

The Christology of Nascent Messianic Judaism

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The Christology of the nascent¹ Messianic Jewish movement (MJM) is of interest not only to modern Messianic Jews, but also to scholars in the Jewish and Christian traditions. The purpose of this brief introduction is to describe its contours in the context of first century Christian Judaism. Few texts provide as good a window into the values and theology of the nascent MJM than the *Didache*. A gathering consensus holds that the *Didache* preserves teaching preceding the destruction of the second Temple, and that its redaction was essentially complete towards the end of the first century.² Less consensus exists regarding the *Didache's* provenance.³

¹ I am experimenting with the term 'nascent' in line with Neusner et. al. who use the term to describe both nascent Judaism and Christianity in this period. It may be more appropriate than referring to early 'Jewish Christianity', 'Christian Judaism' or 'Messianic Judaism'.

² This early date has given rise to claims that Matthew quotes the *Didache*, as in Alan J. P. Garrow, *The Gospel of Matthew's Dependence on the Didache* (London: T&T Clark, 2004). Jeff Spivak, however, still maintains an early second century date for the completed redaction "A Christian-Jewish School : Didache, Doctrina, Matthew" (Aberdeen, 2007), 2-3.

³ Harnack, on the basis of its use in the Egyptian church held to an Egyptian origin *Die Lehre Der Zwölf Apostel : Nebst Untersuchungen Zur ältesten Geschichte Der Kirchenverfassung Und Des Kirchenrechts* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1884), 20-24. whereas Philip Schaff strongly leaned towards a Jerusalem or Antiochene origin in *The Oldest Church Manual Called the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* (London: Henry Jerrard, 1885), 123-5. More recently Niederwimmer pessimistically declared 'Regarding provenance, we are completely in the dark' *The Didache: A Commentary*, ed. Harold W. Attridge, trans. Linda M. Maloney, Hermeneia - a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 53. He is seconded by van de Sandt and Flusser who say that 'no answer can pretend to be better than a reasonable guess' *The Didache: Its Jewish Sources and Its Place in Early Judaism and Christianity* (Assen: Royal Van Gorcum, 2002), 48.. Jeffords provides a useful survey of the schools of thought, breaking them down into French, German, and British / American schools of thought, although his contribution is already dated because of subsequent developments in the English 'school' *The Sayings of Jesus in the Teachings of the Twelve Apostles*, ed. A.F.J. Klijn, et al., vol. 11, Vcsup (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 6-17.

The *Didache* preserves a distinctly Jewish outlook as it sets out to provide instruction to gentile converts.⁴ With a law-observant bent, bearing the ‘whole yoke of the Lord’ is equated to being ‘perfect’ (Did. 6:2 cf. 4:13). Further, the teaching of the *Didache* comprises of commandments (2:1) and lawlessness is decried (5:2; 16:4). Idolatry, a particular temptation to those recently brought out of paganism, is thrice proscribed (3:4; 5:1; 6:3 cf. Acts 15:20,29). Well accepted in the early church, its content is paraphrased in *Barnabas* (c. 100-130 C.E.) and taken almost verbatim in the Apostolic Constitutions, chapter 7 (c. 375 C.E.). Writing in the fourth century, Eusebius describes it as well known in his Ecclesiastical History (*HE* 3.25). Athanasius in *Ep. fest.* 39 listed it *Didache* among those books ‘appointed by the Fathers to be read by those who newly join us, and who wish for instruction in the word of godliness’.⁵ As such, it provides a fitting subject for a case study, leaving a more thorough and comprehensive review of the Christology of the nascent MJM for a later study.

The *Didache* is not a theological work, being closer in form to a church manual. However, its instructions do reveal underlying beliefs. The Christology of the *Didache* is epitomised in its use of terminology. Three terms stand out: Ἰησοῦς, Κύριος, and Χριστός – Jesus, Lord, and Messiah.

I. Ἰησοῦς - Jesus

The first term used of Jesus is Ἰησοῦς, the transliteration of ישוע from the root שוע. As a proper name, it was given in response to the revelation that ‘he will deliver his people from their sins’ (Matt 1:21). In this context then, שוע is to be understood as related to the Hebrew noun ‘deliverance’ and the Hebrew verb ‘cry for help’, both spelled with the same consonants. The object of this deliverance and help is described as the ‘sins’ of his people (τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν αὐτῶν).

