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Christian Hope and Liturgical Order in 1 Clement 40–44

Benjamin Thomas

Although Chapters 40–44 of *1 Clement* seem to have received more scholarly attention than any other section of this early epistle from the Church in Rome to her sister Church in Corinth, much of this scholarship has focused on rather specific technical questions. In the history of scholarship surrounding *1 Clement* there has always been a lively debate about whether Clement endorses a “presbyterial” or “episcopal” view of ordered ministry.¹ More recently, the focus of scholarship has turned to the rhetorical elements in *1 Clement* and their relationship to the structure and function of the epistle.² While both of these fields of enquiry are quite profitable in their own right, neither of these technical investigations addresses the most fundamental question about the text: why should the original audience care about the text at all? In the case of *1 Clement*, why should lay and/or ordained members of the Corinthian congregation at the turn of the second century care about ordered ministry in apostolic succession or the connection of Christian worship to the Levitical sacrificial system? The modern corollary to this question is, “Why should the average church member care about these things today?” In an attempt to address these rather basic concerns, this paper takes a step back to look at the broader picture, suggesting that the pastoral implications of Chapters 40–44 have largely been overlooked by recent scholars and that these implications only come into focus when they are placed within the context of the life and hope common to all Christians as described in Chapters 37–39.

Historical Context

The exact cause of the particular conflict in the Corinthian church that prompted *1 Clement* lies beyond the reach of historical enquiry; it is, however, possible to say with certainty that conflict was nothing new for the

¹ Eric G. Jay, “From Presbyter-Bishops to Bishops and Presbyters – Christian Ministry in the Second Century: A Survey.” *The Second Century* 1 (1981), pp. 125–162.

² Odd Magne Bakke, *Concord and Peace: A Rhetorical Analysis of the First Letter of Clement with an Emphasis on the Language of Unity and Sedition* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2001).

Corinthian church. St. Paul's two extant letters to the Corinthians bear elegant witness to this assertion. One or perhaps two generations later, the Corinthian church is again embroiled in conflict. The basic nature of the conflict is revealed by the following passages from *1 Clement*:

Because of the sudden and repeated misfortunes and setbacks we have experienced, we realize that we have been slow to turn our attention to the matters causing disputes among you, loved ones, involving that vile and profane faction that is alien and foreign to God's chosen people ... [Y]ou used to act impartially in all that you did, and you walked according to the ordinances of God, submitting yourselves to your leaders and rendering all due honor to those who were older [or: *presbyters*] among you.³

But we see that you have deposed some from the ministry held blamelessly in honor among them, even though they had been conducting themselves well.⁴ It is shameful, loved ones, exceedingly shameful and unworthy of your conduct in Christ, that the most secure and ancient church of the Corinthians is reported to have created a faction against its presbyters, at the instigation of one or two persons.⁵

Though other passages in *1 Clement* indicate something further about the nature of the conflict in Corinth, e.g. 63:2–4 and 65:1, the three preceding quotations make it clear that the dispute was at least in part focused on the removal of the presbyters who were leading the Corinthian church. It is worth noting that Ehrman's translation of 1:1, given above, renders *presbyteroi* as "those who were older" for reasons that are not entirely clear. The parenthetical literal rendering, "presbyters," suggested by Ehrman is the more useful translation for a number of reasons. The first reason is that the noun, *presbyteroi*, is parallel to *hegoumenoi* (leaders) found earlier in the same sentence. The first term, *hegoumenoi*, appears to be an office or position of authority in the church, and there seems to be no principled reason to take *hegoumenoi* as an office or role and not the *presbyteroi*. Another reason, related to the first, is that on other occasions, e.g. 44:7 and 47:6, Ehrman has in fact taken *presbyteros* as a term designating a particular office in the Church. Hence, the parenthetical literal translation Ehrman offers is preferable and especially so in light of the other two passages quoted above. The conflict over leadership in Corinth is then cen-

³ *1 Clement* 1:1 All references to *1 Clement* refer to the text as edited by Bart T. Ehrman in *The Apostolic Fathers Volume 1* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2003). English quotations are also from his translation, unless otherwise noted.

⁴ *1 Clement* 44:6.

⁵ *1 Clement* 47:6.

tered on the congregation's treatment of the presbyters and other people in positions of leadership. This particular conflict, which was quite probably in addition to other difficulties that will not be investigated here, has sparked "the church of God temporarily residing in Rome"⁶ to send an epistle to Corinth with the ostensible hope of helping to amend the unfortunate situation in Corinth.

