

The Apostolic Tradition Reconstructed:

A Text for Students

PAUL F. BRADSHAW

*Emeritus Professor of Liturgy
University of Notre Dame, USA*

Contents

1	Introduction	3
2	Reconstruction	12
3	Appendix	40
4	Bibliography	45

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1

Introduction

History of the Scholarship

Within the nineteenth-century search for ancient manuscripts undertaken by western scholars in monasteries and other libraries in Europe and around the Mediterranean, a group of early Christian writings were discovered to which scholars applied the collective term ‘Ancient Church Orders’, because in various ways and to varying extents they gave instructions about the ethical, institutional, and liturgical life of Christian communities that they appeared to be addressing. All of these church orders claimed in one way or another to be ‘apostolic’ (see Bradshaw, 2015). One of these finds was first published in full by Henry Tattam (1848) from a manuscript in the Bohairic dialect of Coptic dating from as recently as 1804. It had no title or author, and so for want of a better designation it came to be called ‘The Egyptian Church Order’. Gradually, much older manuscripts of the same work in other ancient languages were discovered: in the Sahidic dialect of Coptic, Arabic, Ethiopic, and Latin. It became clear that they were all translations of a Greek original, which no longer existed except for a few fragments.

It was also quickly recognized that there was some sort of literary relationship between this particular church order and several others: the *Apostolic Constitutions* and its *Epitome*, the *Canons of Hippolytus*, and the *Testamentum Domini*. What is ironical is that at first nobody proposed that the ‘Egyptian Church Order’ might be a source from which the rest were derived, but it was unanimously judged to be descended from one or other of those church orders. This verdict was not corrected until

the early twentieth century, when it was (mis)identified with what was thought to have been a lost third-century work by a certain Hippolytus of Rome, the *Apostolic Tradition*, first by Eduard von der Goltz (1906) and then in more detailed studies, independently of one another, by Eduard Schwartz (1910) and R. H. Connolly (1916).

Their conclusions rapidly became the established consensus among scholars for most of the twentieth century. Indeed, so sure of the veracity of this theory did many of its supporters become that they claimed to find parallels in theology and vocabulary with other works attributed to Hippolytus and downplayed or simply ignored anything that might raise questions about it (see Bradshaw, 2017). It is true that the occasional voice was heard to challenge the verdict, most notably Rudolf Lorenz (1929) and Hieronymus Engberding (1948), but their views were subjected to heavy criticism. Similarly, E.C. Ratcliffe (1950) asserted that the eucharistic prayer in the church order had been extensively reworked in the fourth century, but his reconstruction of the original was so radical that it failed to win widespread support. In a review published in 1964 he claimed that this reworking had applied to the whole church order: it was ‘not Hippolytus’s original composition, but an edition of it current in the last quarter of the fourth century’ (*Journal of Theological Studies* 15, p. 405); but again his judgement was largely ignored.

The same fate befell the claims made by Antoine Salles (1955), who questioned the Roman character of its baptismal rite; by Jean Michel Hanssens (1959), who argued at great length that the whole work had originated in Alexandria; and by Jean Magne (1965; 1975; 1988), that it was really an anonymous compilation, of which the true title was the *Diataxeis tôn hagiôn apostolôn*, made up of elements from different places and time periods. Unfortunately, as in the case of Ratcliffe, Magne’s alternative explanation—that this church order had eventually been fused with a passage from a genuine ‘Tradition apostolique sur les charismes’ of Hippolytus—was too unconvincing for his theory to win any serious consideration from others.

Introduction

It was not, therefore, until Marcel Metzger published a series of articles (1988; 1992a; 1992b) developing the idea earlier advanced by Magne and also briefly by Alexandre Faivre (1980, p. 286), that not only was the church order not the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus, it was not the work of any single author at all but rather a piece of 'living literature', that scholars began to give the claim proper attention. Like Magne, Metzger argued that its lack of unity or logical progression, its frequent incoherences, doublets, and contradictions, all pointed away from the existence of a single editorial hand. Instead, it had all the characteristics of a composite work, a collection of community rules from quite disparate traditions. In the years since then this conclusion has been accepted by an ever increasing number of scholars, although they have continued to retain the name *Apostolic Tradition* for convenience. Alistair Stewart (2001), however, was an interesting exception. He sought to keep as much of the traditional ascription as possible, by building on a theory put forward by Allen Brent (1995) that there was an Hippolytean school of writers at Rome, and arguing that the *Apostolic Tradition* was the work of members of this school over the period from the late second century to the middle of the third, and that this explained the disunity of the text. This time period, however, appears to be too short to account for all the updating that was done to the text; the restriction to Rome fails to account for the variety of liturgical practices within it; and Stewart's division into layers is too subject to the imagined theological views of different members of this supposed school.

