

TAUGHT BY GOD¹

DIVINE INSTRUCTION IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

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This study investigates one aspect of early Christian self-understanding: the conviction of some early followers of Jesus that they had been, and were being, taught by God, in fulfilment of OT prophetic promises (most importantly, Isa. 54:13 and Jer. 31:33-34). The study breaks new ground, as it is the first monograph-length investigation of the idea of divine instruction in the NT, and yields fresh insights into early Christian eschatology, Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, and hermeneutics. While concentrating upon the idea of divine instruction in the Johannine corpus, a wider-than-normal approach is taken, with brief chapters devoted also to the Pauline writings and Matthew. This allows for an analysis of the way in which *multiple* early Christian communities understood the realisation of the OT prophetic promises of divine instruction; both the unity and diversity of NT developments of the idea are noteworthy. After a discussion of appropriate methods in ch. 1, the thesis moves forward in three sections.

Part One, 'Divine instruction in the OT and early Jewish literature', provides a context for understanding the NT development of divine instruction. Ch. 2 examines divine instruction in the OT. It is demonstrated that, while the idea of God teaching is ubiquitous in the OT, there is a particular prophetic emphasis in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Micah, on the promise of *eschatological* divine instruction. The main contribution of this chapter is twofold. First, the chapter demonstrates a distinction at Sinai between *direct* divine instruction (when God speaks the 'ten words' without an intermediary), and *mediated* divine instruction (when Moses teaches the rest of the Torah). Secondly, it is suggested that each of the prophetic texts promising eschatological divine instruction (Isa. 2:2-4/Mic. 4:1-3; Isa. 30:20-21; 54:13; Jer.

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31:33-34) can be read as suggesting that this eschatological divine instruction is direct, and without human intermediaries.

Next, ch. 3 examines the concept of divine instruction in early Jewish literature, with special attention to the Dead Sea Scrolls and Philo. Investigation of the DSS suggests that divine instruction of the community and of certain individuals (e.g. the psalmist of the *Hodayot*) was understood as *eschatological* instruction, and that CD 20.4 may allude to Isa. 54:13. Investigation of Philo's writings demonstrates that while Philo has a robust concept of divine instruction, his understanding is very different: it is more indebted to Greek educational ideas and personal observation than to the OT. Philo never draws on the OT prophetic promises mentioned above, and never develops an understanding of *eschatological* divine instruction. While other Jewish literature (Josephus, the Apocrypha, the Greek OT Pseudepigrapha) is surveyed in this chapter, the concept of divine instruction does not appear very often in this literature and does not seem significant. The chapter concludes by examining the expectation in early Jewish literature of a Messiah who would be taught by God (e.g. *Pss. Sol.* 17.32) and would teach others.

Part Two, 'Divine instruction in the Johannine corpus', constitutes the main section of the thesis, and poses three questions: (1) How do(es) the author(s) understand the fulfilment of the promises of eschatological divine instruction? (2) What is the content and function of divine instruction? (3) Does divine instruction obviate the need for human teaching?

In order to address these questions, a comprehensive analysis of the didactic terminology of the Fourth Gospel (FG) is first conducted (ch. four). Two noteworthy conclusions are reached. First, it is concluded that, while the FG takes over an unreflective didactic terminology from the common tradition (e.g. Jesus is a teacher/rabbi, he has disciples, he teaches), it combines this terminology with a developed theology of revelation. For the evangelist, Jesus' teaching *properly understood* is revelation, i.e. communication from God. Secondly, the FG uses didactic terminology in a manner different from the common tradition by referring to the 'teaching' of God and the Paraclete/Spirit: in the FG, revelation is distinctively described with didactic terminology. Taken together, these two points are significant: Jesus' teaching is revelation, and divine revelation is referred to as teaching. This presses the question of how Jesus' teaching relates to God's teaching.