The name of Jesus is invoked four times, in two related passages concerning thanksgiving meals in blessings that are in some ways similar to the *Birkat Hamazon*.⁶ The first passage, more in the line with blessings before meals, is *Did.* 9:2-4:

⁴ Nancy Pardee summarises the evidence in a perceptive work that clarifies the genre and double title of the *Didache* in writing ‘Clearly we are in a Jewish-Christian setting that nonetheless has accepted the fact of the mission to the Gentiles’ *The Genre and Development of the Didache: A Text-Linguistic Analysis*, ed. Jörg Frey, vol. 339, WUNT (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 125.

⁵ Audet (1958, 79-90), Niederwimmer (1998, 4-17) as well as Van de Sandt and Flusser (2002, 1-6) provide helpful surveys of direct references to the *Didache* as well as to quotations and allusions to it in early church documents.

⁶ The meals of the *Didache* are not equivalent to a reenactment of the Last Supper. See Huub van de Sandt, “Why Does the *Didache* Conceive of the Eucharist as a Holy Meal?,” *VC* 65, no. 1 (2011): 1. Jonathan Draper argues, however, that neither is this an early form of the *Birkat Hamazon*. “Ritual Process and Ritual Symbol in “*Didache*” 7-10,” *ibid.* 54, no. 2 (2000): 138. However, it is not so easy to dismiss the parallels adduced by Louis Finkelstein, “The *Birkat Ha-Mazon*,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review, New Series* 19, no. 3 (1929): 213ff. It should further be noted that the order of the *Didache* (wine, then bread) is the reverse of the Last Supper tradition, and as Jonathan Schwiebert points out, ‘Neither the crucifixion nor the incarnation is being evoked in this meal.’ *Knowledge and the Coming Kingdom: The Didache's Meal*

First concerning the cup of your thanksgiving, our Father, on account of the holy vine of David your son, which you made known to us through **Jesus** your son. To you be the glory forever. Concerning the fragment, we thank you, our father, for the life and knowledge which has been made known to you through **Jesus** your child. To you be the glory forever. Just as this fragment is scattered on the mountains and was gathered to be one, thus may your church be gathered from the ends of the earth into your kingdom. Because yours is the glory and the power through **Jesus Christ** forever.’

The second is *Did.* 10:2:

We give thanks to you, holy father, for your holy name, which you have made to dwell in our hearts, and by knowledge and faith and immortality, which you have made known to us through **Jesus** your child. Yours is the glory forever.

In all four instances where Jesus is mentioned, his name is preceded by the preposition $\delta\iota\alpha$, or ‘through’. Likewise, in each instance the Father is the subject and Jesus the object. Functionally, the Father has ‘made known’ the ‘holy vine of David’, ‘life’, ‘knowledge’, ‘faith’ and ‘immortality’ through Jesus. In addition, the Father has ‘glory’ and ‘power’ through Jesus. Ontologically Jesus is his ‘son’ and ‘child’.

The first occurrence, ‘on account of the holy vine of David your son, which you made known to us through **Jesus** your son. To you be the glory forever’ is strikingly similar to the prayer in the *amidah*, אַתְּ צְמַח דָּוִד עֲבָדְךָ מְהֵרָה תִצְמַח, וְקִרְנֵוּ תְרִים בְּיִשׁוּעָתְךָ (Speedily cause the branch of David your servant to flourish, and let him be exalted in your salvation).⁷ The parallel does not prove dependency in one direction or the other, but common phraseology underscores the Jewish nature of the prayer. The *Didache’s* distinctive is in identifying *Yeshua* as the name of Jesus, and instead of saying ‘the branch’ saying ‘the holy vine’. Thus *Yeshua* is emphasised as the source of salvation, and holiness is imputed to him.

Yet more remarkable is the second occurrence of ‘Jesus’ where he is described as the Father’s $\pi\alpha\iota\delta\acute{o}\varsigma$ ($\pi\alpha\acute{\iota}\varsigma$). The term has been variously translated as ‘servant’⁸ or ‘*serviteur*’⁹ but also ‘child’.¹⁰ In this case, the context is decisive, as the term is also applied to David. Thus either

Ritual and Its Place in Early Christianity, ed. Mark Goodacre, Library of New Testament Studies (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 102.

