Chapter Seven

A Jewish-Christian Addition to the Two Ways: Did 6:2-3

The statement in Did 6:2-3 represents a considerable shift in focus compared with the ethics and values that were exhibited in the preceding section. After the sharp warning to preserve the aforesaid prescriptions in their integrity in Did 6:1, the two subsequent verses are pervaded with an atmosphere of concession and tolerance:

1. See to it that no one leads you astray from this way of the doctrine, since [the person who would do so] teaches apart from God. 2. For if you can bear the entire yoke of the Lord, you will be perfect, but if you cannot, do what you can. 3. As for food, bear what you can, but be very much on your guard against food offered to idols, for it is worship of dead gods.

Whereas the prohibitions in Chapters 1-5 (and the verse in 6:1 as well) suggest a morality which applies to a community within the boundaries of Judaism proper, Did 6:2-3 has all the markings of an address to non-Jewish Christians. The passage represents an adjustment to the perspective of gentile believers who are not capable of bearing the entire “yoke of the Lord” and may have difficulties in observing Jewish dietary laws. An observant Jew does not have the choice mentioned here. Thus, there is a strong possibility — and this position reflects a broad scholarly consensus — that these two verses originally did not belong to the teaching of the Two Ways.

Only with great effort and more than a little imagination can a balanced interpretation be achieved of such a brief notice as that found in Did 6:2-3. The content of the present chapter focusses on three aspects. After a short discussion of recent studies on Did 6:2-3 (pp. 239-42), the relationship between the passage and the Apostolic Decree will be discussed. There is strong evidence that the materials in Did 6:2-3 reflect a separate tradition of the Decree which is found in Acts 15:20.29; 21:25 and in Rev 2:14.20 as well. Since the Decree is edited explicitly in Acts, this study attempts to first reconstruct the original prohibitions of the decision as rendered in Acts. In search of its authentic form in Acts, special notice will be taken of the Noachide laws and their pre-rabbinic equivalents which, as will become clear, are the most appropriate framework for understanding and appreciating the Decree (pp. 243-53). Next, attention is drawn to the particular wording in the other two first-century sources that echo the Decree, namely Rev 2:14.20 and Did 6:2-3. Although the statements mentioned here have clearly been influenced by the Decree, it is their specific forms which demand further explanation because they reveal a variety in the number of requirements. This examination enables us
to further uncover some additional materials which might have been attached to the Decree’s prohibitions in its earliest form. Next, we go on to discuss the markedly Jewish character of the final clause of Did 6:3 that substantiates the idol food prohibition (pp. 254-65). The final section will explore the type of phraseology used in Did 6:2. In this and in other scattered references (Acts 15 and 21; Rev 2:14.20), the Decree represents a minimum of laws for believing gentiles. This halakhic position conflicted with Paul’s view. Rather than interpreting the Apostolic Decree as a minimum, Paul evidently considered these three precepts as the upper limit on the obligations of gentile Christians. Both attitudes, however, may echo contemporary Jewish views (pp. 265-69). In our conclusion, we will suggest that the specific emphasis on the “whole yoke of the Lord” in Did 6:2 may have been intended to discredit those people who, like Paul, taught that one can be perfect without keeping to the Torah to its full extent (pp. 269-70).

Introduction

If Did 6:2-3 is a supplement to the original Two Ways teaching, the question arises what it means and where it comes from. With respect to its content, several explanations have been offered. One suggestion is that asceticism is the issue here.¹ This opinion seems to be corroborated by the Ps.-Cyprian treatise De centesima, sexagesima, tricesima which distinguishes three classes of Christians, yielding different quantities of fruit (“hundred-fold”, “sixty-fold” and “thirty-fold”) and, in support of this view, almost literally quotes (as “Scripture”) Did 6:2.² Our passage thus underlies a doctrine of asceticism in this fourth (?) century document³ which divides Christians into the elect few who live a life of moral perfection and others who do the best they can. It would be wrong, however, to suggest that, as a result, the text of Did 6:2-3 itself also reflects an ascetic tradition. For although these verses came to be used this way in a later document, it does not follow that this was their original meaning. First of all, the remainder of the Didache does not focus any real attention on an austere life-style. Moreover, the exhortation concerning “food” in Did 6:2-3, which the reader is challenged to accept to whatever degree he is able, does not refer to fasting but to Jewish dietary laws. Finally, there is no example

¹ For this explanation, especially with regard to sexual abstinence, see Von Harnack, Lehre der zwölf Apostel, 19-22; Knopf, Die Lehre der zwölf Apostel, 20-21.
³ According to A.P. Orbán, the treatise was composed at some point in the period between 251-7 and ca 383 CE; cf. ‘Die Frage der ersten Zeugnisse’, 234-35; see also Quasten, Patrology 2, 372; Altaner-Stuiber, Patrologie, 178. However, the third and second centuries too have been suggested as dates of origin; see Rordorf, ‘Un chapitre d’éthique’ (1986) 172, n. 79.