

The Ignatian Epistles Entirely Spurious - Part 2

by William Dool Killen

The speaker argues that the Ignatian Epistles are not authentic and that the letter of Polycarp to the Philippians is a witness to a different Ignatius.

Scripture: 2 Timothy 2:15

Topics: "New Testament", "Church History"

Description

William Dool Killen delves into the examination of the testimony of Polycarp to the Ignatian Epistles, challenging the authenticity and credibility of these letters attributed to Ignatius. He highlights the discrepancies in the authentication of the Ignatian letters compared to the genuine second-century writings like the letter of Polycarp to the Philippians. Killen emphasizes the internal and external evidence supporting the authenticity of Polycarp's letter, showcasing its relevance and reliability in contrast to the Ignatian Epistles. He sheds light on the historical context, dating, and content of Polycarp's letter, suggesting a different interpretation of the recipients and purpose of the correspondence, ultimately questioning the traditional understanding of the Ignatian Epistles.

Transcript

Chapter 2

THE TESTIMONY OF POLYCARP

TO THE

IGNATIAN EPISTLES EXAMINED.

The Bishop of Durham affirms, in a passage already quoted, that "no Christian writings of the second century, and very few writings of antiquity, whether Christian or pagan, are so well authenticated" as the Epistles attributed to Ignatius. This assuredly is an astounding announcement, made deliberately by a distinguished author, whose attention, for nearly thirty years, has been directed to the subject. The letter of Polycarp to the Philippians is a writing of the second century, and it is by far the most important witness in support of the Ignatian letters; but we must infer, from the words just quoted, that it is not "so well authenticated" as they are.

It is difficult to understand by what process of logic his Lordship has arrived at this conclusion. In an ordinary court of law, the witness who deposes to character is expected to stand on at least as high a

moral platform in public estimation as the individual in whose favour he bears testimony; but if the letter of Polycarp is not "so well authenticated" as these Ignatian letters, how can it be brought forward to establish their reputation? Nor is this the only perplexing circumstance connected with this discussion.

There was a time when, according to his own statement in the present work, Dr. Lightfoot "accepted the Curetonian letters as representing the genuine Ignatius;" [15.1] and, of course, when he regarded as forgeries the four others which he now acknowledges. In the volumes before us, as if to make compensation for the unfavourable opinion which he once cherished, he advances the whole seven of the larger edition to a position of especial honour. The letter of Polycarp, the works of Justin Martyr, the treatise of Irenaeus Against Heresies, and other writings of the second century, have long sustained an honest character; but now they must all take rank below the Ignatian Epistles.

According to the Bishop of Durham, they are not "so well authenticated." In his eagerness to exalt the credit of these Ignatian letters, Dr. Lightfoot, in his present publication, has obviously expressed himself most incautiously. In point of fact, the letter of Polycarp, as a genuine production of the second century, occupies an incomparably higher position than the Ignatian Epistles. The internal evidence in its favour is most satisfactory. It is exactly such a piece of correspondence as we might expect from a pious and sensible Christian minister, well acquainted with the Scriptures, and living on the confines of the apostolic age.

It has, besides, all the external confirmation we could desire. Irenaeus, who was personally well known to the author, and who has left behind him the treatise Against Heresies already mentioned, speaks therein of this letter in terms of high approval. "There is," says he, "a very sufficient Epistle of Polycarp written to the Philippians, from which those who desire it, and who care for their own salvation, can learn both the character of his faith and the message of the truth." [16.1] Could such a voucher as this be produced for the Epistles ascribed to Ignatius, and were the external evidence equally satisfactory, it would be absurd to doubt their genuineness.

But whilst the internal evidence testifies against them, they are not noticed by any writer for considerably more than a century after they are said to have appeared. The date commonly assigned for the martyrdom of Ignatius, and consequently for the writing of the letters ascribed to him, is the ninth year of Trajan, corresponding to A.D. 107. This date, Dr. Lightfoot tells us, is "the one fixed element in the common tradition." [16.2] It is to be found in the Chronicon Paschale, and in the Antiochene and the Roman "Acts," as well as elsewhere. [16.3] This same date is assigned by the advocates of the Ignatian Epistles for the writing of Polycarp's letter.

