

Introduction



How to Talk about the Apostolic Fathers?

I am especially grateful to have the opportunity to produce this volume. And yet, there is a real sense in which the writing of this book has been an unexpectedly difficult task for me. I may perhaps best illustrate my point with the following scenario:

Imagine a scene in which a mother takes her child into a large candy store. At the door the child is told that whatever he or she desires is available for the taking—everything is up for grabs, so to speak. The choices are endless, and it would be almost too much for a youngster to imagine! Thrown into such a world of choices, most children could be placed into one of several categories. Those who are aggressive and of single purpose undoubtedly would launch immediately into the task at hand—grabbing and eating, or choosing and hoarding. Those who are more cautious might freeze in their tracks, hardly able to make that most basic of decisions when faced with such a marvelous opportunity. But a third option is also possible, the gathering of what seems to be the most attractive options, followed by the abandonment of those choices in favor of yet other possibilities. A person's first task, then, must be to decide where to begin and exactly how to proceed.

This book has been, in many respects, my own personal candy-store hell. The opportunity to explore together the two subjects that intrigue me the most in a professional sense—the New Testament and the apostolic fathers—is very much in my case what might be aptly described by the popular phrase “death by chocolate.” Where can I, and where should we, begin the whole discussion of the apostolic fathers

and their relationship to the world of New Testament literature? What must be said, and what is probably best left for another occasion?

Frankly, there seems to be no good way to describe the relationship between these two collections of early Christian literature in twenty-five words or less. In the same way that both apples and oranges are representatives of the fruit category, both of these literary collections are a secondary grouping of the same type of materials that were produced by the early church. The ancient formation of the New Testament canon eventually produced a body of (more or less) diverse texts that came to assume the status of "Scripture" for the Christian tradition. By a completely different avenue, the modern assemblage of the apostolic fathers ultimately linked (more or less) diverse texts that had previously become the "also-rans" of that same tradition. Early bishops and church councils made the watershed choices about which texts were to be included in the canon and which simply "need not apply." Of course, the assurance of apostolic authorship and the common usage of a particular text among scattered congregations came into consideration during such decisions. But ultimately, the distinctions between the writings of the fathers and the discourses of Christian Scripture are few. So, where are we to begin and what are we to say?

From the outset the reader should be aware that the treatment in the following pages is not arranged according to systematic and separate discussions of how the individual writings of Scripture and the fathers are related. I have decided that to begin with each of the fathers in order to compare individual writings to relevant New Testament texts would be both boring and tedious for most readers. Throughout the secondary literature one is able to find scattered commentaries on the fathers (though virtually none on the New Testament) that offer such attempts. Also, I have made a very brief and general effort myself in my student's introduction to this collection of literature.¹

Further, and undoubtedly a surprise to many readers, I have not chosen to place my primary focus upon the common and important themes that each set of literature possesses. To be sure, such themes invariably are raised and addressed throughout the following pages.

¹ See Clayton N. Jefford, with Kenneth J. Harder and Louis D. Amezcaga Jr., *Reading the Apostolic Fathers: An Introduction* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996); and more recently, Clayton N. Jefford, *The Apostolic Fathers: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005).

However, it seems better to me to discuss issues that tend to plague any student of Christian antiquity who attempts to read the Scriptures with a broader understanding of historical and literary background and who, at the same time, wishes to make some effort to inform that scriptural knowledge with the insights of other contemporary Christian voices. I chose, then, to address issues through a comparison of texts and not, vice versa, to address texts through a comparison of issues.

Finally, this volume is not designed to be a methodical, text-critical comparison of New Testament texts with parallels from the apostolic fathers, focusing upon the variations in manuscripts and sources. In that vein, several worthy efforts have already been made to cover the entire corpus of the apostolic fathers in the past, including the early work of the Oxford Society of Historical Theology in 1905² and, of course, the landmark Marburg dissertation of Helmut Koester, published in 1957, which was directed by Rudolf Bultmann.³ Apart from these volumes, other scholars have undertaken more restrictive research into individual writings within the corpus on the question of biblical parallels, many of which are both thorough and convincing. But beyond this reason, the current volume was never envisioned as an attempt to undertake such a broad academic effort, particularly in the light of contemporary scholarship. Instead, we must be content here to work with broader themes and selected illustrations from relevant comparisons of intertextual parallels.

Of course, some time and effort are necessary in order to engage our current task. For some students, the endeavor is a candy-store delight—the rewards are both engaging and intoxicating. For other students, the restrictions of some “sugar intolerance” may make the entire project unpalatable and not worth the effort. The following materials are designed to make the rewards more immediate and intense for the first group of students and perhaps more encouraging for the second. Chapters are divided according to issues, not texts. They appear as follows:

² A Committee of the Oxford Society of Historical Theology, *The New Testament in the Apostolic Fathers* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1905). An academic conference at Lincoln College in Oxford, held in April 2004, was conceived as an opportunity to celebrate the research efforts of this particular volume. It was anticipated that two volumes of papers from the conference would appear in 2005 to mark the one hundredth anniversary of that original publication.

