

The Ignatian Epistles Entirely Spurious - Part 3

by William Dool Killen

The sermon critically examines the historical evidence surrounding the martyrdom of Polycarp, arguing for its dating during the reign of Marcus Aurelius.

Scripture: Proverbs 12:22, Proverbs 19:9, 1 Timothy 6:20, 2 Timothy 2:15, 1 John 4:1

Topics: "Early Church History", "Biblical Authenticity"

Description

William Dool Killen preaches about the controversy surrounding the date of the martyrdom of Polycarp and its implications on the Ignatian Epistles. He discusses the arguments presented by Dr. Lightfoot and Archbishop Ussher, highlighting the discrepancies in chronology and the historical evidence supporting a later date for Polycarp's martyrdom. Killen emphasizes the importance of accurate historical context in understanding the authenticity of ancient texts and the significance of reliable testimonies from early Christian writers like Eusebius and Jerome.

Transcript

Chapter 3

THE DATE OF THE MARTYRDOM OF POLYCARP.

To many it may appear that there can be no connection between the date of the martyrdom of Polycarp and the claims of the Ignatian Epistles. All conversant with the history of this controversy must, however, be aware that the question of chronology has entered largely into the discussion. If we defer to the authority of the earliest and best witnesses to whom we can appeal for guidance, it is impossible to remove the cloud of suspicion which at once settles down on these letters.

Their advocates are aware of the chronological objection, and they have accordingly expended immense pains in trying to prove that Eusebius, Jerome, and other writers of the highest repute have been mistaken. In his recent work, the Bishop of Durham has exhausted the resources of his ability and erudition in attempting to demonstrate that the only parties from whom we can fairly expect anything like evidence have all been misinformed. He has secured a verdict in his favour from a number of reviewers, who have apparently at once given way before the formidable array of learned lore brought together in these volumes; [34.1] but, withal, the intelligent reader who cautiously peruses and ponders the elaborate chapter in which he deals with this question, will feel rather mystified than enlightened by his argumentation.

It may therefore be proper to state the testimony of the ancient Christian writers, and to describe the line of reasoning pursued by Dr. Lightfoot. "The main source of opinion," says the bishop, "respecting the year of Polycarp's death, among ancient and modern writers alike, has been the Chronicon of Eusebius ... After the seventh year of M. Aurelius, he appends the notice, 'A persecution overtaking the Church, Polycarp underwent martyrdom.' ... Eusebius is here assumed to date Polycarp's martyrdom in the seventh year of M.

Aurelius, i.e. A.D. 167." [34.2] Dr. Lightfoot then proceeds to observe that "this inference is unwarrantable," inasmuch as "the notice is not placed opposite to, but after this year." He adds that it "is associated with the persecutions in Vienne and Lyons, which we know to have happened A.D. 177." [34.3] So far the statement of the bishop is unobjectionable, and, according to his own showing, we might conclude that Polycarp suffered some time after the seventh year of M. Aurelius.

But this plain logical deduction would be totally ruinous to the system of chronology which he advocates; and he is obliged to resort to a most outlandish assumption that he may get over the difficulty. He contends that Eusebius did not know at what precise period these martyrdoms occurred. "We can," says the bishop, "only infer with safety that Eusebius supposed Polycarp's martyrdom to have happened during the reign of M. Aurelius." "As a matter of fact, the Gallican persecutions took place some ten years later [than A.D. 167], and therefore, so far as this notice goes, the martyrdom of Polycarp might have taken place as many years earlier." [35.1] These extracts may give the reader some idea of the manner in which Dr.

Lightfoot proceeds to build up his chronological edifice. Eusebius places the martyrdom of Polycarp and the martyrdoms of Vienne and Lyons after the seventh year of M. Aurelius; and therefore, argues Dr. Lightfoot, he did not know when they occurred! Because the martyrdoms of Vienne and Lyons took place ten years after A.D. 167, therefore the martyrdom at Smyrna may, for anything that the father of ecclesiastical history could tell, have been consummated in A.D. 157! Dr. Lightfoot himself supplies proof that such an inference is inadmissible; for he acknowledges that, according to Eusebius, the pastor of Smyrna finished his career in the reign of M.