"Only a few months at the outside," says Dr. Lightfoot, "probably only a few weeks, after these Ignatian Epistles purport to have been written, the Bishop of Smyrna himself addresses a letter to the Philippians." [17.1] In due course it will be shown that Polycarp was at this time only about four-and-twenty years of age; and any intelligent reader who pursues his Epistle can judge for himself whether it can be reasonably accepted as the production of so very youthful an author.

It appears that it was dictated in answer to a communication from the Church at Philippi, in which he was requested to interpose his influence with a view to the settlement of some grave scandals which disturbed that ancient Christian community. Is it likely that a minister of so little experience would have been invited to undertake such a service? The communication is rather such an outpouring of friendly counsel as befitted an aged patriarch. In a fatherly style he here addresses himself to wives and widows, to young

men and maidens, to parents and children, to deacons and presbyters. [17.2] There are other indications in this letter that it cannot have been written at the date ascribed to it by the advocates of the Ignatian Epistles.

It contains an admonition to "pray for kings (or the kings), authorities, and princes." [18.1] We are not at liberty to assume that these three names are precisely synonymous. By kings, or the kings, we may apparently understand the imperial rulers; by authorities, consuls, proconsuls, praetors, and other magistrates; and by princes, those petty sovereigns and others of royal rank to be found here and there throughout the Roman dominions. [18.2] Dr. Lightfoot, indeed, argues that the translation adopted by some -- "the kings" -- is inadmissible, as, according to his ideas, "we have very good ground for believing that the definite article had no place in the original." [18.3] He has, however, assigned no adequate reason why the article may not be prefixed.

His contention, that the expression "pray for kings" has not "anything more than a general reference," [18.4] cannot be well maintained. In a case such as this, we must be, to a great extent, guided in our interpretation by the context; and if so, we may fairly admit the article, for immediately afterwards Polycarp exhorts the Philippians to pray for their persecutors and their enemies, -- an admonition which obviously has something more than "a general reference." Such an advice would be inappropriate when persecution was asleep, and when no enemy was giving disturbance.

But, at the date when Ignatius is alleged to have been martyred, Polycarp could not have exhorted the Philippians to pray for "the kings," as there was then only one sovereign ruling over the empire. That this letter of Polycarp to the Philippians was written at a time when persecution was rife, is apparent from its tenor throughout. If we except the case of Ignatius of Antioch -- many of the tales relating to which Dr. Lightfoot himself rejects as fabulous [19.1] -- we have no evidence that in A.D. 107 the Christians were treated with severity.

The Roman world was then under the mild government of Trajan, and the troubles which afflicted the disciples in Bithynia, under Pliny, had not yet commenced. The emperor, so far as we have trustworthy information, had hitherto in no way interfered with the infant Church. But in A.D. 161 two sovereigns were in power, and a reign of terror was inaugurated. We can therefore well understand why Polycarp, after exhorting his correspondents to pray for "the kings," immediately follows up this advice by urging them to pray for their persecutors and their enemies.

If by "kings" we here understand emperors, as distinguished from "princes" or inferior potentates, it must be obvious that Polycarp here refers to the two reigning sovereigns. It so happened that, when two kings began to reign, persecution at once commenced; and the language of the Epistle exactly befits such a crisis. The whole strain of this letter points, not to the reign of Trajan, but to that of Marcus Aurelius. Polycarp exhorts the Philippians "to practise all endurance" (§ 9) in the service of Christ.

"If," says he, "we should suffer for His name's sake, let us glorify Him" (§ 8). He speaks of men "encircled in saintly bonds;" (§ 1) and praises the Philippians for the courage which they had manifested in sympathizing with these confessors. He reminds them how, "with their own eyes," they had seen their sufferings (§ 9). All these statements suggest times of tribulation. A careful examination of this letter may convince us that it contains no reference to the Epistles attributed to Ignatius of Antioch.

Of the seven letters mentioned by Eusebius, four are said to have been written from Smyrna and three from Troas. But the letters of which Polycarp speaks were written from neither of these places, but from

Philippi. In the letters attributed to Ignatius of Antioch, the martyr describes himself as a solitary sufferer, hurried along by ten rough soldiers from city to city on his way to Rome; in the letter of Polycarp to the Philippians, Ignatius is only one among a crowd of victims, of whose ultimate destination the writer was ignorant.