⁷ Jonathan A. Draper, "A Commentary on the Didache in the Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Documents" (Dissertation, Cambridge, 1983), 188. See also Gottlieb Klein, "Die Gebete in Der Didache," *ZNW*9(1908): 133ff.

⁸ Niederwimmer, *The Didache: A Commentary*, 144. Also Sandt and Flusser, *The Didache: Its Jewish Sources and Its Place in Early Judaism and Christianity*, 13.

⁹ Jean-Paul Audet, *La Didaché: Instructions Des Apôtres* (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1958), 235.

¹⁰ This is the tradition of the Loeb library. Bart D. Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers: I Clement, II Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp, Didache*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, trans. Bart D. Ehrman, vol. 24, Loeb Classical Library (Harvard, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 430. In the preceding Loeb edition, Kirsop Lake

David and Jesus are each a 'child' or they are each a 'servant'. The latter is the most likely. This is the very word used of the 'Servant' in the LXX in Isa 41:8-9, 42:1, 19 &c. It is also applied to David in Luke 1:69 and Acts 4:25 as well as in the LXX in Isa 37:35. Thus in this passage, thanks are given to the Father, and Jesus is depicted as his 'servant'.

This servanthood is not a menial one, in the Didachist's community. Eternal glory and power (*δόξα* and *δύναμις*) are mediated to the father through Jesus in 9:4. Here the context is the regathering of the church 'from the ends of the earth' in an appropriation of imagery from the Hebrew Bible. It is an eschatological picture that bears comparison with 1QSb (1Q28b) 5:27-28 where the 'Prince of the congregation' is told 'God has established you as "the sceptre" over the rulers... nations shall serve you. He shall make you mighty by His holy name'. In both cases, whether 'Prince' or 'Servant', the messianic figure is subservient to God but closely associated with his glory.

In the final occurrence of Jesus' name, both concepts are conflated. Jesus is once again God's 'child' and the glory is forever the Father's. Thus it can be seen that consistently (if consistency can be ascertained over four occurrences of Jesus' name) the focus is on the Father rather than Jesus. Jesus is the means by which God imparts knowledge to the Didachean believers. In turn, glory and power are ascribed to the Father by Jesus' agency.

II. Κύριος - Lord

Far more common than occurrences of Jesus' name is the title *κύριος*, or 'Lord', which occurs more than twenty different times in the *Didache*. According to Martin Hengel '*Kyrios*' in the Hellenistic synagogue – as a substitute (*qêrê*) for the Hebrew name for God, YHWH, the tetragrammaton- was the most important appellation for God.¹¹ In the *Didache* there are five places where the term refers to Jesus with a high degree of certainty: in the title, *Did.* 8:2, 15:4, 16:1 and in 16:7-8. In contrast, there is only one place where *κύριος* clearly refers to God while in about ten other places, there are varying degrees of certainty as to whether Jesus is spoken of rather than the Father.

As might be expected from a title rather than a proper noun, the first characteristic of the term *κύριος* is functional. Thus in the title of the *Didache* the Lord is one who has communicated a teaching that is distinctive and authoritative. While there may well be points of contact between *κύριος* as teacher and the Teacher of Righteousness, Beloved Teacher or Interpreter of the Law frequently present in the Damascus Document (=CD, Cairo Damascus) and the *Serek* (=MD, Manual of Discipline, Community Rule) there is likely a particular reference in this role of the Lord. This is teaching (*διδαχή*), reminiscent of Acts 2:42 and 13:12 which refer to the 'teaching of the apostles' and the 'teaching of the Lord'.¹² This teaching, consisting of commands as laid out

et al. (1976-1977) *The Apostolic Fathers*. Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press; Heinemann. (Loeb classical library, no. 24 & 25).

¹¹ Martin Hengel, *Studies in Early Christology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995), 380.

¹² Aaron Milavec in *The Didache: Text, Translation, Analysis, and Commentary* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2003), 40, 44-45, prefers to translate *διδαχή* as 'training' in accordance with the

in the 'Two Ways' section of the *Didache* (4:13) is to be taken up as a 'yoke' (6:2) – the yoke of the Lord. A close connection is made between this teaching and the gospel of the Lord in *Did.* 15:3-4. In this the gospel contains instruction for living (prayers, giving and life in general) rather than being a soteriological message. This underscores the importance of the message in *Did.* 11:2 that a teacher is to be evaluated by whether or not their teaching is in accordance with that of the Didachist and whether it brings righteousness (to be understood in terms of behaviour) and the knowledge of the Lord.

