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## THREE CONTEXTS FOR READING MANASSEH'S PRAYER IN THE DIDASCALIA



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**T**he Prayer of Manasseh is something of an orphan in relation to the scripture of contemporary religious communities. It is excluded from the Tanakh as a non-Hebrew work, and the text lies outside of the Protestant and Roman Catholic canons. It is regarded as authoritative only in certain Orthodox Churches, but then not in all. Most who encounter the Prayer of Manasseh do so in the context of one of the critical editions of the Bible in the apocrypha or deuterocanonical section, in which the prayer appears by itself or in worship as a canticle. Yet there is no unambiguous evidence for the Jewish liturgical use of the prayer independent of its context, and the two contexts in which we find it, in the early church orders and in a list of Odes appended to the book of Psalms in three manuscripts of the Greek Bible, are suggestive of two different uses. The purpose of this essay is to illuminate the earliest narrative context in which we find the Prayer of Manasseh, the *Didascalia Apostolorum*. I would like to argue on that basis that this pseudepigraphic prayer, whoever composed it and whenever it was composed,

was included in the *Didascalia* in response and in reaction to the Jewish-Christian tensions of Syria in the early third century.

The *Didascalia* is a work of twenty-seven chapters in length which is addressed to the entire Christian community including lay women and men. It treats such topics as the duties of the bishop, the nature of penance, liturgical worship, the role of widows and deaconesses in the Church, the resolution of disputes, and the administration of offerings.

The scholarly consensus holds that the *Didascalia* was written in the early third century most likely in North Syria, a region in which Jews and Christians struggled and competed with each other, and is especially directed against those Christians who still observed Jewish law.<sup>1</sup> Unlike the Marcionites, the authors of the *Didascalia* were only selectively anti-nomian. Indeed, they affirmed the law, but on their own terms, because the *Didascalia* distinguishes two parts to the law. The *Didascalia* contains lengthy polemic against those who observe the “second law.” While embarking on an analysis of the *Didascalia* in its socio-

historical setting is beyond our scope, it is possible to sketch some of the most salient aspects of the *Didascalia* so as to begin to understand the nature and function of the prayer.

As I will argue, this strain of anti-Jewish polemic seems to be the preeminent factor in the choice and use of Manasseh as an exemplar of a sinner who offers a confessional prayer.<sup>2</sup> The Prayer of Manasseh functions especially to rehabilitate Manasseh as a penitent idolater. In the larger context of tension between Christians, Jews, and those caught betwixt and between, that is, those Jews who desired to join the Christian fold, or even more likely, those Christians whether of Jewish birth or not, who were drawn to the worship and practice of Judaism, the successful penitence of an idolatrous king would have great significance. For the latter group, the assured forgiveness of Manasseh's idolatrous behavior in worshipping other gods would have been a reassurance to them, who were being exhorted to turn from Jewish worship and practices.

I would like to consider then in turn the different contexts in which the Prayer of Manasseh is imbedded: first, within chapters six and seven, which concern practices of penitence in the early Church and in which we find the scriptural recounting of Manasseh's sin and punishment; second, within the larger frame of the composite *Didascalia* itself, which will also take us further abroad to consider the greater Jewish and Christian textual traditions about Manasseh; and finally, the larger rhetorical functioning of the discourse of the *Didascalia* within the warp and woof of early third century north Syria, with its complex interrelationships among Jewish, Christian, and pagan populations.

## THE PRAYER IN ITS IMMEDIATE CONTEXT

We may begin with the prayer's immediate context, chapters six and seven of the document. These chapters centrally concern the *Didascalia*'s teaching on repentance and forgiveness which involves a penitential process. While the topic is treated elsewhere in the *Didascalia*, chapters six and seven outline in particular the role of bishops in this regard. Chapter six is titled "Concerning transgressors and those who repent." The bishop is charged at the outset in this way: "Judge therefore O bishop, strictly like God Almighty, but those who repent receive with mercy like God Almighty received. And rebuke and exhort and teach with an oath promising forgiveness to those that have sinned as he [God] said in Ezekiel..." The chapter then contains a quote from what we know in the Masoretic text as Ezek 33:10 ff. that exhorts Israel to repent: "Turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?" There is a long quote from Ezekiel 18:1-32 with its stress on individual punishment meant to challenge the concept of trans-generational punishment. "Son of Man, what do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'? As I live, says the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel." The message that the sincerely penitent sinner must be mercifully received is repeated in different ways throughout chapter six. In fact, the emphasis on such necessary reincorporation of penitents suggests that there may have been a practice of exclusion or expulsion of such members from the community.

Chapter six also outlines the process by which the sinner is to be treated and ultimately reincorporated into the community. The bishop should admonish the transgressor, prevent the individual from entering the Church, and allow others to intercede with the bishop on his or her behalf. The bishop is then to talk to the sinner to see if she is sufficiently repentant and worthy to continue the process. Then the offender is charged with fasting as penance, for a period ranging from two to seven weeks. After that affliction, the bishop is to receive the sinner, if sufficiently penitent, back into the Church. It is interesting to note that as one scriptural precedent for the practice of putting someone outside of the church, the *Didascalia* refers to the episode in the book of Numbers, in which Miriam and Aaron have challenged Moses's leadership. Miriam (not Aaron!) is placed outside the camp for seven days. The *Didascalia* states that Miriam's repentance caused her to be brought back within the camp, yet Miriam's "repentance" is a narrative detail absent from the biblical text of Numbers. Here is but one example of the phenomenon that we see throughout the *Didascalia*; there is no sense of a fixed canonical text, no clear distinction made between scripture and tradition, but rather traditions of scripture are garnered in order to make the rhetorical case of the authors/compilers. *Didascalia* 6 ends with a verse from Isaiah (58: 36) "Loose every bond of sin, and sever all bands of violence and extortion;" which is understood as the responsibility of the bishop toward the people who have sincerely repented.

