

Branches on the Vine of David: What Can the *Didache* Tell us About the Sabbath in the Early Jesus Movement?

SBL Philadelphia, 20 November 2005

1. Introduction

I am not a specialist in the *Didache*. My interest is in the question of the rapid and widespread abandonment of the seventh-day Sabbath as practiced in the Jewish matrix of the Jesus movement. A little over a century after the first proclamation of the risen Christ by Jews who were presumably observant, we find that Sabbatarian Christians were a curiosity who met with something less than total approval. This development defies simple explanation; particularly fascinating to me has been the persistence of the Sabbatarian reconstruction of Christian origins, which maintains that this was a post-apostolic development.

This reconstruction was long dismissed by most scholars, but recent trends, such as the recognition of the profound Jewishness of Jesus, or the new perspective on Paul, suggest that it is no longer inconceivable. In addition, there has been a rejection of the view that Judaism and Christianity at a given point in time “parted ways”; instead, there appears to have been interaction and even mutual attraction that lasted for centuries, posing problems for leaders in both movements.

Where does the *Didache* fit in this? The results of my investigation of other early Christian texts stand in opposition both to the assertion of an early, uniform transition to worship on the first day, as well as to the contrary assertion that the Jesus movement remained essentially Sabbatarian for at least a century. What can the *Didache* tell us about the fate of the Sabbath among adherents of the early Jesus movement, and how does this relate to the evidence in other literary remains from that era?

The Sabbath is not mentioned directly, but there are elements in the text relevant for the discussion. Among these are the eucharistic prayers, which show affinity to Jewish table prayers at fellowship meals. Then there is the presence of the unusual phrase, *κατὰ κυριακὴν δὲ κυρίου*, usually understood as a temporal reference referring to the Lord’s Day, our Sunday.

After considering the general question of the overall stance of *Didache* toward the Torah and the Decalogue, I propose to examine both the prayers and the ambiguous phrase with a view to evaluating the light they can shed on the subject of my inquiry, the Sabbath among the early followers of Jesus. I will then address a third indicator, the relevance of which for the Sabbath question has been less often considered, namely the instructions with regard to fasting.

Since the Sabbath is not mentioned in *Didache*, this paper is also an experiment in the proper methods for inquiring into the practice of a community with regard to a topic that is not mentioned. I will argue on the basis of the community proposed to us within the limits of this text, fully aware that not everything the community believed

and practiced can be contained in such a brief text. But from the point of view of method, anything else we might presume that they knew ought to be understandable in the framework sketched in the text. More than this, however, both the genre and the structure of the document give us confidence that the text gives a good picture of what candidates were expected to know, at least in terms of practice, before becoming committed to the community.

2 The stance of *Didache* toward the Torah and the Decalogue

The *topoi* of the ethical instruction in chs. 1–6 reflect a Jewish perception of common failings of non-Jews (e.g. *Did* 2:2). Regardless of the earlier history of Two Ways material, in its present setting this functions as catechetical material for non-Jewish candidates for baptism into a community of followers of Jesus. Notable is the use made of the Decalogue; there is no reference to the Sabbath command. In addition, there is no discussion of circumcision, while the enigmatic exhortation in 6:3 to “do what you can” implies a loose application of *kashrut* regulations. There has been the suggestion that the community introduced non-Jews gradually to Torah observance. “Perfect” obedience was not expected at the time of baptism, but came later (4:13; 6:2). This view however has not won wide acceptance, and I am among those who are not persuaded.

These are strong indicators that the community of the *Didache* had its origin among Jewish followers of Jesus actively engaged in making disciples among non-Jews. They accept these converts in full table fellowship after instruction and baptism, but without requiring circumcision and with only a minimum of observance of *kashrut*. Thus they appear to have adopted a stance similar to Paul’s, although the *Didache* reflects no clear acquaintance with Paul, either his mission or his teaching. To mention just one indicator, the characteristic Pauline association of the Lord’s Supper with the death of Christ is not explicit here. This brings us to the next point.

3 The eucharistic prayers

The eucharistic prayers, whose importance was immediately recognized after the discovery and publication of H and whose relation to the Lord’s Supper or agape meals continues to be intensely debated, offer tantalizing clues to the cultural and religious background of those who formulated them and who ordained their use in the *Didache* community.