Directly associated with this functional perspective on the Lordship of Jesus is the communal or ecclesiological nature of his Lordship. In the *Didache* Jesus' lordship is associated with his Name and his Name with his relationship to the community of believers. Jean Daniélou long ago emphasised the importance of the 'Name' and Christ as the 'Name of God' in early Jewish Christianity.¹³ Within a community context the 'Name' of the Lord also holds significance in the *Didache*. It is the community that bears the Name of the Lord, and as in 1 Enoch 48:1-10 it is his Name that is worshipped. Thus new adherents or members of the community are baptised 'into the name of the Lord' (*Did* 9:5).¹⁴ Here the Name functions effectively at one level as a substantive for the community as a whole. To be baptised into the name of the Lord is to become part of the community, and thus become eligible to participate in thanksgiving meals which involve worship. Since in *Did.* 9:5 it can be established that the Lord whose Name is mentioned is Jesus, it is reasonable to conclude that where the same phrase occurs in *Did.* 12:1 Jesus is spoken of as well. In 12:1 those who come in the name of the Lord¹⁵ are to be welcomed in the community. Again there is a communal aspect to the 'Name'.

A third major feature of the *Didache's* use of the term κύριος is its connection to the exaltation of the Lord. *Did.* 14:1 preserves a very early usage of the phrase 'the Lord's day' and there is little doubt that this refers to the first day of the week. While Niederwimmer holds that the peculiar phrase κυριακὴν δὲ κυρίου seems to already be 'a familiar term for the day of the week that is consecrated by the resurrection of the Lord.'¹⁶ Jonathan Draper earlier put forth a persuasive argument that this is a later Christian redaction for what was originally περί δὲ τοῦ σαββάτου κυρίου (concerning the Sabbath of the Lord).¹⁷ This reading is far better in consonance with the nascent Messianic Jewish flavour of the text as a whole and buttressed with the text-

work's character as a 'training program' with some justification, but the programme itself is presented as teaching.

¹³ This may well be an allusion to the same tradition preserved in Matt 11:30, although the term 'yoke' is known to be used elsewhere (e.g. Sir 28:20; 51:26; 1 Macc 8:18). ¹³ Jean Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, trans. John A. Baker, vol. 1 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1977), 147ff.

¹⁴ There is no doubt as to whether this is Jesus, as the Lord is cited as saying 'do not give what is holy to dogs' (cf. Matt 7:6).

¹⁵ Such are not necessarily the wandering charismatics of 11:1, 3-4; 13:1.

¹⁶ *The Didache: A Commentary*, 195.

¹⁷ "A Commentary on the Didache in the Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Documents,"

critical observation of the clumsiness and repetitiveness of the phrase. The undisputed thrust of the text however is that this is the day on which the Didacheans 'give thanks'. On this day the Lord is worshipped and his 'name is considered marvellous among the gentiles' (*Did.* 14:3). The connection between his exaltation and worship is taken further in *Did.* 16:1 which speaks of the hour in which our Lord comes. Again, in 16:8, 'The Lord will come... all... will see the Lord.' At this point his resurrection will be apparent to all, for all will see him. All will see that he is Lord, and in him will be fulfilled the promises of his return and the eschaton. Richard Longenecker rightly observed that one of the early forms of Christological material in early Christian communities was eschatological writing¹⁸ and here the 'highest' Christology of the *Didache* is revealed.

III. Χριστός - Messiah

Χριστός occurs only one time in the *Didache*. This is somewhat remarkable in light of the well founded statement that Jesus' Messiahship was 'basic to the christology of the earliest Jewish Christians.'¹⁹ However, keeping in mind the intended audience of the *Didache*, and the tumultuous time in which it was written, in the midst of the first Jewish war, this might well be comprehensible. In the words of William Horbury, 'the word messiah itself attests a special accepted notion current at the end of the Old Testament period'.²⁰ It was tied closely to Jewish aspirations for a kingdom and freedom from Roman oppression. Since the *Didache* was not written primarily for Jews, this may perhaps serve as a tentative theory for the author's lack of emphasis on this term.