The same theme continues in *Didascalia* chapter seven in which we find the Prayer of Manasseh, which is also addressed directly to bishops. "Therefore, O bishop, teach and

rebuke, and loose by forgiveness. And know your place, that it is that of God Almighty, and that you have received authority to forgive sins." The chapter goes on to consider the great responsibility invested in bishops as a result. The bishop himself should take care not to warrant reproach, even while acknowledging that all are subject to sin.

Like the sixth chapter, chapter seven contains copious use of scripture, especially long passages from Ezekiel. For example, in reference to the bishop's authority, we find interpolated a section from Ezekiel, equivalent to what appears now in the Hebrew Masoretic text (MT) as Ezek 34. The passage concerns the responsibility of shepherds for the flock. The shepherds are references to Israel's kings in the original context, but here are understood as referring to the role of bishops. "For the Lord spoke thus in Ezekiel concerning those bishops who neglect their people: 'And the word of the Lord came to me, saying: Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, and say to them: Thus said the Lord God: Woe unto the shepherds of Israel, who feed themselves, and my sheep the shepherds have not fed.'" I note the use of Ezekiel here and in chapter six, because we will return below to the significance of the use of Ezekiel in discussion of the "second law."

First let us attend to the inclusion of Manasseh as exemplar in this chapter. The immediate context of the story of Manasseh exhorts the bishops to learn from ancient days "...that from them you may make comparison and learn the care of souls, and the admonition and reproof and intercession of those who repent and have need of intercession."<sup>3</sup>

The tale of Manasseh is then introduced as if taken directly from the text of scripture:

“Hear therefore, O bishops, regarding these things as an example that is fitting and helpful. It is written in the fourth Book of Kingdoms and likewise in the second Book of Chronicles, thus: ...” Yet the tale does not accord with any single tradition, either the Hebrew or Greek of 2 Kgdms 21 or 2 Chr 33, but rather represents a paraphrastic account that draws on traditions found in the targums and shared by Samaritan and Greek sources.<sup>4</sup> Thus, “It is written” may be a technically correct statement on the part of the author, but what is left unsaid is that the traditions about Manasseh were written in many places, and not simply in one book.

It is worth pointing out some interesting differences both between the parallel accounts we know in Hebrew and differences from the biblical account: many of Manasseh's “crimes” mentioned are the same in both MT Kings and Chronicles, such as building shrines and setting up pillars to Baal. Manasseh made his sons pass through the fire, that is death through immolation, presumably as part of the cult of Molech, and he is generally blamed for shedding much innocent blood in Jerusalem. One difference between Kings and Chronicles: whereas 2 Kings 21 narrates that among Manasseh's sins he placed an image of Asherah in the Temple, Chronicles mentions only a *pesel hassemel* (פסל הסמל), a sculpted image that Manasseh had made, rather than specifying that which was no longer likely a threat in post-exilic Judaism, the worship of Asherah. The Greek translation of 2 Chr 33:7 states that Manasseh placed a carved and molten image (ὁ γλυπτὸν καὶ τὸ χωνευτὸν εἰκόνα) in the Temple. The *Didascalia* also adopts the more general term for idol rather than specifying the name of an idolatrous god that was worshipped, likely

as a means of conveying its contemporaneous relevance for the third-century Syrian audience.

After this account of Manasseh's idolatrous malefactions, the text in the *Didascalia* relates God's condemnation of Manasseh. But whereas the biblical account in Kings and Chronicles has God speaking directly to Manasseh, the *Didascalia* incorporates the targumic tradition that God spoke to Manasseh, not directly, but through the hand of the prophets. Manasseh's lack of remorse calls down divine wrath and punishment, so that Manasseh is carried off by the Assyrians in chains to Babylon. Up to this point, these features of the story correspond more or less to a combined account of Kings/Chronicles. *Didascalia* includes an additional account of Manasseh's treatment in Babylon, how he was fed with a small ration of bread and water mixed with gall to afflict him. It was only after this point of affliction in the story that Manasseh shows contrition, entreats God, and offers his prayer. While the prayer is mentioned in 2 Chronicles, the text of the prayer does not appear. Rather the editors of Chronicles refer their readers to two different sources for this information: “The Annals of the Kings of Israel,” and the “records of the seers.”

The summary point to be made about this conflation of scriptural sources and traditions in chapter seven of the *Didascalia* is that in its overall shape the story of Manasseh matches in broad terms the actions expected of a bishop in the restoration of a sinner. It includes admonition by God (or as in Chronicles, the prophets) whose role will be played by the bishop; it includes exhortation, banishment from the temple and land, reread as the Church, and affliction by means of fasting, all this before conversion,

repentance, and restoration can occur.