The next chapter seeks to address precisely this question. It argues that the FG reinterprets the prophetic promise of divine instruction in light of the teaching of Jesus and the Spirit. In John 6:45-46, the evangelist cites Isa. 54:13² and interprets that OT citation by means of an allusion to the *direct* divine instruction at Sinai. This suggests that, like some other Jewish interpreters, he understands Isa. 54:13 to promise direct, unmediated divine instruction. This is highly significant Christologically, because 6:45-46 also implies that divine instruction now comes through Jesus. Jesus (and the Spirit/Paraclete who continues his teaching ministry – cf. 14:26) is, for the evangelist, the fulfilment of Isaiah's promise of *direct* eschatological divine instruction. The fourth evangelist develops a didactic storyline in which Jesus himself is taught by God (3:1-15; 5:17-30; 6:45-46; 7:14-19; 8:28b) in order to make the point that Jesus, like a good pupil, is transparent to his teacher. To see Jesus is to see the Father; to hear Jesus' teaching is to be taught directly by God, in fulfilment of Isa. 54:13.

Ch. 6 examines the content and function of divine instruction in the FG, and concludes that the concept functions polemically and as a means of self-legitimation. In several passages (John 3:1-15; 6:31-58; 7:14-18), the content of divine instruction appears to be the true meaning of the Hebrew Scriptures. Because they are 'taught by God', Jesus' followers are able to understand that the Hebrew Scriptures point to Jesus. This is developed most fully and interestingly in the 'bread of life' discourse (6:32-58). Here, Jesus interprets the OT citation in 6:31 by claiming to be the 'bread' spoken of there. When the Jews question this interpretation, Jesus responds that they cannot come to him unless they are 'taught by God.' Here, divine instruction is analogous to the phenomenon of charismatic exegesis in early Judaism and Christianity. This possibility is strengthened by noting that 6:31-58 has numerous features in common with the Qumran *pesharim*.³

Ch. 7 is the final section of Part Two, and in this chapter, the consequences of divine instruction for *human* teaching are explored. It is first argued that the 'anointing' of 1 John 2:20, 27 refers to the Spirit. Then it is asked whether the teaching of the anointing renders unnecessary teaching and authority structures in the Johannine

² Cf. Stephen E. Witmer, 'Overlooked Evidence for Citation and Redaction in John 6,45a', *ZNW* 97 (2006): 134-38.

³ Cf. Stephen E. Witmer, 'Approaches to Scripture in the Fourth Gospel and the Qumran *Pesharim*', *NovT* 48 (2006): 313-28.

community. After a brief review of Johannine ecclesiology, six views of 1 John 2:27 are summarised and critiqued, and a fresh solution is offered to the question of what exactly 2:27 means. It is argued that in the Johannine letters, as in the FG, 'teaching' may mean revelation, i.e. communication from God. Therefore, when 2:27 claims that the community has no need for anyone to teach them, it refers to teaching in this sense of fresh revelation (cf. 2:21). This solution takes seriously the claim in 2:27 that 'you have no need for anyone to teach you', while avoiding the unlikely conclusion that the author of 1 John is transparently inconsistent (claiming there is no need for teaching, while teaching himself in the letter).

Part Three, 'Divine instruction in Paul and Matthew', extends the study beyond the Johannine corpus by investigating the key Pauline references to divine instruction (ch. 8) and by providing a close reading of Matt. 23:8-10 (ch. 9). Ch. 8 focuses on 1 Thess. 4:9, building on a previous study in which it was argued that 1 Thess. 4:9 alludes to Isa. 54:13,⁴ and also briefly notes Gal. 1:12 and 1 Cor. 2:13. The three questions asked above of the Johannine corpus are asked of the Pauline texts. It is concluded that Paul, like the Johannine writings, interprets the prophetic promises of divine instruction in light of Jesus and the Spirit, but that Paul sees his apostolic instruction as part of God's instruction, rather than obviated by it. Ch. 9 argues that Jesus as teacher is understood by Matthew primarily in terms of *God*. Jesus teaches as the Christ and the Son of God, and his teaching is therefore the fulfilment of Jer. 31:34 and is *divine* instruction. In the Matthean community, individuals no longer make disciples for themselves, but for Jesus, who remains present with the community (Matt. 18:20; 28:18-20).

Finally, Ch. 10 summarises the results of the study, concluding that the Johannine writings, the Pauline letters, and Matthew each re-interpret the OT prophetic promises of eschatological divine instruction in light of Jesus and/or the Spirit. Implications for early Christian eschatology, Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, and hermeneutics are drawn out. It is concluded that the concept of divine instruction functions in diverse ways, and in some early Christian communities may relativise human teaching.

⁴ Cf. Stephen E. Witmer, 'Θεοδιδάκτοι in 1 Thessalonians 4.9: A Pauline Neologism', *NTS* 52 (2006): 239-50.