The term Messiah is attested in John 1:41, and John 4:25 again documents the equivalence of the terms in the statement "I know that Messiah [Μεσσίας] is coming (he who is called Christ)." The importance that John thus put on the correct meaning of Messiah suggests that the term is indeed significant. Such significance is not restricted to New Testament writers, but to other Jewish sources as well. Targum Onqelos translates Gen 49:10, 'until Shiloh come' as 'until *the Messiah comes*';²¹ Targum Pseudo-Jonathan as 'until *the King Messiah comes*';²² and Targum Neophiti as 'until *the time King Messiah shall come*'.²³

In the *Didache*, in the same context of a thanksgiving meal mentioned earlier, Χριστός occurs in the phrase 'Because yours is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forever' (*Did.*

¹⁸ "Christological Materials in the Early Christian Communities," in *Contours of Christology in the New Testament*, ed. Richard N Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 55.

¹⁹ Richard N Longenecker, *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 63.

²⁰ William Horbury, *Jewish Messianism and the Cult of Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1998), 7.

²¹ "The Targum Onqelos to Genesis," in *The Targum Onqelos to Genesis. Translated, with a Critical Introduction, Apparatus, and Notes*, ed. Bernard Grossfeld (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 158.

²² "Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis," in *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis. Translated, with Introduction and Notes*, ed. Michael Maher (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992), 159.

²³ "Targum Neophiti 1: Genesis," in *Targum Neophiti 1: Genesis. Translated, with Apparatus and Notes*, ed. Martin McNamara (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992), 220.

9:4). Here the context is the gathering of the church into God's kingdom, and the glory and power that is God's through Messiah. Thus for the Didachist Jesus' Messiahship is not simply an political or (at the other end of the spectrum) an ethereal concept, but is rooted in God's plan for the church and the cosmos.

Related to Jesus' title of Χριστός is the use of the term Christian (χριστιανός) in *Did.* 12:4 and in the next phrase Christ-monger (χριστέμπορος) in 12:5. It is in the *Didache* (12:4) that the word Christian first appears after its initial use in Acts 11:26. In that context it is with reference to Barnabas and Saul teaching 'a great many people' with the result that according to Luke their new 'disciples' were first called Χριστιανοί. The further adaptation, χριστέμπορος, in *Did.* 12:5 implies that derivations of Χριστός were comprehensible in the day. If this was a 'neologism'²⁴ its use yet relied upon the assumption that its meaning was intelligible. As the *Didache* was written in Antioch where 'the disciples were first called Christians' (Acts 11:26), it is no surprise to find this first extra-biblical use of the term here.²⁵ Of further interest, is the observation that this Latinised form of Χριστός may well have borne negative connotations, as David Horrell describes.²⁶ Even centuries later, in Justin's dialogue with his 'straw man' Trypho, he has Trypho say (*Dial. Tr.* 32.1) 'These and such like Scriptures, sir, compel us to wait for Him who, as Son of man, receives from the Ancient of days the everlasting kingdom. But this so-called Christ of yours was dishonourable and inglorious, so much so that the last curse contained in the law of God fell on him, for he was crucified.' In the Didachean community however, the name of Christ is accepted as a token of identity. One is to 'live as a Christian' and the implication is that this is commendable.

Summary

To only a limited extent, this paper has been able to establish the contours of nascent Messianic Jewish Christology. The literary material available is extensive, and this study has been limited to the names of Jesus in the *Didache*. In terms of the name of Jesus, it's salvific content and relationship to the Father have been seen. In terms of the title Lord, its functional nature in terms of the Lord as the authoritative Teacher is clear, its relationship to the Lord's community, and to the Lord's exaltation and return can also be seen. In the one occurrence of Χριστός there is a connection to the glory and power due to the Father on account of the Christ, and the Didachean community identifies with him seeking to bring honour to his Name.

As far as it goes the Christology of the *Didache* is in all places 'orthodox' and in accord with New Testament doctrine and contemporary and later creeds. Nevertheless, its emphases and perspectives are instructive and useful to twenty-first century Messianic Jews seeking to frame their own understanding of Yeshua the Messiah.

²⁴ Niederwimmer, *The Didache: A Commentary*, 187.

²⁵ David G. Horrell, "The Label Χριστιανός: 1 Peter 4:16 and the Formation of Christian Identity," *JBL* 126, no. 2 (2007): 364-5. Draper, however, speculates that the word here 'may be a gloss' "A Commentary on the Didache in the Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Documents," 255.

²⁶ "The Label Χριστιανός: 1 Peter 4:16 and the Formation of Christian Identity," 367.

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