At this point in the narrative of the *Didascalia*, the Prayer of Manasseh is incorporated. The text of the prayer is preceded by a superscription, "Prayer of Manasseh" which interrupts the flow of the narrative. The *Didascalia* reads: "and he prayed before the Lord God and said: Prayer of Manasseh. O Lord God of my fathers, ..." The Prayer of Manasseh seems therefore to be an insertion, not an original part of the composition.

#### Prayer of Manasseh<sup>5</sup>

- <sup>1:1</sup> O Lord Almighty, God of our ancestors,  
of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and  
of their righteous offspring;  
<sup>2</sup> you who made heaven and earth with  
all their order;  
<sup>3</sup> who shackled the sea by your word  
of command,  
who closed the abyss and sealed it  
with your terrifying and glorious  
name;  
<sup>4</sup> at whom all shudder, and tremble  
before your power,  
<sup>5</sup> for the magnificence of your glory  
cannot be endured,  
and the wrath of your threat to sinners  
is intolerable;  
<sup>6</sup> yet immeasurable and unfathomable  
is your promised mercy,  
<sup>7</sup> for you are the Lord Most High, of  
great compassion, patient, and merciful,  
and relenting at human evil.  
<sup>a</sup>O Lord, according to your great  
kindness you have promised repentance  
and forgiveness to those who have sinned  
against you, and in the multitude of your  
mercies you have constituted repentance  
for sinners, for salvation.<sup>a</sup>  
<sup>8</sup> Therefore you, O Lord, God of the  
righteous, have not constituted  
repentance for the righteous, for

Abraham and Isaac and Jacob,  
who did not sin against you,  
but you have constituted repentance  
for me, who am a sinner.

- <sup>9</sup> For the sins I have committed are  
more in number than the sand of  
the sea;  
my transgressions are multiplied, O  
Lord, they are multiplied!

I am not worthy to look up and see  
the height of heaven because of  
the multitude of my iniquities.

- <sup>10</sup> I am weighted down with many an  
iron shackle, so that I am rejected  
because of my sins, and I have no  
relief;

for I have provoked your wrath and  
have done what is evil in your  
sight, setting up desecrations and  
multiplying abominations.

- <sup>11</sup> And now I bend the knee of my  
heart, begging you for your kindness.

- <sup>12</sup> I have sinned, O Lord, I have  
sinned, and I acknowledge my  
transgressions.

- <sup>13</sup> I earnestly beg you, forgive me, O  
Lord, forgive me!

Do not destroy me with my transgressions!

Do not be angry with me forever or  
store up evil for me;

Do not condemn me to the depths of  
the earth.

For you, O Lord, are the God of  
those who repent,

- <sup>14</sup> and in me you will manifest your  
goodness;

for, unworthy as I am, you will  
save me according to your great  
mercy,

- <sup>15</sup> and I will praise you continually all  
the days of my life.

For all the host of heaven sings  
your praise and yours is the glory  
forever. Amen.

The prayer has three main sections:

1-7: an invocation in which God is invoked as the ancestral God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and extolled as the creator of the cosmos (1-4) and as the righteous yet merciful judge of sinners who institutes repentance (5-7).

8-13a: an acknowledgement and confession of sin and petition for forgiveness.

13b-15: a third section in which the petitioner acknowledges the goodness and mercy of God and pledges to praise God forever just as the angels sing God's praise.

Two observations about the prayer are worth comment before continuing with our discussion of its contexts. The first is to note one of the interesting ways in which the prayer breathes interpretive scripturalization. In verse 7, we see a clear reference to the liturgical divine attribute formula of Exod 34:6-7. It begins in Exod 34:6: "The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, patient, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness," and continues in Exod 34:7 to enumerate the divine traits of covenant loyalty and justice over generations. In the formula's reuse in later texts, particularly in penitential contexts, just the first clause or an adaptation of it normally appears.<sup>6</sup> So indeed in the *Didascalia* the form is closer to the modified form found in the post-exilic contexts of Jonah 4:21 and Joel 2:13 in which divine mercy is stressed over the retributive aspect of divine justice. The verb "relent" also recalls God's willingness to change course in Exod 32:14 and not to destroy the people as God had first intended as punishment for their idolatry. Thus the hearkening back to the Mosaic law-giving at Sinai, here after the breach with the golden calf, is a significant dimen-

sion of this prayer in relation to the *Didascalia*'s greater rhetoric against observing the "second law."

A second observation concerns the one verse that appears here in the Syriac Prayer of Manasseh, and that is also contained in the Greek version in the fourth century *Ap-  
ostolic Constitutions* but does not appear in the two earliest Greek Manuscripts of the Odes, Alexandrinus and Turinses:

7b O Lord, according to your great kindness you have promised repentance and forgiveness to those who have sinned against you, and in the multitude of your mercies you have constituted repentance for sinners, for salvation.