The Argument of Chapters 40–44

Chapters 40–44 of *1 Clement* implicitly and explicitly depend on the relationship between Levitical sacrificial system and Christian worship. This may seem odd to modern readers, especially if one prefers to keep Christianity and Judaism at a respectable theological distance from each other. *1 Clement* displays no such aim. To the contrary, it has been observed that the author of *1 Clement* quite often argues on the basis of "the strong feeling of immediate continuity with the Old Testament, its people and institutions."⁷ Nowhere is this feeling more clear than in Chapters 40–44 where the author moves directly from a discussion of the Levitical sacrificial cult to statements about Church order.⁸

Ehrman claims that Clement's work has "no indication that the hierarchical structures later so important to proto-orthodox Christians – in which there was a solitary bishop over a group of presbyters and deacons – was yet in place;"⁹ however, this claim is undercut by Clement's positive comparison of the ordered ministry of the Christian Church to the clearly hierarchical Aaronic priesthood. While the exact structures of ordered ministry are not clearly delineated in *1 Clement*, absolute claims such as Ehrman's about a complete lack of structure with a single recognized head do not fit well with the analogy to the Old Testament narrative. Furthermore, Clement's rather free quotation of Isaiah 60:17 in 42:5 explicitly links the offices of bishops and deacons to the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament.¹⁰ In Clement's view, ordered Christian ministry is a continuation of what he sees in the Old Testament.

⁶ *1 Clement*, preface.

⁷ Magne Saebø, ed. *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1996), p. 381.

⁸ Bakke, pp. 1 ff., offers a lengthy investigation into the authorship of *1 Clement*, finally concluding that it seems quite likely that Clement is in fact the author of the epistle.

⁹ Ehrman, pp. 24–25.

¹⁰ Bakke, p. 260.

Before exploring the relationship laid out in Chapter 40 between the Old Testament sacrificial cult and ordered Christian ministry, it is useful to review the three chapters which immediately precede it. In Chapter 37, Clement offers several images of Christian communal life. These images are drawn from the common socio-linguistic associations of the day and include comparisons to both military service and the human body to describe the interdependence that Christians have on one another. The analogy of the Christian community to the interdependence of the parts of the human body was presumably not new to the Corinthian Church as it echoes a similar appeal found in 1 Corinthians 12:12 ff. Chapter 38 describes how the metaphor of the body from Chapter 37 requires a form of mutual submission that is *a propos* to every Christian community. The strong are to take care of the weak, the wealthy to look after the poor, and the wise are to exercise their wisdom through action rather than words.¹¹ Chapter 39 offers a brief glimpse at what were apparently the common criticisms of such a view of interdependence in its original historic setting. Bakke argues that Chapter 39 is a major transition in the overall rhetorical structure of *1 Clement* and that its principle theme of the futility of self-exaltation is closely tied to the specific situation in the Corinthian Church.¹² Chapter 39, which is largely comprised of a conglomeration of texts from Job, finally resolves itself into the age-old concern about the apparent injustice which is observed in the prosperity of the wicked.

In response to this question about injustice, Clement launches into a discussion of the Jewish sacrificial cult:

Since these matters have been clarified for us in advance and we have gazed into the depths of divine knowledge, we should do everything the Master has commanded us to perform in an orderly way and at appointed times. He commanded that the sacrificial offerings and liturgical rites be performed not in a random or haphazard way, but according to set times and hours ... Thus, those who make their sacrificial offerings at the arranged times are acceptable and blessed. And since they follow the Master, they commit no sin. For special liturgical rites have been assigned to the high priest, and a special place has been designated for the regular priests, and special ministries are established for the Levites. The lay person is assigned to matters enjoined to the laity.¹³

¹¹ *1 Clement* 38:1–2.

¹² Bakke, pp. 258–259.

¹³ *1 Clement* 40:1–5.

Here, Clement exhorts the Corinthians to have faith that the wicked will not always triumph, and he begins this exhortation with a discussion of the Jewish sacrificial cult. In English, the beginning of Chapter 40 appears to take up a new and unrelated subject from the discussion of injustice in Chapter 39, but the Greek text indicates quite clearly that this is not the case. The second word of 40:1, *oun*, is a post-positive conjunction meaning “therefore”, which signals a logical connection with the preceding material. The only reason *oun* is not the first word of the section is that as a post-positive conjunction, *oun* cannot begin the sentence, and its placement at the beginning of 40:1 tells the reader that what follows depends on the preceding chapter(s). This sudden shift from Christian hope in the face of injustice to an interpretation of Numbers 17 makes more sense if one remembers that at a later point in the letter Clement ascribes to Jesus the role of the high priest.¹⁴ If Jesus is the high priest, then he stands as the completion or fulfillment of the Jewish sacrificial practices, and the Church, as the body of Christ, does the same by extension. Within the context of the Corinthian dispute, several features of the Levitical sacrificial system are of immediate import. The first is the emphasis on order: offerings and sacrifices are not to be given in a “random or haphazard way, but according to set times and hours.”¹⁵ Furthermore, three distinct offices of ministry—the high priest, the regular priests, and the Levites—together with the laity ensure that the orderly fashion of offering and sacrifice is preserved.