A considerable time after the party had left Philippi, Polycarp begs the brethren there to tell him what had become of them. "Concerning Ignatius himself, and those who are with him, if," says he, "ye have any sure tidings, certify us." [21.1] In the Ignatian Epistle addressed to Polycarp, he is directed to "write to the Churches," to "call together a godly council," and "to elect" a messenger to be sent to Syria (§7). Polycarp, in his letter to the Philippians, takes no notice of these instructions.

He had obviously never heard of them. It is indeed plain that the letter of the Philippians to Polycarp had only a partial reference to the case of Ignatius and his companions. It was largely occupied with other matters; and to these Polycarp addresses himself in his reply. The simple solution of all these difficulties is to be found in the fact that the Ignatius mentioned by Polycarp was a totally different person from the pastor of Antioch. He lived in another age and in another country.

Ignatius or Egnatius -- for the name is thus variously written -- was not a very rare designation; [21.3] and in the neighbourhood of Philippi it seems to have been common. The famous Egnatian road, [21.4] which passed through the place, probably derived its title originally from some distinguished member of the family. We learn from the letter of Polycarp that his Ignatius was a man of Philippi. Addressing his brethren there, he says, "I exhort you all, therefore, to be obedient unto the word of righteousness, and to practise all endurance, which also ye saw with your own eyes in the blessed Ignatius, and Zosimus, and Rufus, and IN OTHERS ALSO AMONG YOURSELVES" (Sec. 9).

These words surely mean that the individuals here named were men of Philippi. It is admitted that two of them, viz. Zosimus and Rufus, answered to this description; and in the Latin Martyrologies, as Dr. Lightfoot himself acknowledges, [22.2] they are said to have been natives of the town. It will require the introduction of some novel canon of criticism to enable us to avoid the conclusion that Ignatius, their companion, is not to be classed in the same category. It is well known that when Marcus Aurelius became emperor he inaugurated a new system of persecution.

Instead of at once consigning to death those who boldly made a profession of Christianity, as had heretofore been customary in times of trial, he employed various expedients to extort from them a recantation. He threw them into confinement, bound them with chains, kept them in lingering suspense, and subjected them to sufferings of different kinds, in the hope of overcoming their constancy. It would seem that Ignatius, Zosimus, Rufus, and their companions were dealt with after this fashion.

They were made prisoners, put in bonds, plied with torture under the eyes of the Philippians, and taken away from the city, they knew not whither. It may be that they were removed to Thessalonica, the residence of the Roman governor, that they might be immured in a dungeon, to await there the Imperial pleasure. It is pretty clear that they did not expect instant execution. When Polycarp wrote, he speaks of them as still living; and he is anxious to know what may yet betide them.

Let us now call attention to another passage in this letter of Polycarp to the Philippians. Towards its close the following sentence appears somewhat in the form of a postscript. "Ye wrote to me, both ye yourselves and Ignatius, asking that if any one should go to Syria, he might carry thither the letters from you." We have here the reading, and translation adopted by Dr. Lightfoot; but it so happens that there is another

reading perhaps, on the whole, quite as well supported by the authority of versions and manuscripts.

It may be thus rendered. "Ye wrote to me, both ye yourselves and Ignatius, suggesting that if any one is going to Syria, he might carry thither my letters to you." [23.1] The sentence, as interpreted by the advocates of the Ignatian Epistles, wears a strange and suspicious aspect. If Ignatius and the Philippians wished their letters to be carried to Antioch, why did they not say so? Syria was an extensive province, -- much larger than all Ireland, -- and many a traveller might have been going there who would have found it quite impracticable to deliver letters in its metropolis.

When there was no penny postage, and when letters of friendship were often carried by private hands, if an individual residing in the north or south of the Emerald Isle had requested a correspondent in Bristol to send his letters by "any one" going over to Ireland, it would not have been extraordinary if the Englishman had received the message with amazement. Could "any one" passing over to Ireland be expected to deliver letters in Cork or Londonderry? There were many places of note in Syria far distant from Antioch; and it was preposterous to propose that "any one" travelling to that province should carry letters to its capital city.

