

Book Review: *The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers.*

Editor (and author): Paul Foster

Contributors: Helmut Koester, Jonathan A. Draper, Andrew Gregory, Paul Parvis,
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Holmes, Sara Parvis.

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Studies of the Apostolic Fathers and their writings have flourished hugely over the past few decades. Though the information is scarce, the depth and breadth of the discoveries that modern biblical scholars can offer to our understanding of these invaluable writings is fascinating. Although many of them do not read the writings of the Apostolic Fathers from a devout, Roman Catholic perspective, their contributions are undeniably significant and very worthy of our attention. The twelve papers collected in Dr. Paul Foster's book, *The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers* (New York: T& T Clark, 2007) are a good instance of this phenomenon. All authors of the papers in this book are well-known international scholars in the English-speaking world who have devoted themselves to the research of both the writings of the New Testament and of the Apostolic Fathers for decades. They are: Helmut Koester (Ch. 1) , Johnathan A. Draper (Ch. 2) , Andrew Gregory (Ch. 3), Paul Parvis (Ch. 4), Charles E. Hill (Ch. 5), Joseph Verheyden (Ch. 7), James Carleton Paget (Ch. 8), Michael Holmes (Ch. 10), Sara Parvis (Ch. 11), and Paul Foster (Chs. 6, 9, 12).

The first chapter, titled 'The Apostolic Fathers and the Struggle for Christian Identity,' is written by a senior scholar, Dr. Helmut Koester, who has been involved in the field for more than 50 years. Beginning in the 1950's, Koester started his own research on the Apostolic Fathers and their relation with the oral tradition of the teachings of Jesus, the Synoptic Sayings Gospel (Q), and the canonical writings. His doctoral dissertation, *Synoptische Überlieferung bei den Apostolischen Vätern* (1957), under the guidance of Rudolf Karl Bultmann, is still nowadays a monumental work worthy of being read by anyone who is interested in the relation between the synoptic gospels and the Apostolic Fathers. Based on his profound research background, Professor Koester offers to his readers a bird's-eye perspective on the Apostolic Fathers' writings. He points out that these ancient Christian literatures should not only be considered 'as an effort to establish order and ecclesiastical authority' (p. 2), but rather, they are a part of a larger struggle, namely, the struggle for the formation of a Christian identity in the post-apostolic period. He contends that, while the Synoptic

Sayings Gospel (Q) depicts Jesus of Nazareth as a prophet who ‘called for a new obedience which is demanded in the recognition that no earthly ruler or Messiah but God is king’ (p. 2) (which also is reflected in the *Didache*), Paul the Apostle was illuminated to interpret this prophetic heritage of Jesus differently. In Koester’s words, Paul understood the office of the prophet ‘in political terms,’ that is, as a commission to build a new community, the *ekklesia*, a fellowship of love, justice and equity in the world, authorized by the righteousness of God. What Paul believed and argued strongly for, including his belief in the immediate *parousia* and ‘the utopian elements of Paul’s vision of justice and equity in the new community,’ influenced the Christians in the post-apostolic era (p. 4). However, people like Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, the authors of *1 and 2 Clement*, *Epistle of Barnabas*, *Shepherd of Hermas*, and *Epistle to Diognetus*, while influenced by (though not necessarily agreeing with) Paul, were all facing similar identity problems: who we are as Christians, and how the Christian communities could survive in the Roman world and remain faithful to Jesus’ true teachings, passed down from the apostles.

In other words, behind the texts of orders, instructions, exhortations, homilies, exegesis and condemnations on heresies, what the Apostolic Fathers have in mind is the formation of Christian identity. Jesus and his apostles (such as Peter and Paul) are *the* example to all Christians who seek self-identity. Therefore, the apostolic spirit radiating from their words shows their eagerness to bear witness to the faith in/of Jesus, including both the acceptance of martyrdom and the building-up of a Church that was ‘not just moral and pious but also concerned with principles of love and mutual care, hospitality and concern for the poor, widows and orphans, and ritual that would bind the communities in common celebration’ (pp. 10-11).

