The Ignatian Epistles Entirely Spurious - Part 1

by William Dool Killen

William Dool Killen critiques the authenticity of the Ignatian Epistles and challenges the arguments presented by Dr. Lightfoot in defense of their genuineness.

Scripture: Proverbs 2:6, Colossians 2:8, 1 Thessalonians 5:21, 2 Timothy 2:15, 1 John 4:1
Topics: "Church History", "Biblical Criticism"

Description

William Dool Killen addresses the theological inquiries surrounding the genuineness of the Epistles attributed to Ignatius of Antioch, critiquing the arguments presented by J.B. Lightfoot in favor of their authenticity. Killen highlights the historical criticism involved, pointing out the controversy that has surrounded these letters since the Reformation period. He questions the legitimacy of the Ignatian Epistles, emphasizing the implications of accepting them as genuine on the faith and historical accuracy of the early Christian Church.

Transcript

Preface

This little volume is respectfully submitted to the candid consideration of all who take an interest in theological inquiries, under the impression that it will throw some additional light on a subject which has long created much discussion. It has been called forth by the appearance of a treatise entitled, "The Apostolic Fathers, Part II. S. Ignatius, S. Polycarp. Revised Texts, with Introductions, Notes, Dissertations, and Translations, by J. B. Lightfoot, D.D., D.C.L., LL.D, Bishop of Durham." In this voluminous production the Right Reverend Author has maintained, not only that all the seven letters attributed by Eusebius to Ignatius are genuine, but also that "no Christian writings of the second century, and very few writings of antiquity, whether Christian or pagan, are so well authenticated." These positions, advocated with the utmost confidence by the learned prelate, are sure to be received with implicit confidence by a wide circle of readers; and I have felt impelled here openly to protest against them, inasmuch as I am satisfied that they cannot be accepted without overturning all the legitimate landmarks of historical criticism. I freely acknowledge the eminent services which Dr. Lightfoot has rendered to the Christian Church by his labours as a Commentator on Scripture, and it is therefore all the more important that the serious errors of a writer so distinguished should not be permitted to pass unchallenged. All who love the faith once delivered to the saints, may be expected to regard with deference the letters of a martyr who lived on the borders of the apostolic age; but these Ignatian Epistles betray indications of a very different original, for they reveal a

spirit of which no enlightened Christian can approve, and promulgate principles which would sanction the boldest assumptions of ecclesiastical despotism. In a work published by me many years ago, I have pointed out the marks of their imposture; and I have since seen no cause to change my views. Regarding all these letters as forgeries from beginning to end, I have endeavoured, in the following pages, to expose the fallacy of the arguments by which Dr. Lightfoot has attempted their vindication.

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Chapter 1

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS.

The question of the genuineness of the Epistles attributed to Ignatius of Antioch has continued to awaken interest ever since the period of the Reformation. That great religious revolution gave an immense impetus to the critical spirit; and when brought under the light of its examination, not a few documents, the claims of which had long passed unchallenged, were summarily pronounced spurious. Eusebius, writing in the fourth century, names only seven letters as attributed to Ignatius; but long before the days of Luther, more than double that number were in circulation.

Many of these were speedily condemned by the critics of the sixteenth century. Even the seven recognised by Eusebius were regarded with grave suspicion; and Calvin -- who then stood at the head of Protestant theologians -- did not hesitate to denounce the whole of them as forgeries. The work, long employed as a text-book in Cambridge and Oxford, was the Institutes of the Reformer of Geneva; [2.1] and as his views on this subject are there proclaimed very emphatically, [2.2] we may presume that the entire body of the Ignatian literature was at that time viewed with distrust by the leaders of thought in the English universities.

But when the doctrine of the Divine Right of Episcopacy began to be promulgated, the seven letters rose in the estimation of the advocates of the hierarchy; and an extreme desire was manifested to establish their pretensions. So great was the importance attached to their evidence, that in 1644 -- in the very midst of the din and confusion of the civil war between Charles I. and his Parliament -- the pious and erudite Archbishop Ussher presented the literary world with a new edition of these memorials.