Section 41 continues this emphasis on order found in the Jewish sacrificial practice to the Christian community by the exhortation to “let each of us be pleasing to God by keeping to our special assignments with a good conscience, not violating the established rule of his ministry, acting in reverence.”¹⁶ The clear import of this statement is that, as the Temple sacrifices were conducted in an orderly and predictable fashion, Christians also should render their service to God in an orderly and predictable fashion as well. This parallel, as it stands, does not alone offer compelling evidence that the threefold Christian order of ministry is derivative from the Temple cult, but it is at least suggestive. There is, however, a tantalizing textual variant in the manuscript evidence. The Greek word *euaresteito*, translated “let [us] be pleasing to” by Ehrman is *eucharisteito* in the earliest

¹⁴ *1 Clement* 61:3.

¹⁵ *1 Clement* 40.2.

¹⁶ *1 Clement* 41.1.

Greek manuscript of *1 Clement*.¹⁷ *Eucharisteito* is a form of the verb, translated “to give thanks,” which generally functions as the technical term in Greek for the Eucharist. Given the close tie between Old Testament sacrifices and the Christian Eucharist in slightly later Christian writings, it seems that the earliest manuscript evidence may offer the better reading of Clement’s intention on this point.¹⁸

Chapter 42 clarifies the roles of bishops in ordered ministry by linking the ministry of bishops directly to the will of God. Clement states that “Christ came from God, and the apostles from Christ. Both things happened then, in an orderly way according to the will of God.”¹⁹ Again there is a strong emphasis on order in ministry. The question, then, is how are bishops to fit into this equation? Clement states simply that the apostles appointed bishops as well as deacons from the “first-fruits of their ministries.”²⁰ Clement underscores the appropriateness of this action by his inexact reference to the LXX text of Isaiah 60:17, which he renders: “I will appoint their bishops in righteousness and their deacons in faith.”²¹ When disagreement about who are the rightful bishops and/or presbyters occurs – a disagreement that has been assumed by this paper to be among the immediate causes of Clement’s epistle – Clement appeals straightway to the validity of the Aaronic priesthood which was also set apart to govern the common religious life of a people by the direct action of God.²² Not unlike the situation Clement supposed the ordained leaders of the Corinthian Church to have been facing, Aaron’s priestly leadership was challenged by factions within the Israelite community during the sojourn in the wilderness.²³ Hence, Moses proposes a public contest to decide who would comprise the chosen priestly class. Clement assures his readers that Moses knew the outcome in advance but that the budding of Aaron’s rod was so

¹⁷ Ehrman, p. 109, footnote 77. See also Ehrman, p. 30.

¹⁸ Irenaeus offers a very compelling example of this connection in *Against Heresies* 4.18.1–5.

¹⁹ *1 Clement* 42.2.

²⁰ *1 Clement* 42.4.

²¹ *1 Clement* 42.5. A more literal rendering of the Septuagint into English would read “I give your princes (or rulers) in peace and your overseers in righteousness.” The Greek term for overseer, *episkopos*, is the same word that later becomes used to designate bishops.

²² *1 Clement* 43. In this passage Clement draws heavily upon Numbers 17.

²³ Numbers 16–17.

that “there might be no disorderliness in Israel.”²⁴ Again, the mandate of the ecclesiastical order in Christian communities is upheld by an appeal to an earlier Jewish religious structure.

Chapter 44 concludes this particular argument for ordered ministry by suggesting that the apostolic succession of bishops was put in place to prevent the current disagreement regarding Church leadership. Clement states that the apostles foresaw the later difficulties in the Church by analogy to the trouble faced by Moses and Aaron. The epistle goes even further to warn its readers that they “commit no little sin if [they] remove from the bishop’s office those who offer the gifts in a blameless and holy way.”²⁵ It is also worth noticing that in the very next line, Clement uses the Greek word *presbyteroi*, which can be translated either “priest” or “elder.” Here, the use of *presbyteroi* seems to refer back to the office of bishop in the previous line, suggesting that Clement sees a connection between the two offices. Unfortunately, he offers little information about what the particular distinction between these two offices might be. In any case, the appearance of the term *presbyteroi* at the end of this section, along with the previous mention of both *diakonoi* and *episkopoi*, at least makes plausible the claim that the explicit threefold Old Testament hierarchy is applicable to the formal structure of the early Christian Church.

