Reviews


The Didache meal displays some salient features which differ considerably from the Last Supper accounts in the New Testament. The ritual does not include the words of institution, its prayers do not refer to the body and blood of Christ nor do they show any awareness of being related to the tradition of the Last Supper. Therefore the data in Didache 9-10 have often been taken as referring to any communal meal but a eucharistic one. Many studies have attempted to synthesize the idiosyncratic traits of the Didache prayers into a coherent explanation, for example by assuming that the extant text of the Didache would have omitted the institution account. A more obvious solution to the problem, however, would be to put aside one’s prejudice that references to Jesus’ death are a necessary part of the Eucharist in the first century. This is also the concern of this appealing book. Jonathan Schwiebert is interested not so much in the question whether the Last Supper was the originating moment of all subsequent eucharistic practice. He separately queries the meal traditions in the New Testament and in the Didache in their own right. He investigates these prayers as historical phenomena and inquires after their ritual logic, that is, what is to be considered constitutive for each of these two traditions?

A major contention of this study is that the meal tradition was received and transmitted orally rather than textually. Following a currently fashionable trend in New Testament scholarship, it reconstructs oral tradition on the basis of folklore studies. Instead of using the historical-critical method, this study focuses on the prayers’ performance. We must reckon with different rules. It is not primarily the historical and cultural context of a meal tradition but its ritual instructions that explains something meaningful or significant about a group. Analysing and interpreting these meal traditions
comes down to rejection of redactional-critical assumptions in favour of the internal logic of a document and its constitutive elements.

These two preliminary observations—indepen dent internal logic and oral transmittance—set the stage for the study as a whole. Its first part analyses the fixed oral instructions for the meal of the Didache and Last Supper in the New Testament. By discovering the basic oral structure in each tradition the temptation to read a preconceived theory of historical development into these meal rituals might be resisted. Then, in the second part of this study, the indispensable ritual logic is the starting-point for an inquiry into the historical place of the Didache meal in formative Christianity. The constitutive elements of the Didache meal tradition might give us a clear historical view of the prayers’ original milieu and their subsequent history.

What is essential and constitutive in the Last Supper tradition? In the New Testament, the last meal before Jesus’ death plays an important role in Paul, Mark, Matthew and Luke. Chapter 2 demonstrates that the verbatim agreements between Mark 14:22-24 and 1Cor 11:23-25 in these initially oral reports might indicate that certain specific terms were fixed. The meal accounts in these passages show a bipartite structure emphasizing two parallel items, a loaf and a cup, while words like “taking”, “blessing/giving thanks”, “saying”, “this” etc. are repeated in each. In addition to a structural and verbal affinity, the versions of the supper tradition in Mark and 1 Corinthians include two further correspondences. They both are located on the final night before Jesus’ death and demonstrate an orientation toward the coming of the kingdom. Also, the two other witnesses to the Supper tradition in the New Testament, Matthew and Luke, largely retain features of fixed orality in their bread and cup sayings, entrenched in a context that evokes Jesus’ death and the parousia. Unfortunately, however, the sequence of “bread-wine” was not as fixed in the basic structure of the oral tradition as Schwiebert believes (33, n. 37). We have in essence two different reports about the sequence of the elements: first the bread and cup order in Matt 26:26-29, Mark 14:22-25, and 1 Cor 11:23-26 and, second, the reverse order in Luke 22:15-19a and 1 Cor 10:16-17.

Didache 9-10 consists of instructions for the conduct of a meal ritual. Chapter 3 describes a threefold division of the ritual prayer with striking parallels at the opening and closing of each prayer. Those components which are repetitive are considered the fixed elements in the oral transmission. They begin with the formula “We thank you, Father, for...” and close with the clause “which you made known to us through Jesus your