Aurelius. But, in A.D. 157, M. Aurelius was not emperor. Such are the contradictions to which this writer commits himself in attempting to change the times and the seasons. It is quite clear that Eusebius laboured under no such uncertainty, as Dr. Lightfoot would fondly persuade himself, relative to the date of the martyrdom of Polycarp. He directs attention to the subject in his History as well as in his Chronicon, and in both his testimony is to the same effect. In both it is alleged that Polycarp was martyred in the reign of Marcus Aurelius.

It must be remembered, too, that Eusebius was born only about a century after the event; that from his youth he had devoted himself to ecclesiastical studies; that he enjoyed the privilege of access to the best theological libraries in existence in his day; that, from his position in the Church as bishop of the metropolis of Palestine, and as the confidential counselor of the Emperor Constantine, he had opportunities of coming into personal contact with persons of distinction from all countries, who must have been well acquainted with the traditions of their respective Churches; and that he was a man of rare prudence, intelligence, and discernment.

He was certainly not a philosophical historian, and in his great work he has omitted to notice many things of much moment; but it must be conceded that, generally speaking, he is an accurate recorder of facts;

and, in the case before us, he was under no temptation whatever to make a misleading statement. We must also recollect that his testimony is corroborated by Jerome, who lived in the same century; who, at least in two places in his writings, reports the martyrdom; and who affirms that it occurred in the seventh year of M.

Aurelius. [37.1] Dr. Lightfoot, indeed, asserts that Jerome "derived his knowledge from Eusebius," [37.2] and that, "though well versed in works of Biblical exegesis, ... he was otherwise extremely ignorant of early Christian literature." [37.3] We have here unhappily another of those rash utterances in which the Bishop of Durham indulges throughout these volumes; for assuredly it is the very extravagance of folly to tax Jerome with "extreme ignorance of early Christian literature."

Those who are acquainted with his writings will decline to subscribe any such depreciatory certificate. He was undoubtedly bigoted and narrow-minded, but he had a most capacious memory; he had travelled in various countries; he had gathered a prodigious stock of information; he was the best Christian scholar of his generation; he has preserved for us the knowledge of not a few important facts which Eusebius has not registered; and he at one time contemplated undertaking himself the composition of an ecclesiastical history. [37.4] We cannot, therefore, regard him as the mere copyist of the Bishop of Caesarea.

"Every one acquainted with the literature of the primitive Church," says Dr. Döllinger, "knows that it is precisely in Jerome that we find a more exact knowledge of the more ancient teachers of the Church, and that we are indebted to him for more information about their teaching and writings, than to any other of the Latin Fathers." [38.1] Dr. Döllinger is a Church historian whom even the Bishop of Durham cannot afford to ignore, -- as, in his own field of study, he has, perhaps, no peer in existence, -- and yet he here states explicitly, not certainly that Jerome was extremely ignorant of early Christian literature, but that, in this very department, he was specially well informed.

The learned monk of Bethlehem must have felt a deep interest in Polycarp as an apostolic Father. he was quite capable of testing the worth of the evidence relative to the time of the martyrdom; and his endorsement of the statement of Eusebius must be accepted as a testimony entitled to very grave consideration. Some succeeding writers assign even a later period to the death of Polycarp. It is a weighty fact that no Christian author for the first eight centuries of our era places it before the reign of M.

Aurelius. The first writer who attaches to it an earlier date is Georgius Hamartolus, who flourished about the middle of the ninth century. Dr. Lightfoot confesses that what he says cannot be received as based on "any historical tradition or critical investigation." [38.2] It is, in fact, utterly worthless. The manner in which Dr. Lightfoot tries to meet the array of evidence opposed to him is somewhat extraordinary. He does not attempt to show that it is improbable in itself, or that there are any rebutting depositions.

He leaves it in its undiminished strength; but he raises such a cloud of learned dust around it, that the reader may well lose his head, and be unable, for a time, to see the old chronological landmarks. [39.1] He rests his case chiefly on a statement to be found in a postscript, of admittedly doubtful authority, appended to the letter of the Smyrnaeans relative to the martyrdom of Polycarp. He argues as if the authority for this statement were unimpeachable; and, evidently regarding it as the very key of the position, he endeavours, by means of it, to upset the chronology of Eusebius, Jerome, the Chronicon Paschale, and other witnesses.