While we cannot know if this verse appeared in the prayer before its inclusion in the *Didascalia*, it is certainly the case that it accords well with the exhortation to the bishops to bring penitent sheep back into the fold. And so, according to the *Didascalia*, after the prayer is offered, Manasseh is duly heard and absolved by God. Manasseh's rescue and return to the land is decidedly more dramatic than in Chronicles, with flames of fire dissolving the brass case and chains in which he was secured, perhaps borrowed from the account of the three youths in the book of Daniel. The *Didascalia*'s editorial comment after this long scriptural account of Manasseh's reign and repentance brings the point home: "You have heard, beloved children, how Manasseh served idols evilly and bitterly, and slew righteous men; yet when he repented God forgave him, albeit there is no sin worse than idolatry, which is why, there is granted a place for repentance."<sup>7</sup>

### THE PRAYER OF MANASSEH IN ITS LARGER CONTEXT

In order to shift from consideration of the prayer in its immediate literary context to its broader context both within the *Didascalia* and the discursive world of Jewish and Christian texts, we might begin by asking the question, why is King Manasseh singled out for use as an exemplar of penitence? Scripture has a perfect penitent it would seem in the person of King David, reflected both in story and in prayer. The superscription of Psalm 51 in the book of Psalms offers King David as a singularly penitent David in the face of his double sin of adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah, a contravention of two of the great ten commandments. Moreover, the narrative recounting both David's episode with Bathsheba and Nathan's subsequent accusation of him in 2 Sam 11-12 would have been ideal texts to draw upon for an ideal penitent. In the Bible, David is depicted as the most pious of kings in the DtrH, who offers more prayers than any other character. Moreover, confronted with his misdoing, David acknowledges his wrongdoing forthrightly, "I have sinned," and accepts his due punishment.

So why Manasseh instead of David? A partial answer was provided above. Manasseh was an idolater and as such could serve as a reassurance to errant Christ-followers who had strayed from the path in observing Jewish practices. To put the case more strongly, Manasseh's rehabilitation along with the penitential practices described served as a kind of counter-discourse to his general reputation in other Jewish tradition of the time.<sup>8</sup>

#### MANASSEH IN THE PSEUDEPIGRAPHA

Manasseh was not, shall we say, embraced in the bosom of Jewish tradition. Manasseh

was vilified in most post-exilic Jewish literature as an idolater who shed innocent blood, a portrait that stands closer to his negative profile in the Deuteronomistic historian's book of 2 Kings than that in 2 Chronicles.<sup>9</sup> While the tale of his repentance is included in a few texts, in most of the accounts, Manasseh was the perpetrator of murder resulting in a prophet's martyrdom. His chief crime according to many of the sources was his murder of Isaiah by sawing him in two. Though not explicit, we see a hint of this in Heb 11: 37, the catalogue of faithful heroes including the prophets, some of whom were "sawn in two." We see the story of Isaiah's murder explicitly in the first verse of the first century CE "Lives of the Prophets," which reads: "Isaiah, from Jerusalem, died under Manasseh by being sawn in two, and was buried underneath the Oak of Rogel, near the place where the path crosses the aqueduct whose water Hezekiah shut off by blocking its sources."<sup>10</sup> So, too in the oldest part of the *Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah*, Isaiah in fact prophesies his own death at Manasseh's hands during the reign of Manasseh's father, King Hezekiah.<sup>11</sup> *Ascen. Isa.* 5: 1-5 recounts in rather more gruesome detail Isaiah's death by woodsaw at the hand of Manasseh, who was said to be inspired by the evil spirit of Beliar rooted in his heart. Both Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds preserve similar depictions of Manasseh. Manasseh's list of sins are expanded in 2 *Baruch* which recounts Israel's history in terms of contrasting virtuous and wicked leaders. While 2 *Bar.* 64-65 mentions Manasseh's prayer, the passage asserts that God did not listen to his prayer, because Manasseh's fate was already cast. In the rejection of Manasseh's prayer, 2 *Baruch* is in accord with the targum to 2 Chronicles 33, in which the angels are said

to have tried to prevent God from hearing Manasseh's prayer, so incensed were they at his behavior. Josephus' *Antiquities* is one of the few Jewish accounts that draws a more sympathetic portrait of Manasseh in drawing from both accounts in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles, but in the main, the consensus verdict in Jewish tradition was that Manasseh was an anti-exemplar, distinctly not worthy of emulation.

THE PRAYER IN THE CONTEXT  
OF THE DIDASCALIA:  
THE "SECOND LAW"

With this suggested notion of "counter-discourse" in mind, let us consider now the "Second Law" also called "*Deuterosis*" in the Greek text of the Apostolic Constitutions, referred to in the Syriac of the *Didascalia* by *tenyān nāmōsā*. In considering the idea of the "second law" we must take into account not only its use in the *Didascalia*, but also the resonance of this term in Jewish and Christian discourse generally of this era. Given the name of the fifth book of the Pentateuch, one might expect the "Second Law" to refer to the contents of Deuteronomy in which Moses recounts the Sinai law-giving to the next generation of Israelites on the plains of Moab. This is not so. Within the *Didascalia* itself, the "Second Law" is understood as that part of the law delivered after the idolatrous episode of the worship of the golden calf in Exodus 32. The second chapter of the *Didascalia* includes the following exhortation:

So the first law is that which the Lord God spoke before the people had made the calf and served idols, which consists of the Ten words and the Judgements. But after they had served idols, he justly laid upon them the

bonds, as they were deserving. But do not therefore lay them upon yourself; for our Savior came for no other cause but to fulfil the Law and to set us loose from the bonds of the Second Law.

