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Niederwimmer, Kurt Attridge, Harold W., ed.

The Didache: A Commentary

Translated by Linda M. Maloney

Hermeneia

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This is an English translation, with some slight editing, of a commentary that appeared in the series *Kommentar zu den Apostolischen Vätern*, published by Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht in a second edition in 1993. For nearly the last quarter century Kurt Niederwimmer held the chair in New Testament in the Evangelisch-theologische Fakultät at the University of Vienna. The translation of the *Didache* provided in the commentary is that of Aelred Cody, “modified to reflect Professor Niederwimmer’s exegetical decisions” (p. xxvii). As a concession to English readers, translations of Greek and Latin quotations are added.

It was a good decision by the Hermeneia editors to adopt Niederwimmer’s masterful commentary for the series. One sees here the steady hand of a seasoned exegete who is not only extremely well-acquainted with the secondary literature, but whose judgments reflect an exceptional balance and maturity. Niederwimmer is a reliable guide for those who want to understand this fascinating document of early Christianity—“The teaching of the Lord through the twelve apostles to the nations,” as the first line of the text has it (the so-called long title)—which, although indirectly known from the fathers, was discovered in a monastery library in Constantinople by Philotheos Bryennios only in 1873, in a manuscript dating from the year 1056.

A full quarter of the commentary is given over to introductory questions. Niederwimmer presents a full review of the attestation of the *Didache* in early canonical lists and Christian writings, the textual tradition (the main Greek manuscript, the Oxyrhynchus fragment and versions), the indirect tradition contained in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, and the relation of chapters 1-6 to the “Two Ways” Tractate reflected in a

number of other documents. As for the sources underlying the *Didache*, Niederwimmer refers to the following four items: an originally Jewish “Two Ways” document, already “superficially Christianized,” an archaic baptism and eucharistic tradition, an archaic tradition concerning itinerant charismatics, and a brief apocalyptic account of the end time. These materials the author redacted and applied to his own community in a fresh way. The author constantly adopts and adapts, as Niederwimmer repeatedly indicates. In contrast to more complicated theories concerning the redactional history of the *Didache* (e.g. as in R. Audet’s commentary), Niederwimmer posits a single redaction of the materials by the author, who lived in a Jewish-Christian milieu, and was imaginably “a respected and influential bishop” (pp. 228). The resultant work is described as “not a ‘theological’ work but a rule for ecclesiastical praxis, a handbook of church morals, ritual, and discipline” (p. 2).

On the difficult question of the date of the *Didache* although Niederwimmer allows that the traditions contained in it derive from the first century, he concludes that “there are as yet no compelling reasons to dismiss” a date of around 110 or 120 C.E., and that regarding its provenance “we are completely in the dark” (p. 53). On another point of interest, Niederwimmer denies any dependence of the author on the writings of the New Testament. The most likely possibility is the Synoptic Gospels, but in his opinion the most we may conclude is dependence upon synoptic tradition rather than any of the Synoptics themselves.

The commentary proper abounds in keen exegetical insights. Full footnotes, excursuses, and tables (usually parallel Greek material in columns) provide a mine of pertinent information. By way of example, we may note the following excursuses: the “Two Ways” (1.1), relationship to the Synoptics (1.3), *Hermas* and the *Didache* (1.5), the ideal “accept whatever comes” (3.10), common possessions (4.8), an original paranetic epilogue (6.1), types of baptismal water (7.2), Jewish fasting practice (8.1), the text of the Lord’s prayer (8.2), the text of the prayer before the full meal (9.1-5), the reference to the “oil of anointing” in the Coptic version (added to 10.7), on the crux of 11.11, using Christ to make a living (12.5), the teacher (13.2), and the lost conclusion to the *Didache*.

One of the clear strengths of Niederwimmer’s commentary is the way in which he distinguishes between the traditions used by the author and the author’s own additions. This process itself is “of fundamental importance for understanding the work as a whole,” as Niederwimmer indicates in the final sentence of his “Afterword” (p. 229). An example of the Didachist’s additions can be seen in 1.6, where the exhortation to almsgiving is appended to the aphorism from an unknown source, “Let your charitable gift sweat into your hands until you know to whom you are giving it.” Niederwimmer’s excellent discussion shows how the author both uses and modifies the tradition he received. Among other notable points are the following. The “*teknon*” sayings of 3.1-6 are described as “sapiential material in a psychologized form” (p. 95). What the difficult 4.4, “You shall not show doubt whether [something] will be or not,” means cannot be

determined, but probably refers to an overscrupulous judge. The Lord's Prayer of 8.2 is meant to replace the Jewish *Tefillah*, and together with the instructions about distinctive days for Christian fasting (8.1) reveals a Jewish-Christian community in the process of distancing itself from the surrounding Judaism.

In chapters 9-10 is found "an archaic liturgical formulary without peer in the early period of Christian literature" (p. 139). The crucial question here concerns whether this material is eucharistic or points to an *agape* meal. Niederwimmer gives strong reasons to take it as referring to the latter, with 10.1-6 as "a kind of 'preface' preceding the sacrament to follow" (p. 143).

According to Niederwimmer, the church order of chapters 11-15 reveals a community not as advanced as others of its day. Thus there is not yet a monepiscopate, and although the apostolate is a thing of the past, there are still itinerant charismatics and prophets visiting the community (requiring regulation), and their beginning to settle down in the community is causing potential problems.

It is a rewarding experience to work through this detailed commentary. Especially admirable is Niederwimmer's restraint. He will not let his hypotheses run beyond what the evidence allows. He distinguishes between what we can know and what we cannot know. He argues his conclusions carefully and persuasively. This is a first-rate commentary and a model of how it ought to be done.