THE DIDACHE AS A CHRISTIAN ENCHIRIDION

William Varner

It is neither original nor particularly exciting to write that the Didache was used in ancient times for the instruction of new converts and/or baptismal candidates. Readers of Eusebius and Athanasius had long noted that these writers referred to such use of a book with a similar name before the rediscovery of its ancient text in what has come to be called the Jerusalem Codex (Hierosolymitanus 54). When access to the full sixteen chapters became available after 1883, the reference in 7.1 made such use plain: “After you have reviewed all these things (τα ἀνταπροειπντες), baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in running water.” It is generally recognized that these words indicate that the first five or possibly six chapters were used in the original Didache community for pre-baptismal catechetical instruction. Our assumption also is that other communities utilized the Didache for such catechesis at least up until the fourth century when the Alexandrian fathers clearly mention this catechetical use.

My thesis, therefore, is not something radical, but rather adapts an accepted position and defines it further on the basis of what I believe has been some neglected evidence. I believe that by the fourth century a Didache shorter than the size of the work in the Jerusalem Codex was used as a handbook of the Christian faith that was literally placed in the hand of new converts. The English term for this type of handbook, enchiridion, is a transliteration of the Greek term ἐγχειρίδιον. I base my argument on a re-examination of three ancient authors who mention the Didache plus a re-examination of the only other material evidence of a Greek Didache. The three literary texts are the Stichometry of Nicephorus, the Paschal Letter of Athanasius, and the Greek commentaries of Didymus the Blind. The

---

1 Philotheos Bryennios, Διδαχὴ Τῶν Δώδεκα Αποστόλων (Constantinople: Tupois S.I. Voutyra, 1883).
3 PGL, 405; LSJ, 475, mentions ἐγχειρίδιον as the title of works by “Epictetus and others.” The OED defines the word: “A handbook or manual; a concise treatise serving as a guide or for reference,” and traces its first use to Miles Coverdale in 1541.
material evidence is that of the two fragments found among the Oxyrhynchus material. The case is not as certain as I would like, but I do believe that the argument is worthy of consideration as possibly providing another piece of the puzzle in the textual history of this little document.

I will not include in this chapter a detailed review of all the secondary literature that has arisen around each of these four literary and material remains. I have attempted, however, to interact with as much of this literature as possible, and will only utilize the literature that is appropriate to my point at hand. My argument, however, is not based on some peculiar view that I hold about these sources but on the generally accepted interpretation of each one. The most controversial aspect of my argument is my proposal interpreting the Oxyrhynchus fragments. These four items of evidence stretch chronologically from the fourth century (Athanasius, Didymus and the fragments) to the ninth century (Nicephorus). I will begin with the last literary source, the Stichometry of Nicephorus, and work my way back in time.

1. The Stichometry of Nicephorus

Nicephorus was Patriarch of Constantinople from 806–815 and was known for his defense of orthodoxy over against the iconoclasts. His Stichometry is attached to the end of his much longer Chronography and is basically a canon list that mentions the length of canonical and some non-canonical books by the number of stichoi (στίχοι) that each one contains.1 He lists a number of “New Testament Apocrypha” (τὰ νέας ἀπόκρυφαι) and among them is a work that he titles “Teaching of Apostles” (Διδαχή ἀποστόλων). He lists the number of “stichoi” in the book as 200. The line entry is as follows:

έ. Διδαχή ἀποστόλων στίχοι 200.

The reference to 200 stichoi has been noted by a number of writers as early as Bryennios who have called attention to the fact that there are 204 lines in the Didache’s five leaves in the Jerusalem Codex. This should not be considered significant, however, for as early as Schaff (1887) scholars have pointed out that the total number of stichoi for the Clements in Nicephorus is 2,600, while the total number of lines in those books in the codex is 1,120.5

---

1. Bryennios, who has called attention to the fact that there are 204 lines in the Didache’s five leaves in the Jerusalem Codex.