There is another such clear statement of supercessionism in chapter 26 of the *Didascalia*, a chapter titled, "On the bonds of the Second Law of God," which states even more explicitly that "[Jesus] renewed, fulfilled, and affirmed the Law; but the Second Legislation he did away with and abolished. For indeed it was to this end that he came, that he might affirm the Law and abolish the Second Legislation and fulfill the power of human free will, and show forth the resurrection of the dead."<sup>12</sup> If these descriptions of anti-nomianism are not sufficient to convey the anti-Jewish position of the author, it is also evident in the designation used for Jews. The point to be made is that the term "the Jews" or "Israel" is never used outside of scriptural quotations. Rather, there are singular references to the "former people" as in this verse from the beginning of Chapter 9: "Hear these things then, you laity also, the elect Church of God. For the former people was also called a church, but you are the catholic church, holy and perfect, 'a royal priesthood, a holy assembly, a people for inheritance, the great church, the bride adorned for the Lord God.'" The chapter continues in that vein, stressing the newly elect status of the church in its replacement of Israel's institutions with its own.

This is not to say that there was a single mind in early Christianity about the role of the law in the life of Judaism and Christianity. The *Didascalia's* understanding of the law as comprising two separate and distinct parts of the Sinai legislation stands in contrast with other early Christian understand-



ings of the law. In Gal 3:24-25, we see observance of torah as a custodian or helpful discipline until the advent of Christ makes its practice no longer necessary. This perspective is later echoed in the writing of Irenaeus. Or to take another perspective, in the Epistle of Barnabas, the nature of the whole law is asserted to be misunderstood by the Jews. Barnabas makes no division within the narrative frame of scripture itself, but holds only that the true meaning of the law is its spiritual or allegorical sense. The letter of James, dismissed by Martin Luther as that "most strawy epistle," offers yet another view, the most law-affirming of all.

But we are still left wondering how such an understanding of a dual Sinai legislation should develop. A straight narrative reading of Exodus 32 and following does not support such a reading, because in fact, the renewed covenant that God makes with Israel in Exodus 34 on the second set of tablets includes not only the "ten words" or the decalogue but much more legislation. There is no indication whatsoever that God imposes the renewed covenant with its gift of law as a punishment for idolatry, but rather, God seems to have been softened by the prophetic intercession of Moses in this regard and restores the law tablets as a gift to the people.

The origins and evolution of the *Didascalia's* construal of the "second law" are not completely clear and a thorough consideration is not possible here, but Pieter van der Horst has drawn attention to a verse in Ezekiel 20 that helps to understand its origins. According to van der Horst, the "second law" is rooted in a reading of the account of the apostasy of the golden calf in Exod 32 coupled with the exilic prophetic text from Ezekiel 20:25: "Moreover I gave them stat-

utes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live." He does not mention the subsequent verse in Ezekiel, which as we will see, is relevant to our discussion of Manasseh who was said to have sacrificed his sons by immolating them. Ezek 20:26 reads: "I defiled them through their very gifts, in their offering up all their firstborn, in order that I might horrify them, so that they might know that I am the Lord."

The "laws that were not good" were understood to be the "second law", that is, the law given to Moses after his second trip up Mt. Sinai. Van der Horst argues that such an anti-Jewish reading of Ezekiel 20: 25 had already begun in the final decades of the second century in which the stakes were high for claiming the position of the Jews as the covenanted people of God. Irenaeus is the first to draw such an interpretation in his *Adversus Haereses* (4.15.1). Quoting not only Ezek 20:25, but a long passage from Acts 7: 38-43, in which Israel's worship of the golden calf is portrayed as a spiritual return to Egypt, Irenaeus depicts the commandments as an intentional punishment for their sins. While Irenaeus's interpretation may have predated the *Didascalia*, our author pressed the "second law" concept to his full advantage in making his rhetorical case.

We should now return to a point made earlier in the paper, which was to note the extensive use of Ezekiel in chapters six and seven of the *Didascalia*. There is also a quotation of Ezek 20:25 in the twenty-sixth chapter of the *Didascalia* with its condemnation of the second law. In contrast to the Christian deployment of the prophet Ezekiel, Pieter van der Horst has pointed out the significance of the spare use in general of Ezekiel in Jewish texts among the rabbis.<sup>13</sup> Although Ezekiel 1 and 10 were drawn upon

for apocalyptic and esoteric writings, Ezekiel does not figure prominently in rabbinic writings. Van der Horst also suggests the rabbinic dispute over Ezekiel's inclusion in the Bible. What was, if not anathema, then questionable scripture, among the Jewish community, became an important source for the aims of this Christian or Jewish-Christian author of the *Didascalia* in repudiating Judaism. Whether the status of Ezekiel in rabbinic Judaism was actually a result of this Christian polemic, is a question we will leave unanswered for now.