No one can pretend to say that the whole, or even any considerable part of Syria, was under the ecclesiastical supervision of Ignatius; for, long after this period, the jurisdiction of a bishop did not extend beyond the walls of the town in which he dwelt. If Ignatius meant to have his letters taken to Antioch, why vaguely say that they were to be carried to Syria? [24.1] Why not distinctly name the place of their destination? It had long been the scene of his pastoral labours; and it might have been expected that its very designation would have been repeated by him with peculiar interest.

No good reason can be given why he should speak of Syria, and not of Antioch, as the place to which his letters were to be transmitted. Nor is this the only perplexing circumstance associated with the request mentioned in the postscript to this letter. If the Philippians, or Ignatius, had sent letters to Polycarp addressed to the Church of Antioch, was it necessary for them to say to him that they should be forwarded? Would not his own common sense have directed him what to do?

He was not surely such a dotard that he required to be told how to dispose of these Epistles. If we are to be guided by the statements in the Ignatian Epistles, we must infer that the letters to be sent to Antioch were to be forwarded with the utmost expedition. A council was to be called forthwith, and by it a messenger "fit to bear the name of God's courier" [25.1] was to be chosen to carry them to the Syrian metropolis. There are no such signs of haste or urgency indicated in the postscript to Polycarp's Epistle.

The letters of which he speaks could afford to wait until some one happened to be travelling to Syria; and then, it is suggested, he might take them along with him. If we adopt the reading to be found in the Latin version, and which, from internal evidence, we may judge to be a true rendering of the original, we are, according to the interpretation which must be given to it by the advocates of the Ignatian Epistles, involved in hopeless bewilderment. If by Syria we understand the eastern province, what possibly can be the meaning of the words addressed by Polycarp to the Philippians, "If any one is going to Syria, he might carry thither my letters to you"? [26.1] Any one passing from Smyrna to Philippi turns his face to the north-west, but a traveller from Smyrna to Syria proceeds south-east, or in the exactly opposite direction.

How could Polycarp hope to keep up a correspondence with his brethren of Philippi, if he sent his letters to the distant East by any one who might be going there? It is pretty evident that the Latin version has preserved the true original of this postscript, and that the current reading, adopted by Dr. Lightfoot and

others, must be traced to the misapprehensions of transcribers. Puzzled by the statement that letters from Polycarp to the Philippians were to be sent to Syria, they have tried to correct the text by changing [Greek. par haemon] into [Greek. par humon] -- implying that the letters were to be transmitted, not from Polycarp to the Philippians, but from the Philippians to Antioch.

A very simple explanation may, however, remove this whole difficulty. If by Syria we understand, not the great eastern province so called, but a little island of similar name in the Aegaeen Sea, the real bearing of the request is at once apparent. Psyria [27.1] -- in the course of time contracted into Psyra -- lies a few miles west of Chios, [27.2] and is almost directly on the way between Smyrna and Neapolis, the port-town of Philippi. A letter from Smyrna left there would be carried a considerable distance on its journey to Philippi.

Some friendly hand might convey it from thence to its destination. Psyria and Syria are words so akin in sound that a transcriber of Polycarp's letter, copying from dictation, might readily mistake the one for the other; and thus an error creeping into an early manuscript may have led to all this perplexity. Letters in those days could commonly be sent only by special messengers, or friends traveling abroad; and the Philippians had made a suggestion to Polycarp as to the best mode of keeping up their correspondence.

They had probably some co-religionists in Psyria; and a letter sent there to one or other of them, could, at the earliest opportunity, be forwarded. But another explanation, perhaps quite as worthy of acceptance, may solve this mystery. Syria was the ancient name of another island in the Aegaeen Sea, and one of the Cyclades. Though it is not so much as Psyria in the direct course between Smyrna and Philippi, it is a place of greater celebrity and of more commercial importance.

Like Psyria, in the course of ages its name has been contracted, and it is now known as Syra. Between it and Smyrna there has been much intercourse from time immemorial. It has been famous since the days of Homer, [28.1] and it was anciently the seat of a bishop, [28.2] -- an evidence that it must soon have had a Christian population. It is at the present day the centre of an active trade; and a late distinguished traveller has told us how, not many years ago, in an afternoon, he and his party "left Syra, and next morning anchored in front of the town of Smyrna." [28.3] Syria is not, as has been intimated, in the direct route to Philippi; but the shortest way is not always either the best or the most convenient.

