CHAPTER EIGHT

THE EGYPTIAN HERMAS:
THE SHEPHERD IN EGYPT BEFORE CONSTANTINE

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In surveying non-scriptural Christian manuscripts of the time before Constantine, one work stands out, which is simply referred to as “The Shepherd” (Ὁ Ποιμήν) by most ancient witnesses, and which is ascribed to a certain Hermes.\(^1\) It is by far the best-attested Christian work except those eventually established as canonical; indeed, in the first few centuries its attestation is considerably better than that of some of the canonical books. This contribution surveys the early manuscripts of Hermes and asks why it was so popular in the early Christian world.

To ask whether Hermes was considered “canonical” in the early church is the wrong question. This question cannot withstand methodological scrutiny, as the concept of canonicity is debatable and elastic. It is better to simply ask: why were the works of Hermes so popular?

Actually, there should have never been any argument over whether or not the works of Hermes were canonical.\(^2\) Among our earliest securely datable external witnesses, Tertullian makes clear that the works of Hermes have not been judged canonical by meetings of Christians.\(^3\) The reasons

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\(^3\) Rather, it had been “judged among the apocryphal and false (writings) by every council of Churches”, de pudicitia, 10.12; he was more charitable in his “Catholic” period, see below at n. 73. For “Gnostic” criticism of the work (if he is the Hermes, “first-born of unrighteousness”, in the Apoc. Peter [NHC VII.78.17–19]) see K. Koschorke, Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der
for this determination are not difficult to see. Despite Origen’s attempts to ascribe the works to the Hermas who is sent greetings in Rom 16:14, it was well known that Hermas did not live in the apostolic period. The assertion of the compiler of the Muratorian Canon that Hermas was the brother of Pius, bishop of Rome, during whose episcopate (c. 130–150?) he wrote his work, surely cannot be correct; nevertheless, it seems certain that he was active in second century Rome.

Yet, by early Christian writers, such as Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Didymus the Blind, Hermas is used as if he had the authority of scripture. All cite Hermas in this way; to others, such as Origen and Athanasius, it was at least useful. The volume of citations attests to the work’s popularity, which is something that the manuscript record reflects.

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4 Origen, Comm. in Rom. 10.31; cf. Eusebius HE III.3; Jerome, De vir. Illus., x.


6 He probably wrote in the first half of the century, although others favour a later date. We will not engage further with the question of when Hermas wrote, or who he was: on these questions see Joly, Hermas: Le Pasteur, 11–21; Osiek, Shepherd of Hermas, 18–28; J.C. Wilson, Toward a Reassessment of the Shepherd of Hermas: Its Date and Its Pneumatology (Lewiston: Mellen Biblical Press, 1993) 9–61; idem, Wilson, Five Problems in the Interpretation of the Shepherd of Hermas, 3–37.

7 On the patristic witnesses to Hermas see Brox, Der Hirt des Hermas, 57–71.

8 Adversus Haereses 4.20.2, citing Mand. 1.1.1 as γραφή (cf. Brox, Der Hirt des Hermas, 57–61, inter alia discussing what Irenaeus meant by the term); see also Eusebius HE V.8.7.

9 Strom. I.17.85; I.29.181; II.1.3; VI.15.131; see Brox, Der Hirt des Hermas, 63–64.


11 Origen, Comm. in Rom. 10.31: “a work which seems to me very useful, and, as I believe, divinely inspired”; he acknowledges contemporary adverse opinions (“seems to be despised by some”) at de princ. 4.2.4, 21. Athanasius calls it “a most profitable book” (ὁφελιμωτάτης βιβλίου, de incarn., 3.1, ed. Kannengiesser), and he is happy to cite the work in support of his arguments while firmly asserting “it is not of the canon” (μη ὁν ἐκ τοῦ κοινόνς, De decret. 18.3, ed. Opitz); on Athanasius’ opinions, along with those of Eusebius, cf. below, p. 202.