³ Helmut Koester, *Synoptische Überlieferung bei den apostolischen Vätern* (TUGAL 65; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1957).

In chapter 1 (“Finding a Time and Place for the Texts”) we begin where, I believe, the most challenging snare of our study lies in wait: the question of when and where our texts were written. This is a problem both for the corpus of the apostolic fathers and (in a lesser way) for the New Testament. Within each field of study some broad consensus of opinion has been formed in recent years, sometimes achieved with the advantage of recent archaeological data and secondary estimations, but all too often from the larger void of limited information and sheer guesswork, which now have become accepted opinions. For those who want the ultimate answer to such questions (and I happily include myself here), I offer nothing to shake the world of early Christian studies. For those who could stand to have the questions more clearly identified, perhaps I will provide at least a surface map for further investigation. My primary concern in either case, however, is to inform the reader with respect to my own starting points and assumptions.

Chapter 2 (“The Authority of Texts and Traditions”) provides some focus to the written and oral sources that now lie behind the apostolic fathers. This is a broad category of materials, naturally, a subject whose more intricate details already have been the subject of numerous studies in books and journals. My goals are not so ambitious. I hope simply to identify the types of materials that are shared among our texts, to isolate some of the forms that seem to serve as common links between the fathers and the New Testament, and to suggest some general trends that may help to shed some light upon our general knowledge of early Christian literature.

Chapter 3 (“Codes of Conduct and Christian Thinking”) takes a quick look at one of early Christianity’s most important issues: the regulation of the ethical lifestyle. Already an issue among Paul’s earliest contacts, by the end of the first century specific codes and regulations had become foundational for the Christian life. There is a curious regularity about these codes, whose use and abuse continued to dominate the attention of later church leadership. Such codes never stood alone, but were offered both as support and justification within countless ecclesiastical debates.

A typical concern of those who study the rise of early Christian communities is addressed in chapter 4 (“Imagery of the New Testament Faith”). This section is a sweep through the apostolic fathers in a survey of New Testament imagery that appears there. The focus of

this review is to offer a synopsis of ideas and motifs that the authors of the fathers found to be useful, either having borrowed them from the texts of Scripture themselves or having drawn them from the common materials of early Christian faith. Although some reference is made here to specific quotations that the fathers have drawn from Scripture, the primary focus is upon the use of broader images and ideas.

The next two chapters represent opposite sides of a coin, and perhaps should be considered as an extended unit. Chapter 5 (“The Question of Christians as Jews”) seeks to review the struggle of the rising church consciousness concerning the role of Judaism in the midst of the fledgling Christian faith. The New Testament is a clear witness to this evolution, as has long been recognized. At the same time, the apostolic fathers offer further reflection on the theme as experienced by second-century church communities. In chapter 6 (“The Question of Christians as Citizens”) I consider the result of the so-called Jewish question as the church of the fathers gradually came to define itself according to the parameters of Roman society. This evolution was by no means complete by the latest text of the apostolic fathers, but a clear transition is evident.

The final chapter, chapter 7 (“How Persons and Places Influence History”), is a brief survey of historical personalities and locales that influenced the thoughts and theology behind the apostolic fathers. Although much of what appears here is modeled upon New Testament paradigms, at the same time a momentous transition occurred between the first and second centuries. Old ideas were expanded, and new possibilities were envisioned. In many cases, the transition represents the work of specific leaders who have responded to various problems and ecclesiastical issues, particularly as those concerns characterized specific church communities.

Finally, I have appended a short section entitled “The Significance of the Apostolic Fathers for New Testament Study.” It is my hope that the present volume will serve as a worthy example of how the apostolic fathers may serve to underpin our further investigations into early Christian Scripture.

As a standard throughout the following pages I have employed the translations of the New Revised Standard Version for the scriptural references. For the apostolic fathers I have typically used the translations of Michael W. Holmes’s most recent revision of J. B. Lightfoot and J. R.

Harmer's *The Apostolic Fathers*.⁴ One will find here those texts that are most often included among the fathers: *Epistle of Barnabas*, *1–2 Clement*, *Didache*, *Epistle to Diognetus*, *Shepherd of Hermas*,⁵ the seven letters of Ignatius (*To the Ephesians*, *To the Magnesians*, *To the Philadelphians*, *To Polycarp*, *To the Romans*, *To the Smyrnaeans*, and *To the Trallians*), *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, *Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians*, and the *Fragments of Papias*. As directly indicated when relevant, I occasionally offer my own translation of texts when I believe that some specific issue or rendition is desirable for the context of the discussion. No foreign words or phrases appear here without an accompanying English translation.

Let us begin!

⁴Michael W. Holmes, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999). A third edition was due late in 2005.

⁵Two different systems, one older and one newer, are commonly used to cite the text of the *Shepherd of Hermas*. The present volume uses the newer system. For a helpful chart that compares the two systems see Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 333.