Two years later the renowned Isaac Vossius produced a kindred publication. Some time afterwards, Daillé, a learned French Protestant minister, attacked them with great ability; and proved, to the satisfaction of many readers, that they are utterly unworthy of credit. Pearson, subsequently Bishop of Chester, now entered the arena, and in a work of much talent and research -- the fruit of six years' labour -- attempted to restore their reputation. This vindication was not permitted to pass without an answer; but, meanwhile, the dark prospects of the Reformed faith in England and the Continent directed attention to matters of more absorbing interest, and the controversy was discontinued.

From time to time, however, these Epistles were kept before the eyes of the public by Archbishop Wake and other editors; and more recently the appearance of a Syriac copy of three of them -- printed under the supervision of the late Rev. Dr. Cureton -- reopened the discussion. Dr. Cureton maintained that his three Epistles are the only genuine remains of the pastor of Antioch. In a still later publication, [3.1] Bishop Lightfoot controverts the views of Dr. Cureton, and makes a vigorous effort to uphold the credit of the

seven letters quoted by Eusebius and supported by Pearson.

Dr. Lightfoot has already acquired a high and deserved reputation as a scholar and a commentator, and the present work furnishes abundant evidence of his linguistic attainments and his perseverance; but it is somewhat doubtful whether it will add to his fame as a critic and a theologian. In these three portly octavo volumes -- extending to upwards of 1800 pages of closely printed matter -- he tries to convince his readers that a number of the silliest productions to be found among the records of antiquity, are the remains of an apostolic Father.

He tells us, in his preface, that the subject has been before him "for nearly thirty years;" and that, during this period, it has "engaged his attention off and on in the intervals of other literary pursuits and official duties." Many, we apprehend, will feel that the result is not equal to such a vast expenditure of time and labour; and will concur with friends who, as he informs us, have complained to him that he has thus "allowed himself to be diverted from the more congenial task of commenting on S.

Paul's Epistles." There is not, we presume, an evangelical minister in Christendom who would not protest against the folly exhibited in these Ignatian letters; and yet it appears that the good Bishop of Durham has spent a large portion of his life in an attempt to accomplish their vindication. To Dr. Lightfoot may be justly awarded the praise of having here made the reading public acquainted with the various manuscripts and versions of these Ignatian letters, as well as with the arguments which may be urged in their favour; and he has thus rendered good service to the cause of historical criticism.

Professor Harnack, in a late number of the Expositor [4.1], states no more than the truth when he affirms that "this work is the most learned and careful Patristic Monograph which has appeared in the nineteenth century." To any one who wishes to study the Ignatian controversy, it supplies a large amount of valuable evidence, not otherwise easily accessible. Some, indeed, may think that, without any detriment to ecclesiastical literature, some of the matter which has helped to swell the dimensions of these volumes might have been omitted.

Everything in any way associated with the name of Ignatius seems to have a wonderful fascination for the learned prelate. Not content with publishing and commending what he considers the genuine productions of the apostolic Father, he here edits and annotates letters which have long since been discredited by scholars of all classes, and which he himself confesses to be apocryphal. The Acts of Martyrdom of Ignatius -- which he also acknowledges to be a mere bundle of fables -- he treats with the same tender regard.

Nor is this all. He gives these acts, or large portions of them, in Latin and Greek, as well as in Coptic and Syriac; and annotates them in addition. He supplies, likewise, English translations. It may be argued, that the publication of such a mass of legendary rubbish is necessary to enable the student to form a correct judgment on the merits of the subject in debate; but surely the question might be settled without the aid of some of these auxiliaries. Dr. Lightfoot has long been known as one of the most candid and painstaking of scriptural commentators; but it must always be remembered that he is an Episcopalian, and the ruler of an English diocese.

He would be something almost more than human, were he to hold up the scales of testimony with strict impartiality when weighing the claims of his own order. It strikes us that, in the work before us, his prejudices and predilections reveal their influence more conspicuously than in any of his other publications. He can see support for his views in words and phrases where an ordinary observer can

discover nothing of the kind; and he can close his eyes against evidence which others may deem very satisfactory.

Even when appraising the writers who have taken part in this controversy, he has presented a very one-sided estimate. He speaks of those who reject the claims of these Epistles as forming "a considerable list of second and third rate names;" [6.1] and he mentions Ussher and Bentley among those who espouse his sentiments. According to our author, there cannot be a "shadow of doubt" that the seven Vossian Epistles "represent the genuine Ignatius." [6.2] "No Christian writings of the second century," says he, "and very few writings of antiquity, whether Christian or pagan, are so well authenticated." [6.3] He surely cannot imagine that Ussher would have endorsed such statements; for he knows well that the Primate of Armagh condemned the Epistle to Polycarp as a forgery.