The ‘transformation of egalitarianism into hierarchy’ in the Apostolic Fathers’ writings, which is traditionally heavily emphasized by others, is mentioned by Koester in the last part of his paper, and only in three paragraphs. He contends that the introduction of hierarchical structure (i.e. a central administration in major cities, especially of a central treasury for service to the needy) is ‘the price that had to be paid for [this] definition of Christian existence’ (p.11). Due to this transformation, what Paul strongly proposed regarding the egalitarian status of all members of the *ekklesia* disappears. Koester reminds his readers that ‘the price that was paid is still a burden for many churches today’ (p. 12). As a Lutheran minister, Dr. Koester’s plaintive comment resounds in our ears.

Each one of the following chapters in the book is dedicated to an individual work of the Apostolic Fathers. Rev. Dr. Jonathan A. Draper, an Anglican theologian, contributes a paper on the *Didache*, which has been the subject of his research for more than thirty years. Regarding the origin of the *Didache*, he mentions that ‘it seems to originate from a Jewish-Christian community trying to remain faithful to the Torah, even though it has opened itself to Gentile converts’ (p. 15). In the section of ‘The Yoke of the Lord,’ Draper contends that the *Didache* is the manual used by its community for instructing the Gentile converts since its own title thus stated (p. 16); and the community was open to the Gentiles while strictly followed the conclusion of the Jerusalem Council (cf. Acts 15:28-29). But to what extent was the *Didache* community open to the Gentile converts? According to the late Catholic biblical scholar, Fr. Eugene Laverdiere, S.S.S., although the *Didache* community might have accepted that Gentiles join them, this does not mean they were open-minded. In his book, *The Eucharist in the New Testament and the Early Church* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996), Fr. Laverdiere not only argues that the *Didache* is an evolved literature (AD 50 to 100) corresponding to the three stages in the history of its community; he also argues that the *Didache* community was a closed Jewish Christian community that neither believed that it had a mission to the Gentiles, nor were they willing to be in communion with other Christian communities of Gentile origin, such as the Lukan and the Matthean communities (pp. 135-138). Fr. Laverdiere believes that the *Didache* community eventually died out because of its exclusiveness, obstinate attitude and strict allegiance to the Jewish heritage, and its title ‘Teaching of the Lord through the Twelve Apostles to the Gentiles/Nations’ thus becomes ‘the greatest irony of all’ (p. 138).

Rev. Dr. Andrew Gregory contributes an introductory paper on *I Clement*. As opposed to the traditional Roman Catholic’s viewpoint that this letter is the evidence of ‘the first exercise of Roman primacy after Peter's death’ (“un primo esercizio del Primato romano dopo la morte di Pietro”, as Pope Benedict XVI says in his book: *Catechesi sui Padri della Chiesa. Da Clemente Romano a Gregorio Magno* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2008, p.10), Gregory points out that modern scholars actually have no consensus on the authorship of this letter; further, internal evidence shows that this magnificent, grand letter is written in the plural. Gregory also points out that the genre of *I Clement* is συμβουλευτικόν (advisory), a deliberative rhetoric to ‘persuade rather than to compel’ which is also found in other texts that are contemporary with *I Clement*. (p. 26). In order to make his point clear, Gregory gives his readers as evidence six passages he has found in *I Clement* to support his argument that *I Clement* is actually not an ‘exercise of Roman primacy’

over the church at Corinth, but a letter of advice issued by the whole church in Rome. In other words, *1 Clement's* author(s) tried to persuade by using a deliberative rhetorical argument which implied response; and it is clear to him that no 'Petrine authority' or 'Roman primacy' is invoked. Finally, Gregory reminds his readers that the author(s) of *1 Clement* lived in the period of the Second Sophistic, as most of the authors of surviving Christian texts from the early second century did, and readers should be mindful of this fact.

As introduced above, the authors of the papers collected in this book do not read the Apostolic Fathers' writings from a traditional Roman Catholic perspective. They approach these ancient Christian writings from a modern, liberal biblical historical analysis perspective. Nevertheless, it is very much a refreshing and rewarding experience to read their findings as well as their rich summaries of relevant academic research carried out in recent decades. It is also exciting to see many liberal, Protestant biblical scholars and theologians paying great attention to the roots of our common faith, reminding us that we are all heirs to the wonderful legacy of the apostles.

CHANG, Ieeming Paulus
Post-doctoral Fellow, *Academia Catholica*,
Fu Jen University
pauluschang@gmail.com