Sources

Any edition or translation of the *Apostolic Tradition* is to some extent a work of reconstruction because of the absence of any Greek text, apart from a small number of fragments. The Latin has traditionally been used as the basis for this reconstruction as it is the oldest surviving manuscript, written in the late fifth century and copied from a translation of the Greek thought to be about a century older. It has been judged to provide a very

literal translation, but it is incomplete, with significant sections missing. To supplement it, in the past the Sahidic manuscript from the year 1006 seemed next closest to the original, although it deliberately omitted the texts of the eucharistic and ordination prayers and some other chapters. This Coptic dialect had the advantage of using a number of Greek loan words, but the disadvantage of a different grammatical construction from Greek. The Arabic translation was supposedly made in 1295 from an older Coptic text but it may actually have been a little earlier than that. It exists now only in manuscripts dating from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, and it moved even further away from a literal rendering than the Sahidic. The Ethiopic, which survives in manuscripts from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, was made from a better Arabic text than is in the extant Arabic manuscripts, including the preservation of the texts omitted in the Sahidic and Arabic and of other chapters not included in any other versions, but it also features a number of interpolations. The other church orders that used the *Apostolic Tradition* as a source were also able to contribute to discerning a true reading at some points even if at others they diverged widely from it.

The greatest advance in trying to establish the Greek text that ultimately lay behind all the translations, however, came with the publication by Alessandro Bausi (2011) of a different Ethiopic translation of the church order apparently made sometime between the end of the fifth century and the seventh century and preserved in a single manuscript from not later than the fourteenth century. Not only does this furnish another translation besides the Latin that was made at an early date and directly from Greek rather than via an intermediary language but it also corresponds closely to the Latin for much of the church order, indicating that it was made from a similar Greek text. The other translations, on the other hand, apparently all derive from a different textual tradition where the underlying Greek seems already to have undergone some expansion even before the various translators added their own. In order to distinguish it from the other Ethiopic

translation, it is often referred to as E1, with its later companion designated as E2.

This means that E1 can now be used as the primary source for the reconstruction of the Greek where the Latin is absent, and even occasionally to correct it when both are present, and because together they represent a quite distinct tradition from the rest, this results in a significantly different, more reliable, and slightly shorter version than has ever been presented before. It needs to be acknowledged, however, although E1 appears largely faithful to the Greek behind it and mostly free from the sort of expansions in the other translations, it does have its textual difficulties in various places as well as some omissions of its own. Until the present work, the only scholars to have made extensive use of E1 have been Reinhard Messner (2016) and Alistair Stewart (2015) in the second edition of his translation and commentary on the *Apostolic Tradition* mentioned earlier, and even he does not base his translation on it in every place where the Latin is missing. Nevertheless, though disagreeing with the context and date in which Stewart sets the original work, I have found his English translation of portions of E1 there and his judgements about the Greek text of the church order useful in the preparation of this volume.

This Reconstruction

Establishing the Greek text is, however, only part of the process of reconstruction. Once one has accepted that the *Apostolic Tradition* as we have it is a composite work, made up of a basic core that has been supplemented and modified by different hands over a period of time from the second to the fourth centuries (and even later in some of the translations), then it becomes necessary to attempt to dissect the existing text to discern what that core might have been, and where in it emendations and expansions might have been made.

Introduction

Some recent studies of the church order have already suggested specific points in the text where such editorial work seems to have taken place, but this translation is an attempt to make the various chronological layers of the whole document more visually evident to students by the use of three different typefaces. At some points these different layers can be detected with a high degree of confidence, in other passages rather more tentatively.

Often it is vocabulary that provides the guide. In Chapter 3, for example, the prayer uses as a title for Jesus the word 'servant', which had given way to 'Son of God' and other more exalted titles in Christian discourse by the middle of the second century, while elsewhere in that prayer we encounter descriptions of the bishop's office in priestly terms, something that did not come into Christian use until the third century, and of the new bishop 'propitiating' God's countenance, language that belongs more to fourth-century Christianity. Clearly, then, this prayer must have layers of accretion.

