Chapter Eight

The Didache’s Ritual: Jewish and Early Christian Tradition (Did 7-10)

In this chapter, we will primarily be looking for antecedent and contemporary elements in Jewish worship with regard to the rituals in Chapters 7 to 10 in the Didache. It will become clear that the traditions concerning baptism (Did 7), the Lord’s Prayer (Did 8) and the eucharistic meal (Did 9-10) present close parallels to Jewish liturgy in the Second Temple Period. This, of course, is not surprising since the pattern of Christian worship in general was undoubtedly very strongly influenced by Jewish worship, from which it issued. Another related element is more important and deserves particular consideration in this respect. It has become quite evident in the last few decades that Jewish liturgical traditions of Temple times were not so fixed and uniform as was once supposed. Especially J. Heinemann, in a study published in Hebrew in 1964 and in a slightly revised form in English in 1977, has emphasized the variety and flexibility of Jewish liturgical practices in the first century CE.¹ He attempted to show that Jewish prayers from the first were oral texts and fixation of this material occurred at a later stage in the transmission of these texts. Because all Jewish prayers originated in the oral tradition of liturgical life, the different recensions of a prayer in the various manuscripts may well represent variations of the prayer in this oral tradition. Certainly, in Heinemann’s opinion, the basic forms and thematic structures are to be traced back to the time of the Second Temple, but not fixed texts. Jewish liturgy emerged gradually while the loss of the temple was the impetus to its institutionalization. When the oral prayers were written down, these variant forms became textually fixed.

This description of the origins of prayer needs some correction, though, since in 1977 – and even less in 1964 – the evidence of the Dead Sea Scrolls was not yet fully integrated into an all-encompassing study of Jewish liturgy. Heinemann, for example, did not have access to the collections of liturgical texts published in 1982, the cycle of Sabbath songs edited in 1985, and the non-canonical hymns from the fourth cave which appeared in 1986.² These and other publications show that at least the wording of a number of written prayers, and maybe the formulation of

¹ Prayer in the Talmud, 43.
those which were transmitted orally as well, were fixed. At the same time, it is of importance to realize that the Qumran prayers do not merely represent materials provided by an isolated separatist sect. They often parallel other known prayers in the Bible, the Apocrypha and rabbinic sources. Furthermore, scholars have argued with good evidence that some of the prayer texts found in Qumran have originated outside of the secluded sect and thus are sources of information about practices within a broader Jewish context. Those prayers which represent broader liturgical practice and those which do not show evidence of sectarian provenance may be considered witnesses to the wider development of the early pre-rabbinic history in Jewish liturgy. They attest to the fact that practice of prayers and blessings in mainstream Judaism was already on its way towards shaping a fixed form of divine worship in the Second Temple period. In sectarian as well as in non-sectarian circles, the principle of fixity began to be applied both to the contents of prayer and to the form of its recitation. Admittedly, the loss of the Temple was an extra impulse to the further development of an institutionalized and fixed prayer and the process of crystallization of prayer, therefore, certainly reached its peak during the Tannaitic period.

In the field of Christian worship, a somewhat similar phenomenon is found. It may be helpful in studying the Didache’s rituals to realize that first-century Christian worship was not nearly as established and homogeneous in doctrine and practice as was once assumed. The references to a variety of rites in the New Testament, such as baptism (Mark 1:9; Matt 3:16; Luke 3:21; John 3:22-23; 4:1-2; Matt 28:19), fasts (Matt 6:16-18), the Lord’s Prayer (Matt 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4) and the Last Supper (Matt 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:17-20; 1 Cor 11:23-25) may be treated as instructions given by Jesus. The surface implication is that the words and deeds of Jesus are faithfully preserved and transmitted in the New Testament gospels. At the same time, one should not ignore the creativity of the early church. The accounts of baptism, fasting, the Lord’s Prayer and the Last Supper in the gospels may, of course, contain a definite and secure historical kernel.

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4 Weinfeld has reconstructed 4Q434 frgm. 2 from two smaller fragments (cf. Chazon-Elgvin-Eshel *et alii*, *Qumran Cave 4*, 20, 262-63.279-81). In his opinion, the text represents an early form of the Grace after meals for Mourners known in the rabbinic tradition (see his ‘Grace After Meals at the Mourner’s House’ and Id., ‘Grace After Meals in Qumran’). It is doubtful, however, whether these smaller fragments really prove the existence of the Grace after meals at Qumran. According to Falk, *Daily, Sabbath, and Festival Prayers* (217, n.1) the fragments contain “rather a psalm about God’s future consolation of Jerusalem’s afflicted based on Isaiah 61:10-16. They are best understood,” so Falk believes, “as a song of Zion (cf. Ps. 48; 11QPs’ *Hymn to Zion; 4Q380 1-2*) ....” If this view is correct, it is important to note that “no texts of meal prayers turned up at Qumran” (ibid.).

4 See Chazon, ‘Prayers from Qumran’, 271-73.283-84; Schuller, ‘Prayer, Hymnic and Liturgical Texts’. For a recent discussion of the criteria to establish the provenance of the prayers found in the Qumran caves, see also Falk, *Daily, Sabbath, and Festival Prayers*, 9-16.