At present this place is the principal port of the Greek archipelago; [29.1] and probably, in the days of Polycarp, vessels were continually leaving its harbour for towns on the opposite coasts of the Aegaeen. A Christian merchant resident in Syria would thus have facilities for sending letters left with him either to Smyrna or Philippi. Ignatius or his friends may have heard of an offer from such a quarter to take charge of their correspondence, and may have accordingly made the suggestion noticed at the close of Polycarp's letter.

As the island of Syria was well known to them all, the Smyrnaeans could not have misunderstood the intimation. This explanation throws light on another part of this postscript which has long been embarrassing to many readers. After adverting to the request of Ignatius and the Philippians relative to the conveyance of the letters, Polycarp adds, "which request I will attend to if I get a fit opportunity, either personally, or by one whom I shall depute to act likewise on your behalf." [29.2] According to the current interpretation, Polycarp here suggests the probability of a personal visit to the eastern capital, if he could find no one else to undertake the service.

The occasion evidently called for no such piece of self-sacrifice on the part of this apostolic Father. The Church of Antioch, after the removal of its pastor Ignatius, was, we are assured, delivered from farther trouble, and was now at peace. [30.1] The presence of the minister of Smyrna there was utterly unnecessary; [30.2] the place was very far distant; and why then should he be called on to undertake a wearisome and expensive journey to Antioch and back again? Polycarp admits that his visit was not essential, and that a messenger might do all that was required quite as well.

But if by Syria we understand one of the Sporades or Cyclades, we are furnished with a ready solution of this enigma. The little island of Psyria was distant from Smyrna only a few hours' sail; and as it was perhaps the residence of some of his co-religionists, Polycarp might soon require to repair to it in the discharge of his ecclesiastical duties. He could then take along with him, so far, the letters intended for Philippi. Or if by Syria we here understand the little island anciently so called, near the centre of the Cyclades, the explanation is equally satisfactory.

The letter of Polycarp was written, not as Dr. Lightfoot contends, in A.D. 107 but, as we have seen, about A.D. 161, when, as the whole strain of the Epistle indicates, he was far advanced in life. There is reason to believe that about this very juncture he was contemplating a journey to Rome, that he might have a personal conference with its chief pastor, Anicetus. His appearance in the seat of Empire on that occasion created a great sensation, and seems to have produced very important results.

If he now went there, any one who looks at the map may see that he must pass Syria on the way. He could thus take the opportunity of leaving there any letters for Philippi of which he might be the bearer. At a subsequent stage of our discussion, this visit of Polycarp to Rome must again occupy our attention. The facts brought under the notice of the reader in this chapter may help him to understand how it has happened that so many have been befooled by the claims of these Ignatian Epistles.

A mistake as to two of the names mentioned in the letter of Polycarp, created, as will subsequently appear, by the crafty contrivance of a manufacturer of spurious documents, has led to a vast amount of blundering and misapprehension. Ignatius, a man of Philippi, has been supposed to be Ignatius, the pastor of Antioch; and Syria, the eastern province of the Roman Empire, has been confounded with Psyria or Syria -- either of these names representing an island in the Aegean Sea not far from Smyrna.

Ignatius, the confessor of Philippi, when in bonds wrote, as we find, a number of letters which were deemed worthy of preservation, but which have long since perished; and some time afterwards an adroit forger, with a view to the advancement of a favourite ecclesiastical system, concocted a series of letters which he fathered upon Ignatius of Antioch. In an uncritical age the cheat succeeded; the letters were quite to the taste of many readers; and ever since they have been the delight of High Churchmen.

Popes and Protestant prelates alike have perused them with devout enthusiasm; and no wonder that Archbishop Laud, Bishop Jeremy Taylor, Bishop Hall, and Archbishop Wake, have quoted Ignatius with applause. The letters ascribed to him are the title-deeds of their order. Even the worthy Bishop of Durham, who has never permitted himself to doubt that we possess in some form the letters of the pastor of Antioch, has been the victim of his own credulity; and has been striving "off and on" for "nearly thirty years" to establish the credit of Epistles which teach, in the most barefaced language the gospel of sacerdotal pretension and passive obedience.

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