In other places it is a significant disagreement between the different translations that is the clue. In Chapter 2, for instance, although all the sources mention the presence of other bishops, and the Latin and E1 obviously both used a Greek text that did so at the same point in the passage, the wide differences in the other translations as to where they introduce this reference is one factor that points to this not having been the earliest form of the Greek text.

This reconstruction cannot claim to be definitive because there are some passages where there is insufficient evidence for a sure judgement to be made. Nevertheless, it is hoped that it will be sufficient to give an idea to readers of just how different the oldest material in this church order appears to have been from the later translations of it, and of the progress from the relative simplicity of the earliest instructions to the more detailed and complex versions designed to meet changed situations and doctrinal beliefs of later ages.

Introduction

The probable temporal origin of each part of the church order is presented in three broad historical periods. What is thought to be the oldest material, from the second century, is presented in Roman type, words that were subsequently moved or deleted being struck through. This first layer need not have formed a single collection. It could, for example, have consisted of a set of directions about admission to different offices in the church; another document describing how baptisms were to be performed; and some scattered instructions about the eucharistic meal and other aspects of church life, all being subsequently brought together as the first recognizable form of the church order. What are thought to be later (seemingly early- to mid-third-century) additions to this stratum are printed in italics. Within this layer are some parts, particularly the core of prayer texts, that appear as old as the first layer but were only *added* to the church order at this time. Material that is considered to have been inserted even later (belonging mostly to the late-third or early-fourth century) is marked by underlining.

It must be emphasized that each of these categories of material was not the work of just a single editor or redactor, nor were the changes in each band necessarily all made at exactly the same time. The typographical variations simply indicate periods of time in which a number of changes appear to have been made, almost certainly by several different hands. As for the region of the ancient world where this church order originated, all that can be said is that the core of the baptismal material in Chapter 21 with its threefold questions and answers is characteristic of North Africa, evidenced by Tertullian at the beginning of the third century (*De baptismo* 3–4). Rome is another possibility for this, as its liturgical practices tended to resemble those of North Africa, but we lack any confirmation of the form of its baptismal interrogation at this early date. Egypt might also be added, but clear evidence is again unavailable. In any case, whether those baptismal instructions were derived from a pre-existing source (perhaps reflecting a different location) or were newly composed for inclusion in the first draft of the church order is impossible

to determine. Much of the rest of the text lacks firm indications of a specific location, but there are elements that point clearly to some of the redaction as having taken place in an Eastern church, as for example, the eucharistic prayer in Chapter 4 (see Smyth, 2011) and the reference to daily pre-baptismal exorcism in Chapter 20.

Words in brackets have been added to help make sense: they are not necessarily a part of the original text that is missing. The Latin once had titles for each chapter, but being written in red ink, they have completely faded, and so the titles from E1 have been used. Different versions also had their individual systems of numbering chapters, but modern editions have created their own. This reconstruction adopts the numbering system generally used nowadays that was devised by Bernard Botte (1963) in his edition and French translation of the text.

Further Reading

Those readers seeking more information about some of the reasoning behind the chronological judgements that have been made here or about other aspects of this church order are encouraged to consult the following in addition to the literature in the Bibliography:

Bradshaw, Paul F., Maxwell E. Johnson, and L. Edward Phillips, 2002, *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary*, Hermeneia Commentary Series, Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Bradshaw, Paul F., 2021, 'The Ordination Prayers in the so-called *Apostolic Tradition*', *Vigiliae Christianae* 75, pp. 119–29.

——— 'Presbyters in the *Apostolic Tradition*', in Bart Koet, Edwina Murphy, Murray Smith (eds), *Presbyters in the Early Church: The First Two Centuries*, WUNT series, Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck (forthcoming).

Johnson, Maxwell E., 2005, 'The Problem of Creedal Formulae in *Traditio apostolica* 21.12–18', *Ecclesia Orans* 22, pp. 159–75.

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Introduction

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Stewart-Sykes, Alistair, 2009, 'The Baptismal Creed in *Traditio Apostolica*: Original or Expanded?', *Questions liturgiques* 90, pp. 199–213.

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