THE DIDACHE AND EARLY MONASTICISM IN THE EAST AND WEST

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As one of the earliest Christian documents, the Didache "has been analyzed down to its last detail," observed Jean-Paul Audet in his study of this intriguing early Christian text.1 But a study of its overall influence is only just beginning. It is within this perspective that this essay is written. Did this early Christian text with its moral exhortations and liturgical observances come into contact with the early Christian movement of monasticism? Was there any influence of the Didache upon ancient Christian monasticism?

The earliest Christian monastic text is the Life of Antony, which was written by Athanasius (d. 373) in Egypt sometime in the second half of the fourth century. With this work the Christian world was alerted to the remarkable blossom of the ascetical life in Egypt during the fourth-fifth centuries. The connection of the Didache to Christian Egypt is discussed by Willy Rordorf in his introduction to the critical edition of the text that he published with André Tuilier in 1978.2 Most scholars at the present time prefer Syria to Egypt as the home of the Didache. Nevertheless, Egypt was the home of two important papyrus fragments of this ancient work, namely, the Oxyrhynchus fragment in Greek and a second fragment in Coptic, specifically, in the Fayyumic dialect.3 Hence, it is not surprising that the question should be raised as to whether the Didache did not at some point influence Egyptian monastic literature. At least in one notable instance the answer is in the affirmative. This was a major interpolation of part of the Didache into a later monastic text. The passage is so striking that it deserves some notice. Other influences, on the other hand, are not as clear. But it seems evident that in one instance each the Rule of Benedict and the Rule of the Master cite a passage from the Didache. My purpose in this essay is to identify and contextualize these

elements from the *Didache* within the monastic literature of the early church.

I. *The Abba Shenoute and the Didache*

One of the first scholars to call attention to the relationship of the *Didache* to the Egyptian monastic literature was L.E. Iselin, who in 1895 published an article on a hitherto unknown version of the Two Ways which appeared in the *Life* of the Abba Shenoute by Besa. Two years later another scholar, Humbert Benigni, analyzed this fragment of the *Didache* and showed how it had an origin which was seemingly independent of the presently known texts.4

Shenoute is probably one of the least known of the monastic leaders in fourth-fifth century Egypt. He was also perhaps one of the most bizarre. Born about 348, he reportedly died sometime around 466 about the age of 118. He became a monk at the monastery of Atripe, which generally is known as the White Monastery, near the modern town of Akhmîm in upper Egypt.5 Atripe, as far as it can be ascertained, belonged to that cenobitic, monastic tradition which was organized and inspired around 320 by the monk Pachomius (ca. 290–346) in the region of upper Egypt with Tabennisi as the first foundation. The Pachomian monastic formula of community life and mutual service envisaged the monastic community as an image of the church, with the superior of the community as a charismatic father who served his brethren and received their obedience. This concept was somewhat different from that of the eremitical tradition

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