Conclusion

This paper began by asserting that the technical scholarship which has dominated the discussion of Chapters 40–44 of *1 Clement* is not of the greatest interest to the average member of a Christian congregation. Further, the stated aim was to offer some thoughts which might help to remedy this problem, if only for a small piece of *1 Clement*. The first idea is that the connection between Chapters 37–39 and 40–44 is an implied criticism of the modern tendency to spiritualize individual religious convictions at the expense of “organized religion.” The second idea is that the tendency of the Church toward increasing denominational division since the Reformation runs counter to the example put forth in *1 Clement*.

Regarding the first of these two ideas, it is hard to imagine that any self-professed Christian would be willing to oppose the general claim that

²⁴ *1 Clement* 43.6.

²⁵ *1 Clement* 44.4.

all Christians are part of the body of Christ, each with a particular role to play. What is often the case, however, is that these roles tend to be construed in a rather vague and personal way that has little to do with what happens in a worshipping community. By connecting the idea that each Christian is a part of the body of Christ with a distinct function in worship, Clement tacitly insists that every member of the worshipping congregation is as important as any other, including those bishops, priests, and deacons who stand in succession with the apostles. Just as there were distinct functions in the Levitical system, everyone from the bishop to the laity has a role to play in Christian worship: “For special liturgical rites have been assigned to the high priest, and a special place has been designated for the regular priests, and special ministries are established for the Levites. The lay person is assigned to matters enjoined to the laity.”²⁶ Simply stated, it is not possible for the head to say to the foot (or the foot to the head), “I have no need of you.”

By reaching back to the Old Testament to find the scriptural foundation of the spiritual authority granted to the apostles’ successors, Clement shows that ordered Christian ministry requires more than mere charisma and the support of a few people in any given congregation. Ordered ministry for Clement derives its strength from the apostolic succession, which, according to Clement, was put in place by Christ himself.²⁷ One practical conclusion that grows out of the preceding observations is quite clear: whenever a group of Christians choose to reject their faithful presbyters, bishops, or deacons, this action undermines the vision of Christ’s body in a very real way. The Body of Christ is not merely a spiritual ideal; at some level, it is a visible community of people gathered to worship God, with each person in the particular role to which he has been called.

One remaining question is: What might Clement perceive as the danger of rejecting either the personal role one plays in the liturgy or the structural role played by Christian ministers? Certainly, Clement thinks that such rejection spiritually imperils the person or people who take this course. He quite clearly approves of ordered ministry and worship in 40:4 asserting that “[t]hose who make their sacrificial offerings at the arranged times are acceptable and blessed,” but he also condemns those who do otherwise. In 41:3 he states, “Those who do anything contrary to [God’s]

²⁶ *1 Clement* 40:1–5.

²⁷ *1 Clement* 42:1 and 44:1.

plan bear the penalty of death.” Clearly Clement did not envision this in a strictly literal way; had he done so, his epistle would have been a funeral oration rather than a call to repentance. Nevertheless, he did think that schism and disorder of the sort displayed at Corinth had serious consequences. For Clement, abandoning the Church order that God had put in place was more than expressing a theological preference: it was an active rejection of what God had chosen. To abandon those who followed in the apostles’ steps meant cutting oneself off from the body of Christ. In light of Clement’s prediction of death, it is important to remember that Christ did come so that we “may have life, and have it abundantly.”²⁸ And any separation from this life in Christ is a separation that no Christian can reasonably desire.

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Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Die neueste Forschung zum Ersten Klemensbrief betrachtet zwar die rhetorischen Besonderheiten dieses Briefes, lässt aber die grundlegende Frage – nämlich warum seine ursprünglichen Adressaten sich inmitten eines erbitterten Kirchenstreits für Fragen einer Ordnung der Kirche in der Nachfolge der Apostel oder für den Zusammenhang zwischen christlichem Gottesdienst und levitischem Opfersystem interessieren sollten – weitgehend unerforscht. Für den heutigen Leser ist es hilfreich, die Kapitel 40–44 im Kontext der Kapitel 37–39 zu lesen, um Klemens’ Behauptung zu verstehen, es bestehe eine starke Ähnlichkeit der christlichen Kirchenämter mit Bischöfen, Priestern und Diakonen mit der levitischen Unterteilung in Hohepriester, Priester und Leviten. Auf Grundlage dieser Analogie ruft Klemens die korinthische Gemeinde zur Versöhnung mit ihrer Leitung auf, da die kirchliche Ämterstruktur für die Gesundheit der Kirche unabdingbar sei. Für Klemens ist die Akzeptanz der dreiteiligen Ordnung geweihter Amtsträger notwendig für ein ordnungsgemässes Funktionieren der christlichen Gemeinschaft, während ihre Ablehnung zugleich die christliche Vision von der Kirche als Leib Christi verwerfen würde.

²⁸ John 10:10b NRSV.