In the first, God is thanked “for the holy vine of David,” who is described as God’s $\pi\alpha\tau\epsilon\rho\varsigma$. This vine has been made known to “us,” to those participating in the thanksgiving, by Jesus, also referred to as God’s $\pi\alpha\tau\epsilon\rho\varsigma$, his servant or child (*Did* 9:2). Although the exact phrase, “vine of David,” is unknown in prior literature, it is a combination of common imagery, so that its meaning can be inferred. The natural contents of the cup are signified through a figure of speech in a way that evokes Israel in its quality as salvation community, constituted under its ideal king. Jesus figures here as conduit of revelation, although the repetition of $\pi\alpha\tau\epsilon\rho\varsigma$ suggests a profound relationship with David, perhaps even identification. The lack of overt mention of his passion often cited as an objection to the use of this prayer in a eucharistic celebration must be relativized by further associations surely evoked by this term, particularly those of the songs of the

Ebed Jahweh in Deutero-Isaiah. The community that participates in such a prayer sees itself as connected to the reconstituted eschatological Israel, but in a way that is mediated through Jesus.

When life and knowledge are evoked in the bread blessing, the eschatological overcoming of the loss of paradise is suggested, as Johannes Betz thoroughly traced. These too are made known through the *παῖς*, Jesus. The image of bread, constituted of grains that had been gathered, is spoken of in a singular way, in that it is referred to as *κλάσμα* that had been scattered on the mountains and gathered to become one (9:4). We recall that in the Gospel of John Jesus was concerned that all the *κλασμάτα* be gathered after the feeding of the five thousand (John 6:12), a collection fills twelve baskets (v. 13), not insignificant for an image redolent of the gathering of Israel. Here it is *Didache* that is more explicit, yet speaks of gathering not Israel but the church into the kingdom. The appearance of church, *ἐκκλησία*, in a wish normally associated with Israel suggests a slightly different relation of the church to Israel than did the reference to the vine. Taken in isolation, it could suggest a replacement theology, something that the wine blessing does not do.

In spite of unresolved specifics, there appears to be wide consensus that these prayers of thanksgiving were similar to prayers used at festive communal meals of Jews. As we know, Jeremias objected vigorously to calling these *Kiddush* prayers, yet the most common occasion for such prayers among Jews, especially the blessing over wine, would have been at festive meals on Friday evening, at the beginning of the Sabbath.

Still, they were not however exclusively “Sabbath” prayers. Therefore, we cannot conclude that the communal, eucharistic meals in the *Didache* community were originally on Friday evening. But the use of prayers such as would also have been used at Sabbath meals means that the eucharistic celebrations of the community had attracted certain aspects of Sabbath practice.

3 The “Lord’s of the Lord’s” (*Did.* 14:1)

These meals are related in some way to something called the *κυριακή του κυρίου*. Bart Ehrman, in his new LCL edition, translates it as “the Lord’s own day,” seeking to signal to the reader limited to English that the phrase is unusual. The phrase also reflects the usual understanding of this as a temporal indicator. Speaking for this is the clear and unbroken literary testimony to the usage in Greek from the end of the second century to this day of *ἡ κυριακή* for Sunday (*Gospel of Peter*, Clement of Alexandria).

Alternate suggestions involve supplying a word from the near context (*command* or *instruction*, cf. *κατὰ τὴν ἐντολήν*, *Did.* 13:7, immediately preceding) or the overall context (*teaching*, *διδαχή*, the first word of the book, and its title in H). This is certainly possible, but it doesn’t solve the problem of the duplication of *κυριος*; just what is the Lord’s of the Lord? Two possible solutions have been proposed. One is that which sees this as the yearly celebration of the Lord’s resurrection, Pascha/Easter. The other would identify the celebration in ch. 14 as the Lord’s Supper on the Lord’s Day, in this case, in contradistinction to the celebration in chs. 9–10, which would be in conjunction with baptism, something that might have been performed yearly, or alternately whenever the need arose when candidates had completed their course of

instruction.

It appears then to be the most likely, though not certain, that at least in ch. 14 the eucharistic celebrations are weekly occurrences tied to the first day of the week, likely on Saturday evening [why?], and we thus have here an early reference to that day as ἡ κυριακή, the Lord's Day.

