverence for his servants David and Js – who in ch 9 get equal “billing”!

Only overt supernaturalism is in ch 16’s apocalyptic portrayal of imminent time of testing, faithful saved, advent of Kingdom w/ Lord (God, not Js) coming in glory. (Post 70 CE ?)

“Deeds, not words” the central theme; like Qumran Manual of Directions and Community Rules: very Jewish. And thus may reflect °earliest beginnings of the Christ myth.° (WD)

Brief overview to see how first Christians might help us avoid being the last.

Two Ways: 1:1-2 classic theme of Greek philosophy and Jewish Wisdom: note Ps 1 (way of righteous, wicked); Dt 30:15-16, (life & prosperity, death & adversity).

Ch 1-5: Rules: ch 1, 2, 5 mostly in second singular, indicative, but 1:3-5a imperative; from Mt or oral source?; later insertion (CJ); 3&4 shift to imperative, Δ tone – “my child”. Decalogue Cmd 2, 4, 5 omitted – likely to accommodate Roman culture (AM).

Ch 6 – transition: ‘Don’t be led astray, and if you can’t be perfect, do your best; but never eat food sacrificed to idols.’ Again, accommodation – but there are limits!

Ch 7 – Baptism: Δ rituals for Δ communities? Lack of access to water? Natural is best, but... Again note allowances made. Here and afterwards all plurals – shift in focus?

Ch 8 – Fasting and Prayer: like baptism, indicate sense of Δ status of Did. people; prayer from Mt or common source? Doxology (from 1 Chron) 29: 10-11 not in Mt or Lk; early addition? “Lord’s gospel” likely means “God’s good news” (AM)

Ch 10 – earliest of two Eucharist (thanksgiving) liturgies (9 & 10); both resemble Jewish “grace” after meals: give thanks for food and drink, assign glory. °Common meal is ritual expression of community; food represents divine justice° (JDC, cf. 10:6). “What will I eat today?” (SP) Coming of KG = justice, food for all; hence “Marana tha” (or “Maran atha”?)

Ch 9 – “food & drink” > “cup & bread”; “life & knowledge” replace “knowledge & faith & immortality” as Js’ revelation; note 10:5 // 9:4. ‘For baptized only’: need for community of householders and itinerants; °KG rqr interaction. Q & Th for settled groups; Didache gives best glimpse of the other half of the picture.° (JDC)

Ch 11-13 – clearly, itinerants caused problems (post 70 CE?); Δ doctrines, Δ aims; disruptors, freeloaders; 3 ch on how to deal w/ them: hospitality limits; judge by actions; get rid of parasites and “Christ-peddlers” but welcome those who conform, support themselves, benefit the community, and let them share in the common wealth (cf. Ac 4!).

Ch 14 – 3 vv: Lord’s day worship, proper sacrifice rqr confession and forgiveness.

Ch 15 – community organization: bishops & deacons, worthy men to govern community; “your honored ones, second only to prophets and teachers.” When necessary, reprove gently – but require repentance. In all things, deeds, not words.

Ch 16 – warning of eschaton and promise of hope. Final assault of Evil imminent, but faithful will be saved – cf Dan, Mk 13, Mt 24, Lk 21, 1 Thess 4, Rev. After 70 CE many feared end of world. °Today, of course, we can ignore these predictions of divine apocalypse, knowing that the greater threat is self-destruction by ecological apocalypse.° (SP)

What can we take away from all this?

1. Christianity's apocalyptic tradition probably originates in Didache and Q₃.
2. With Th and Paul* mythmaking begins, and with it comes the beginning of 'the divided tradition': Wisdom vs Cross / Life vs Death / the centrality of Js' teaching or of his death and resurrection (JDC).
3. In the canonical gospels – as Strauss pointed out in 1835 and Bultmann in 1941– we have full-blown myth. Funk, Geering, & Cupitt have done their best to make this clear, but many continue to find myth more attractive & comforting than reality.
4. Only a thorough-going elimination of supernaturalism can take Christianity back to its origins and lead to a creative & nurturing religion of the future. Maranatha.

Proposed Changes to Xn Trad

Rewrite Communion/Last Supper liturgy; re-institute thanksgiving theme; replace body & blood symbolism with open table & self-denial (solarity).

Disavow personal afterlife (heaven & hell), retain Jewish concept of salvation as corporate, not individual; focus on welfare of all mankind.

Revise Lord's Prayer to conform more closely to Mt, Lk, and esp. Q.

Disavow Js' divinity & physical R[^] as well as Mt 27:25 & //s; shift emphasis on beliefs to one on behaviors; recognize Paul's misconstrual of *pistis* and Luther's dubious translation – *Glaube* rather than *Vertrauen*.

A whimsical parodic synopsis

“Like all good jolly fellows I drink my whiskey clear;
I'm a ramblin' wreck from Georgia Tech, and a hell of an engineer.”

Like all the earliest Christians I take my Jesus straight;
Forget those fantastic fictions, just be good to your neighbor, mate.

Useful texts:

Jefford, Clayton N., *Didache: The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*.

Milavec, Aaron, *The Didache: Text, Translation, Analysis, and Commentary*.

Crossan, John Dominic, *The Birth of Christianity*.

Patterson, Stephen J., *The Lost Way: How Two Forgotten Gospels Are Rewriting The Story of Christian Origins*.

Brock, Rita & Parker, Rebecca, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire.*

Kloppenorg, John S., *Excavating Q: The History and Setting of the Sayings Gospel.*

Arnal, William, *Jesus and the Village Scribes: Galilean Conflicts and the Setting of Q.*

Van den Dungen, Wim, "Didache", <http://www.sofiatopia.org/equiaeon/didache.htm>

*Did Paul's visionary kerygma assume that since no lesser sacrifice could atone for human sinfulness, a crucified Messiah must needs be the Son of God? (cf. 2 Kings 3:26 – 27)