As the reader peruses his chapter on "The Date of the Martyrdom," he cannot but feel that the evidence presented to him is bewildering, indecisive, and obscure; and it may occur to him that the author is very

like an individual who proposes to determine the value of two or three unknown quantities from one simple algebraic equation. His principal witness, Aristides, were he now living and brought up in presence of a jury, would find himself in rather an odd predicament. He is expected to settle the date of the death of Polycarp, and yet he knows nothing either of the pastor of Smyrna or of his tragic end.

It does not appear that he had ever heard of the worthy apostolic Father. Aristides was a rhetorician who has left behind him certain orations, entitled Sacred Discourses, written in praise of the god Aesculapius. It might be thought that such a writer is but poorly qualified to decide a disputed question of chronology. Our readers may have heard of Papias, -- one of the early Fathers, noted for the imbecility of his intellect. Aristides, it seems, was quite as liable to imposition.

"The credulity of a Papias," says Dr. Lightfoot, "is more than matched by the credulity of an Aristides." [40.1] Such is the bishop's leading witness. Aristides was an invalid and a hypochondriac; and, in the discourses he has left behind him, he describes the course of a long illness, with an account of his pains, aches, purgations, dreams, and visions -- interspersed, from time to time, with what Dr. Lightfoot estimates as "valuable chronological notices!" [40.2] The reader may be at a loss to understand how it happens that this eccentric character has been brought forward as a witness to the date of the martyrdom of Polycarp.

He has been introduced under the following circumstances. In the postscript to the Smyrnaean letter -- an appendage of very doubtful authority -- we are told that the martyrdom occurred when Statius Quadratus was proconsul of Asia. From certain incidental allusions made by Aristides in his discourses, the bishop labours hard to prove that this Statius Quadratus was proconsul of Asia somewhere about A.D. 155. The evidence is not very clear or well authenticated; and we have reason to fear that very little reliance can be placed on the declarations of this afflicted rhetorician.

His sickness is said to have lasted seventeen years; and it is possible that, meanwhile, his memory as to dates may have been somewhat impaired. Dr. Lightfoot cannot exactly tell when his sickness commenced or when it terminated. But he has ascertained that this Quadratus was consul in A.D. 142; and, by weighing probabilities as to the length of the interval which may have elapsed before he became proconsul, he has arrived at the conclusion that it might have amounted to twelve or thirteen years.

Nothing, however, can be more unsatisfactory than the process by which he has reached this result. According to the usual routine, an individual advanced to the consulate became, in a number of years afterwards, a proconsul; and yet, as everything depended on the will of the emperor, it was impossible to tell how long he might have to wait for the appointment. He might obtain it in five years, or perhaps sooner, if "an exceptionally able man;" [41.1] or he might be kept in expectancy for eighteen or nineteen years.

The proconsulship commonly terminated in a year; but an individual might be retained in the office for five or six years. [41.2] He might become consul a second time, and then possibly he might again be made proconsul. Dr. Lightfoot, as we have seen, has proved that Statius Quadratus was consul in A.D. 142; and then, by the aid of the dreamer Aristides, he has tried to show that he probably became proconsul of Asia about A.D. 154 or A.D. 155. His calculations are obviously mere guesswork.

Even admitting their correctness, it would by no means follow that Polycarp was then consigned to martyrdom. The postscript of the Smyrnaean letter is, as we have seen, justly suspected as no part of the original document. Dr. Lightfoot himself tells us, that it is "generally treated as a later addition to the letter, and as coming from a different hand;" [42.1] and, whilst disposed to uphold its claims as of high authority,

he admits that, when tested as to "external evidence," the supplementary paragraphs, of which this is one, "do not stand on the same ground" [42.2] as the rest of the Epistle.

And yet his whole chronology rests on the supposition that the name of the proconsul is correctly given in this probably apocryphal addition to the Smyrnaean letter. Were we even to grant that this postscript belonged originally to the document, it would supply no conclusive evidence that Polycarp was martyred in A.D. 155. It is far more probable that the writer has been slightly inaccurate as to the exact designation of the proconsul of Asia about the time of the martyrdom. [43.1] He was called Quadratus -- not perhaps Staius, but possibly Ummidius Quadratus. [43.2] There is nothing more common among ourselves than to make such a mistake as to a name.