4 The instructions concerning fasting

After prescribing a one- or two-day fast for candidates for baptism, as well as for those performing the baptism (*Did* 7:4), *Didache* enjoins a twice-weekly fast, but not on the same days as certain others, referred to as ὑποκριτοί, that is, as impious or ungodly people—in other words, people with whom we have a lot in common who don't see some things the way we do. Instead of Monday and Thursday, the addressees were to fast on Wednesday and Friday (*Did.* 8:1). These hypocrites are variously understood as non-Christian Jews, perhaps Pharisees, from whom the community is seeking to distinguish itself, or schismatic members of the community. At the very least, it is clear that the days used by those so characterized do correspond to documented Jewish practice.

In contrast to the Gospel of Matthew, where the questions of correct fasting revolves around privacy versus public show, the difference between the impious and the pious is defined ritually. By shifting the day of practice, you have gone from hypocrisy to sincerity. The only parallel I have come across in early Christian literature for defining genuine and false way on the basis of ritual practice assigned to a day is *Barn.* 15, which praises worship on the eighth day instead of the seventh.

Is the shift of day with regard to fasting a clue for understanding the juxtaposition of Eucharistic prayers reminiscent of the Sabbath with a Lord's Day practice? More than any other writing of the period, a clear differentiation from others is sought through matters of external practice. Although the Sabbath is not mentioned, this could explain the emphasis with which it is pointed out that the Eucharist is celebrated on the Lord's Day. The pleonastic reference could be a form of emphasis.

It is not necessary to go as far as Audet and assume that this represents a deliberate flouting of the Sabbath, but it is hard to conceive how this can be practical for Sabbath-observant people. The shift in days for fasting implies that even the (Jewish) teachings in the community had at most a loose tie to Sabbath observance, since it is very impractical to fast on the preparation day ("Friday").

5 Conclusion

The *Didache* proposes a community of Greek-speaking Christian Jews who combine a low Christology with a loose commitment to the Torah. This has consequences for the scholarly construct Jewish Christianity.

This community pursues a mission to non-Jews, although the text reflects no knowledge of either the mission nor the theology of Paul. Members of the community are prepared to engage in full table fellowship with uncircumcised non-Jews. This raises the question of where to place the community proposed by the *Didache* in the

panoply that was the early Jesus movement. There are tantalizing points of contact with the Gospel of Matthew, something that has been intensively explored by many participants of this consultation. As we know, Helmut Koester viewed *Didache* as the kind of church order that we could imagine a Q community possessing, whereas Jean Danielou and Johannes Betz detected in the eucharistic prayers a proto-Johannine position. Taken in isolation, the posture toward non-Jewish converts outlined in this paper would suggest that if we had to place this community on a trajectory, the proper location might be somewhere between Stephen and Paul. The absence of specifically Pauline theological motifs would not be an obstacle to such a hypothesis. More serious is the absence of any explicit reference to the death or resurrection of Jesus, which for Paul belonged to the irreducible core of the gospel he had received as a matter of tradition (1 Cor 15:1–8).

This is a reminder that our trajectories are helpful constructs that often illuminate but can also mislead us into thinking of the early Jesus movement as a set of discrete vectors traveling away from a common starting-point, so that we prefer to speak of Christianities rather than Christianity. Such models have demonstrated their heuristic value in comparison to the construct of *Early Christianity* as a monolithic movement that proceeded in lockstep from the Jerusalem *Urgemeinde* to proto-Catholicism within less than a century, but the communities were not hermetically sealed units, immune to cross-fertilization.

With this caution in mind, a combination of three indicators in the evidence available in the *Didache* leads to the conclusion that the text proposes a community in which the shift in days for fasting implies that even the teachers of the community, presumably Jews, were at the most only loosely committed to Sabbath observance, since it is impractical to fast regularly on the day of preparation, our Friday. The use of table prayers similar to those spoken on the Sabbath for communal meals held on Saturday evening implies, when viewed together with the shift in days used for fasting, that the first day of the week took on at an early point not only the name Lord's Day, but also attracted to itself certain aspects of the Sabbath.

There are no indications however that the chief characteristic of the Sabbath, a day of rest, had been transferred to the Lord's Day. This would have been impractical at any rate in the society of the time.