But whereas we have one construal of the "second law" or *Deuterosis*, that obtains in the *Didascalia*, we must consider the resonance of this legal language in the larger Jewish discursive context. Up to this point, we have been using the Greek term "*Deuterosis*" or an English translation "second law." Connolly suggests that the notion of the Greek *Deuterosis* is derived from the *shanah*, the repetition of the law understood to be part and parcel of the oral tradition of reciting the law in Jewish tradition.<sup>14</sup> The Syriac translator of the original Greek used the term *tenyān nāmōsā*, or "repetition (or double) of the Law," which in fact is the Syriac title of the book of Deuteronomy, taken from the Greek δευτερονομιον. The contrast to "*mishnah*", that which is repeated orally, the tradition of the rabbis, then, would be "*miqra*", that which is read aloud from what is written. If we are to understand the Syriac use of the term *tenyān nāmōsā*, as actually rendering the usual sense of "*mishnah*" in Jewish tradition, then what we see in the *Didascalia* may be a usurpation of that halakhic practice in the Syriac Jewish community.<sup>15</sup>

Just as "Israel" or the Jews as a living community of people is effaced in the *Di-*

*dascalia*, so too, an important living dimension of the "law" as practiced in the Jewish community is effaced by the author of the *Didascalia*. No mention is made of the development of the legal tradition, the ongoing mishnah authorized by the learned leaders of the Jewish community. It is likely the rabbis as the bearers of the halakhic tradition would possess a similar status and level of authority within their community as the bishops in the Christian community who are addressed in the document. Thus what is left unstated about the "second law" may be as important as understanding what is explicitly said about it in the *Didascalia* in terms of understanding its rhetorical force among culturally literate Jews, Christians, and Jewish-Christians. In its rhetoric, the *Didascalia* thus suggests both that the post-golden calf Sinai legislation is null and void, but also that the oral halakhic tradition of the rabbis which would about this time come to roost in writing in the Mishnah was similarly obsolete.

#### THE USE OF THE PRAYER OF MANASSEH WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE DIDASCALIA

In establishing contexts for the Prayer of Manasseh, we have now reviewed the role of the Prayer in its more immediate literary context in chapters six and seven of the *Didascalia*, its larger context with the church document as a whole, and the broader literary contextual environment which it inhabited as part of traditional Jewish and Christian scriptural interpretations such as we reviewed in the pseudepigrapha, targums, and New Testament. It remains to make some tentative suggestions about the *Didascalia*'s social context and function in the life of the early Syriac Christian community.

Perhaps because it seems self-evident, little has been said in scholarship about how the *Didascalia* was actually used in antiquity. In his introductory essay on the Prayer of Manasseh, James Charlesworth says only this: "Its appearance in the *Didascalia* (3<sup>rd</sup> cent. A.D.) and especially in the Apostolic Constitutions (4<sup>th</sup> cent. A.D.), a manual for instruction in the post-Nicene Church, reveals that the Prayer of Manasseh was from early times used ecclesiastically."<sup>16</sup> Charlesworth's statement is doubtless true, but not helpful in its vague generalization because it isolates the Christian community from its pagan and Jewish surroundings and influences. Questions remain about how exactly the *Didascalia* was read, who heard it, how frequently and how it thus shaped (or did not) those who heard its rhetoric. Without overt description of the *Didascalia*'s use in any of our sources from antiquity, the answers to these questions must remain tentative. In any case, it is possible to proffer one suggestion rooted in the observations by Gerard Rouwhorst about Jewish liturgical traditions in early Syriac Christianity.<sup>17</sup> Although we cannot pinpoint either the geographical provenance of the *Didascalia* or its subsequent circulation after composition, the general consensus would have it in northern Syria, in which region lived a sizable Jewish community, a community moreover that may have been bilingual, using both Greek and Syriac.

Rouwhorst points out two features of Jewish influence on early Syriac Christianity. One is in the architecture of churches in north Syria. In these, he notes the absence of the usual seats for clergy in the apses of the building. Rather, seats for clergy are found in the middle of the nave, which contained a large, walled-in platform, which is referred

to as a *bema* in one of Ephrem's works (eighth *memra* on Nicomedia) and corroborated by later sources making the North Syrian churches distinct from the churches of mainland Syria in which the ambo was the central feature of the church. He suggests a relationship between the plan of these North Syrian Churches and that of the synagogues as they existed in Palestine and the Diaspora: "At least from the second-third century C.E. some synagogues were provided with platforms that were intended for the reading and the explanation of the Scriptures, i.e., the Torah and the Prophets, and what is still more striking they were called *bemas*."<sup>18</sup>

We know from later commentaries on the liturgy that the first part of the Eucharist, that is, the liturgy of the word, the reading, preaching and singing of scripture in psalms, was offered on the *bema*, before the clergy descended to the altar for the liturgy of the sacrament. While the *Didascalia* makes no reference to the actual building in which worship took place, in chapter 10 there is clear reference to two parts of the service, the first referred to as "the word" and the second referred to as "the prayer" in which communion is offered. *Didascalia* chapter 10 makes clear that unrepentant sinners might participate in the first part of the service, the liturgy of the word, but only repentance, confession, and conversion could allow entrance into the Eucharistic assembly.

A second point of significance is the lectionary tradition among Syriac-speaking Christians which from the majority of accounts included two readings from the Old Testament, and two from Christian writings. Drawing from several Syriac sources, the so-called *Doctrine of the Apostles*, the *Apostolic Constitutions*, as well as the *Doctrine of Addai*, we learn of the following four dis-

tinct readings: "the Torah, or (Old Testament), the Prophets, the Gospel, and the Acts of the Apostles." What is intriguing is that specific books are not specified but the authors are presumed, the Torah (presumably issuing from Moses), the Prophets with their unique authority, the Gospels which are each attributed to one of four disciples of Jesus, and the apostolic witnesses.