How often may we find John put for James, or Robert for Andrew? Quadratus was a patrician name, well known all over the empire; and if Staius Quadratus had, not long before, been proconsul of Asia, it is quite possible that the writer of this postscript may have taken it for granted that the proconsul about the time of Polycarp's death was the same individual. The author, whoever he may have been, was probably not very well acquainted with these Roman dignitaries, and may thus have readily fallen into the error.

Dr. Lightfoot has himself recorded a case in which a similar mistake has been made -- not in an ordinary communication such as this, but in an Imperial ordinance. In a Rescript of the Emperor Hadrian, Licinius Granianus, the proconsul, is styled Serenus Granianus. [43.3] If such a blunder could be perpetrated in an official State document, need we wonder if the penman of the postscript of the Smyrnaean letter has written Staius Quadratus for Ummidius Quadratus? And yet, if we admit this very likely oversight, the whole chronological edifice which the Bishop of Durham has been at such vast pains to construct, vanishes like the dreams and visions of his leading witness, the hypochondriac Aristides. [44.1] Archbishop Ussher and others, who have carefully investigated the subject, have placed in A.D. 169 the martyrdom of Polycarp.

The following reasons may be assigned why this date is decidedly preferable to that contended for by Dr. Lightfoot. 1. All the surrounding circumstances point to the reign of Marcus Aurelius as the date of the martyrdom. Eusebius has preserved an edict, said to have been issued by Antoninus Pius, in which he announces that he had written to the governors of provinces "not to trouble the Christians at all, unless they appeared to make attempts against the Roman government." [44.2] Doubts -- it may be, well founded -- have been entertained as to the genuineness of this ordinance; but it has been pretty generally acknowledged that it fairly indicates the policy of Antoninus Pius.

"Though certainly spurious," says Dr. Lightfoot, "it represents the conception of him entertained by Christians in the generations next succeeding his own." [45.1] In his reign, the disciples of our Lord, according to the declarations of their own apologists, were treated with special indulgence. Melito, for example, who wrote not long after the middle of the second century, bears this testimony. Capitolinus, an author who flourished about the close of the third century, reports that Antoninus Pius lived "without bloodshed, either of citizen or foe," during his reign of twenty-two years. [45.2] Dr.

Lightfoot strives again and again to evade the force of this evidence, and absurdly quotes the sufferings of Polycarp and his companions as furnishing a contradiction; but he thus only takes for granted what he has elsewhere failed to prove. He admits, at the same time, that this case stands alone. "The only recorded martyrdoms," says he, "in Proconsular Asia during his reign [that of Antoninus Pius] are those of Polycarp and his companions." [45.3] It must, however, be obvious that he cannot establish even this exception.

We have seen that the chronology supported by the Bishop of Durham is at variance with the express statements of all the early Christian writers; and certain facts mentioned in the letter of the Smyrnaeans concur to demonstrate its inaccuracy. The description there given of the sufferings endured by those of whom it speaks, supplies abundant evidence that the martyrdoms must have happened in the time of Marcus Aurelius. Dr. Lightfoot himself attests that "persecutions extended throughout this reign;" that they were "fierce and deliberate;" and that they were "aggravated by cruel tortures." [46.1] Such precisely were the barbarities reported in this Epistle.

It states that the martyrs "were so torn by lashes that the mechanism of their flesh was visible, even as far as the inward veins and arteries;" that, notwithstanding, they were enabled to "endure the fire;" and that those who were finally "condemned to the wild beasts" meanwhile "suffered fearful punishments, being made to lie on sharp shells, and buffeted with other forms of manifold tortures." [46.2] These words attest that, before the Christians were put to death, various expedients were employed to extort from them a recantation.

Such was the mode of treatment recommended by Marcus Aurelius. In an edict issued against those who professed the gospel by this emperor, we have the following directions. "Let them be arrested, and unless they offer to the gods, let them be punished with divers tortures." [46.3] "Various means," says Neander, "were employed to constrain them to a renunciation of their faith; and only in the last extremity, when they could not be forced to submit, was the punishment of death to be inflicted." [46.4] This, undoubtedly, was the inauguration of a new system of persecution.