He has still less reason to claim Bentley as on his side. On authority which Bishop Monk, the biographer of Bentley, deemed well worthy of acceptance, it is stated that in 1718, "on occasion of a Divinity Act," the Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, "made a speech condemning the Epistles of S. Ignatius." His address created a "great ferment" in the university. [7.1] It is further reported that Bentley "refused to hear the Respondent who attempted to reply." We might have expected such a deliverance from the prince of British critics; for, with the intuition of genius, he saw the absurdity of recognising these productions as proceeding from a Christian minister who had been carefully instructed by the apostles.

Bentley's refusal to hear the Respondent who attempted to reply to him, was exactly in keeping with his well-known dictatorial temper. Does Dr. Lightfoot bring forward any evidence to contradict this piece of collegiate history? None whatever. He merely treats us to a few of his own conjectures, which simply prove his anxiety to depreciate its significance. And yet he ventures to parade the name of Bentley among those of the scholars who contend for the genuineness of these letters!

He deals after the same fashion with the celebrated Porson. In a letter to the author of this review [7.2], Dr. Cureton states that Porson "rejected" these letters "in the form in which they were put forth by Ussher and Vossius;" and declares that this piece of information was conveyed to himself by no less competent an authority than Bishop Kaye. Dr. Lightfoot meets this evidence by saying that "the obiter dictum even of a Porson," in the circumstances in which it was given, might be "of little value." [7.3] It was given, however, exactly in the circumstances in which the speaker was best prepared to deliver a sound verdict, for it was pronounced after the great critic had read the Vindiciae of Pearson.

It would be hopeless to attempt to settle a disputed question of criticism by enumerating authorities on different sides, as, after all, the value of these authorities would be variously discounted. We must seek to arrive at truth, not by quoting names, but by weighing arguments. Not a few, however, whose opinion may be entitled to some respect, will not be prepared to agree with Bishop Lightfoot when he affirms that those who reject these Ignatian letters are, with few exceptions, only to be found in the "list of second and third rate names" in literature. [8.1] We have seen that Bentley and Porson disagree with him -- and he can point to no more eminent critics in the whole range of modern scholarship.

If Daillé must be placed in the second rank, surely Pearson may well be relegated to the same position; for there is most respectable proof that his Vindiciae, in reply to the treatise of the French divine, was pronounced by Porson to be a "very unsatisfactory" performance. [8.2] "The most elaborate and ingenious portion of the work" is, as Bishop Lightfoot himself confesses, "the least satisfactory." [8.3] Dr. Lightfoot, we believe, will hardly pretend to say that Vossius, Bull, and Waterland stand higher in the literary world

than Salmasius, John Milton, and Augustus Neander; and he will greatly astonish those who are acquainted with the history and writings of one of the fathers of the Reformation, if he will contend that John Calvin must be placed only in the second or third class of Protestant theologians.

In the presence of the great doctor of Geneva, Hammond, Grotius, Zahn, and others whom Dr. Lightfoot has named as his supporters, may well hide their diminished heads. In the work before us the Bishop of Durham has pretty closely followed Pearson, quoting his explanations and repeating his arguments. Some of these are sufficiently nebulous. Professor Harnack -- who has already reviewed his pages in the Expositor, and who, to a great extent, adheres to the views which they propound -- admits, notwithstanding, that he has "overstrained" his case, and has adduced as witnesses writers of the second and third centuries of whom it is impossible to prove that they knew anything of the letters attributed to Ignatius. [9.1] As a specimen of the depositions which Dr.

Lightfoot has pressed into his service, we may refer to the case of Lucian. That author wrote about sixty years after the alleged date of the martyrdom of Ignatius, and his Lordship imagines that in one of his works he can trace allusions to the pastor of Antioch under the fictitious name of Peregrinus. "Writing," says he "soon after A.D. 165," Lucian "caricatures the progress of Ignatius through Asia Minor in his death of Peregrinus." [9.2] This Peregrinus was certainly an odd character.