It seems plausible that the fourth source mentioned, "the Acts of the Apostles," might also include readings from such so-called "pseudo-apostolic" "church teaching documents" as the *Didascalia Apostolorum* or the *Apostolic Tradition* or the *Apostolic Constitutions*. In this way, the Syriac Church would be in continuity with reading the letters of Paul in the Churches, letters that dealt with concrete problems that various congregations were having. If such suppositions are correct, then portions of the *Didascalia*, including polemic against the "second law" and exhortations to penitence akin to that of King Manasseh, would have been heard regularly in the churches in order to safeguard their membership and to build walls between competing Jewish communities in hopes of solidifying a contested Christian identity through counter-discursive texts and practices.

### CONCLUSION

Having ventured a bit far afield and on less firm ground in order to contextualize the Prayer of Manasseh within its broadest context, it is necessary to bring together a few threads of the argument in summary. The use of the Prayer of Manasseh in the *Didascalia* sheds light on inter-religious polemic as a counter-discourse that functions in a

few ways. First, in its immediate context of chapters six and seven, the Prayer and the story of Manasseh serve as a model for the penitent sinner for even the worst sins imaginable. The *Didascalia* offers Manasseh to the bishops as an example of the efficacy of repentance as part of a penitential process, even to those convicted of the worst sin, idolatry. As part of a tale of "olden days" the Prayer of Manasseh is not overtly liturgical, though the puzzling inclusion of the superscription strongly hints at another life outside the *Didascalia*. As these chapters are addressed to bishops, we might venture to say as well that the prayer was employed in penitential practices at that time within the church, and depending on its first composer, perhaps it was used in Jewish penitential practice prior to that. Yet the document as a whole, or in chapters, may well have been read regularly as part of the liturgy of the word, the first half of the weekly worship gathering in the churches. Because the *Didascalia* is addressed to the entire Christian community, its exhortatory role would extend not just to the leaders, but to those in the congregation who were tempted to continue their Jewish practice and participation in the Jewish community. The *Didascalia* relies heavily on the positive portrait of Manasseh in Chronicles' counter-discourse as fully redeemed sinner, rather than on the traditional Jewish view of Manasseh as idolatrous prophet-slayer. The practice of penitence, which as rituals normally do, likely preceded its justification through written text, also shaped the way in which the story of Manasseh was appropriated from the various scriptural traditions available to the author of the *Didascalia*. We thus see the fluidity of "biblical canon" still in the third century.

Within the context of the *Didascalia* itself, we hear the Prayer of Manasseh in relation to the condemnation of the so-called "second law" of the Jews. If we can assume that the *Didascalia Apostolorum* was regularly read in churches as part of the liturgy of the word, part of the "Acts of the Apostles," we can also hear the Prayer of Manasseh as part of the larger rhetorical world of Judaism and Christianity in antique Syria, in which leaders of the Church were working hard to retain members in the face of competing temptations for Judaizers attracted to the worship life of synagogues as well as continued participation in other aspects of Jewish community life of northern Syria. The au-

thor/compiler of the *Didascalia* would not let such individuals have it both ways. The closeness of the communities of Jews and Christians, their shared use of some texts and traditions, and contested identities, also caused a threat. In the face of such perceived danger to community cohesion, it was "either/or" never "both/and" among some of the leadership. There is no effacing the legacy for Jewish-Christian relations in subsequent centuries of such stark rhetoric and antagonism so clearly inscribed in the third century, but continued critical examination of such sources may help to shape a future of clearer mutual understanding for those standing in such living streams of tradition.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This is reflected in the *Didascalia's* admonitions to believers not to follow the "second law." The *Didascalia* contains a conception of two givings of the law: the first was the Decalogue; the second contained the cultic and ritual legislation that was given as punishment after the incident with the Golden Calf. For a discussion of the "second law," see Pieter van der Horst, "I Gave Them Laws that Were not Good: Ezekiel 20:25 in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity," in *Hellenism, Judaism, Christianity: Essays on their Interaction* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1994), 122-145, esp. 138-40. For the evidence on dating the *Didascalia*, see F.X. Funk, *Die Apostolische Konstitutionen, Didascalia et Constitutiones Apostolorum* (2 vols.; Paterdorn: Schoeningh, 1905) 1:50-54.

<sup>2</sup> The work of Hindy Najman has caused me to reflect in greater depth on the role of exemplars in early Judaism; see her "How Should We Contextualize Pseudepigrapha? Imitation and Emulation in 4 Ezra," in *Flores Florentino: Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Early Jewish Studies in Honour of Florentino García Martínez* (ed. A. Hilhorst, E. Puech, E. Tigchelaar; JSJSup, Leiden: Brill, forthcoming). From a different perspective, the work of Adolf Lumpe remains a touchstone, "Exemplum" RAC 6.1229-1257 and informed my earlier work on positive and negative exempla found abundantly in early Jewish literature, particularly in prayers; see J.H. Newman, *Praying by the Book: The Scripturalization of Prayer in Second Temple Judaism* (SBLEJL 14, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), esp. 159-172. There has been much scholarship in recent years on the role of saints, hagiography, and other ritual practices in forming Christians in late antiquity; an influential work in this regard is Peter Brown's "The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity," in *Saints and Virtues* (ed. J. Hawley; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 1-14; and a more recent study, Georgia Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity*

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Translations from the *Didascalia* in the article, except where noted, are adapted from Arthur Vööbus, *The Didascalia Apostolorum in Syriac I* (CSCO 401/402; Leuven: Peeters: 1979) with occasional consultation for felicitous style to the edition of R. Hugh Connolly, *Didascalia Apostolorum: the Syriac version translated and accompanied by the Verona Latin fragments* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1929; repr. 1969) on whom Vööbus too was reliant.

<sup>4</sup> Vööbus, *Didascalia*, 50-51

<sup>5</sup> There are few textual variants among the major Syriac and Greek manuscripts. The most significant occurs in verse 7. The earliest Peshitta manuscript dates from the ninth century and preserves a form only slightly different from the Syriac of the *Didascalia*; for a review of the Syriac manuscripts of Pr Man, see the introduction to the "Prayer of Manasseh" in *The Old Testament in Syriac According to the Peshitta Version Part 4/fasc. 6* (ed. W. Baars and H. Schneider; Leiden: Brill, 1972), ii-vii.

<sup>6</sup> For discussions of the use of this formula within the Bible, see J. Scharbert, "Formgeschichte und Exegese von Ex 34:6-7 und seiner Pallelism," *Biblica* 38 (1957) 130-150; Robert C. Dentan, "The Literary Affinities of Exodus XXXIV 6f." *VT* 13 (1963) 34-51; and Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 335-350. For a discussion of its early interpretation, see James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), 721-727.

<sup>7</sup> The assertion that idolatry is the worst of sins is not a unanimous perspective in Christianity or Judaism. We might contrast this view with the author of Jubilees, in which it is intermarriage. In Jub. 33:20 such a high degree of value is placed on preservation of the people of Israel as a holy seed that intermarriage is considered the worst pollution, "because Israel is a holy

nation to the Lord his God, and a nation of inheritance, and a nation of priests, and a royal nation and a special possession. And there is nothing which appears which is as defiled as this among the holy people.”

<sup>8</sup> I use the idea of counter-discourse as employed by Carol Newsom in her work on the Community Rule (1QS) and the *Hodayot* from Qumran. The term discourse, following Foucault, comprises the intermeshed world of text and social, or in the case of Pr Man, ritual, practices; see her *The Self as Symbolic Space: Constructing Identity and Community at Qumran* (STDJ 52; Leiden: Brill, 2004), esp. 23-76.

<sup>9</sup> See *y. Sanh.* 10 (28c.37); *b. Yebam.* 49b, *Apoc. Ab.* 25, *Jos. Ant.* 10.3.2.

<sup>10</sup> The passage about Isaiah is concerned not so much with Manasseh's treatment of the prophet as with the connection of Isaiah to the miracle of the ever-flowing Siloam spring and Isaiah's role in safeguarding Jerusalem and its water source through prayer during the reign of Hezekiah and the Assyrian onslaught. The almost off-handed mention of Isaiah's death at Manasseh's hands may well suggest its already secure position in Jewish tradition by this point.

<sup>11</sup> By Michael Knibb's assessment, *Ascen. Isa.* 1:1-3:12 and 5:1-16 comprise the oldest parts of the work which are no later than the first century CE but probably earlier; "Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah," *OTP* 2:149-150.

<sup>12</sup> In Connolly's words, "To the author of the *Didascalia*, the *Deuterosis* was something of which the only fulfillment lay in its complete abrogation. He definitely excludes it from fulfillment;" *Didascalia*, lxii.

<sup>13</sup> Van der Horst cites E. Dassmann's work "Hesekiel," *RAC* 14 (1988) 1132-1191, especially

1133-1149. "Laws that were not good," 99.

<sup>14</sup> See the discussion of Connolly, *Didascalia*, lvii-lxix.

<sup>15</sup> In a related vein, Charlotte Fonrobert has referred to the *Didascalia* as a "counter-Mishnah" for the followers of Jesus. She argues the case that the *Didascalia* itself represents "one of the voices of Judaism" at a time when the construction of Christian and Jewish identities were still in flux. She argues cogently that the spectrum of Jews and Christians inhabit the same "discursive space" desiring to claim the authority of the scriptural tradition to support their rival claims to orthopraxis or orthodoxy. Less convincing is her argument that the compilers of the *Didascalia* knew of a compiled *Mishnah* and were consciously writing in order to counter its role in a Jewish community given the considerable differences in genre between the two. Whereas she rightly suggests a degree of fluid community identity, she wrongly assumes a degree of stability and canonicity with scriptural texts than was the case, given our assessment of the non-"biblical" story of Manasseh in chapters six to seven. She does not consider the issue of the *Didascalia*'s composition but analyzes it as a unified composition, nor more significantly from the perspective of understanding the origins of the Prayer of Manasseh, does she address the notion of the independent circulation of parts of the *Didascalia* prior to its redaction; Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, "The *Didascalia Apostolorum*: A Mishnah for the Disciples of Jesus," *J ECS* 9 (2001) 483-509.

<sup>16</sup> "Prayer of Manasseh," *OTP* 2:632.

<sup>17</sup> Gerard Rouwhorst, "Jewish Liturgical Traditions in Early Syriac Christianity," *VC* 51 (1997) 72-93.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.