Early in life he had murdered his own father, and for this he was obliged to make his escape from his country. Wandering about from place to place, he identified himself with the Christians, gained their confidence, and became, as is alleged, a distinguished member of their community. His zeal in their cause soon exposed him to persecution, and he was thrown into prison. His incarceration added greatly to his fame. His co-religionists, including women and children, were seen from morning to night lingering about the place of his confinement; he was abundantly supplied with food; and the large sums of money, given to him as presents, provided him with an ample revenue.

After his release he forfeited the favour of his Christian friends, and became a Cynic philosopher; but he could not be at peace. He at length resolved to immortalize himself by voluntary martyrdom. Meanwhile he despatched letters to many famous cities, containing laws and ordinances; and appointed certain of his companions -- under the name of death-messengers -- to scatter abroad these missives. Finally, at the close of the Olympian games he erected a funeral pile; and when it was all ablaze, he threw himself into it, and perished in the flames.

"There is very strong reason for believing" says Dr. Lightfoot, "that Lucian has drawn his picture, at least in part, from the known circumstances of Ignatius' history." [10.1] The bishop returns again and again to the parallelism between Ignatius and Peregrinus, and appears to think it furnishes an argument of singular potency in favour of the disputed Epistles. "Second only," says he, to certain other vouchers, which he produces, "stands this testimony." [11.1] From such a sample the judicious reader may form some idea of the conclusiveness of the bishop's reasoning.

Peregrinus begins life as a parricide, and dies like a madman; and yet we are asked to believe that Lucian has thus sketched the history of an apostolic Father! When Lucian wrote, Ignatius had been dead about sixty years; but the pagan satirist sought to amuse the public by sketching the career of an individual whom he had himself heard and seen, [11.2] and who must have been well known to many of his readers. About the middle of the second century the Church was sorely troubled by false teachers, especially of the Gnostic type; and it may have been that some adventurer, of popular gifts and professing great zeal in the

Christian cause, contrived to gather around him a number of deluded followers, who, for a time, adhered to him with wonderful enthusiasm.

It may be that it is this charlatan to whom Lucian points, and whose history he perhaps exaggerates. But there is nothing in the life of Peregrinus which can fairly be recognised even as a caricature of the career of one of the most distinguished of the early Christian martyrs. Were we to maintain that the pagan satirist was referring to the Apostle John, we might be able to show almost as many points of resemblance. The beloved disciple travelled about through various countries; acquired a high reputation among the Christians; was imprisoned in the Isle of Patmos; wrote letters to the seven Churches of Asia; and was visited in his place of exile by angels or messengers, who probably did not repair to him empty-handed.

John died only a few years before Ignatius, and was connected with the same quarter of the globe. We have, however, never yet heard that Lucian was suspected of alluding to the author of the Apocalypse. If Bishop Lightfoot thinks that he can convince sensible men of the genuineness of the Ignatian Epistles by bringing forward such witnesses as Lucian and his hero Peregrinus, we believe he is very much mistaken. The argument is not original, for it is pressed with great confidence by his predecessor Pearson, and by others more recently.

But its weakness is transparent. Professor Harnack, whilst admitting the weight of much of the evidence adduced in these volumes, scornfully refuses to acknowledge its relevancy. "Above all," says he, "Lucian should be struck out. I confess I cannot imagine how writers go on citing Lucian as a witness for the Epistles." [12.1] There is, however, an old adage, "Any port in a storm." and before the close of this discussion it may perhaps be found that Lucian is as good a harbour of refuge as can be furnished for the credit of the Ignatian Epistles in the whole of the second century.

It is obvious that, even according to his own account of the history of his present work, Dr. Lightfoot has not entered on its preparation under circumstances likely to result in a safe and unprejudiced verdict. "I never once doubted," says he in the preface, [13.1] "that we possessed in one form or another the genuine letters of Ignatius." This is, however, the very first point to be proved; and the bishop has been labouring throughout to make good a foregone conclusion. No wonder that the result should be unsatisfactory.

If he has built on a false foundation, nothing else could be expected. There is not, we are satisfied, a particle of solid evidence to show that Ignatius of Antioch left behind him any writings whatever. This may be deemed a very bold statement, but it is deliberately advanced. I hope, in a subsequent chapter, to demonstrate that it is not made without due consideration.