In former times, the Christians who refused to apostatize were summarily consigned to execution. Now, they were horribly tormented in various ways, with a view to compel them to abandon their religion. This new policy is characteristic of the reign of Marcus Aurelius. Nothing akin to it, sanctioned by Imperial authority, can be found in the time of any preceding emperor. Its employment now in the case of Polycarp and his companions fixes the date of the martyrdom to this reign. 2.

We have distinct proof that the visit of Polycarp to Rome took place after the date assigned by Bishop Lightfoot to his martyrdom! Eusebius tells us that, in the first year of the reign of Antoninus Pius, [47.1] Telesphorus of Rome died, and was succeeded in his charge by Hyginus. [47.2] He subsequently informs us that Hyginus dying "after the fourth year of his office," was succeeded by Pius; and he then adds that Pius dying at Rome, "in the fifteenth year of his episcopate," was succeeded by Anicetus. [47.3] It was in the time of this chief pastor that Polycarp paid his visit to the Imperial city.

It is apparent from the foregoing statements that Anicetus could not have entered on his office until at least nineteen, or perhaps twenty years, after Antoninus Pius became emperor, that is, until A.D. 157, or possibly until A.D. 158. This, however, is two or three years after the date assigned by Dr. Lightfoot for the martyrdom. Surely the Bishop of Durham would not have us to believe that Polycarp reappeared in Rome two or three years after he expired on the funeral pile; and yet it is only by some such desperate supposition that he can make his chronology square with the history of the apostolic Father.

It is not at all probable that Polycarp arrived in Rome immediately after the appointment of Anicetus as chief pastor. The account of his visit, as given by Irenaeus, rather suggests that a considerable time must meanwhile have elapsed before he made his appearance there. It would seem that he had been disturbed by reports which had reached him relative to innovations with which Anicetus was identified; and that, apprehending mischief to the whole Christian community from anything going amiss in a Church of such

importance, he was prompted, at his advanced age, to undertake so formidable a journey, in the hope that, by the weight of his personal influence with his brethren in the Imperial city, he might be able to arrest the movement.

It is not necessary now to inquire more particularly what led the venerable Asiatic presbyter at this period to travel all the way from Smyrna to the seat of empire. It is enough for us to know, as regards the question before us, that it took place sometime during the pastorate of Anicetus; that Polycarp effected much good by his dealings with errorists when in Rome; and that its chief Christian minister, by his tact and discretion, succeeded in quieting the fears of the aged stranger.

That the visit occurred long after the date assigned by Dr. Lightfoot for his martyrdom, may now be evident; and in a former chapter proof has been adduced to show that it must be dated, not, as the Bishop of Durham argues, about A.D. 154, but in A.D. 161. Neither is there any evidence whatever that Polycarp was put to death immediately after his return to Smyrna. This supposition is absolutely necessary to give even an appearance of plausibility to the bishop's chronology; but he has not been able to furnish so much as a solitary reason for its adoption. 3.

We have good grounds for believing that the martyrdom of Polycarp occurred not earlier than A.D. 169. This date fulfils better than any other the conditions enumerated in the letter of the Smyrnaeans. Archbishop Ussher has been at pains to show that the month and day there mentioned precisely correspond to and verify this reckoning. It is unnecessary here to repeat his calculations; but it is right to notice another item spoken of in the Smyrnaean Epistle, supplying an additional confirmatory proof which the Bishop of Durham cannot well ignore.

When Polycarp was pressed to apostatize by the officials who had him in custody, they pleaded with him as if anxious to save his life -- "Why, what harm is there in saying Caesar is Lord, and offering incense?" and they urged him to "swear by the genius of Caesar" [50.1] These words suggest that, at the time of this transaction, the Roman world had only one emperor. In January A.D. 169, L. Verus died. After recording this event in his Imperial Fasti, Dr. Lightfoot adds, "M. Aurelius is now sole emperor." [50.2] When he is contending for A.D. 155 as the date of the martyrdom, he lays much stress on the fact that "throughout this Smyrnaean letter the singular is used of the emperor."

"Polycarp," he says, "is urged to declare 'Caesar is Lord;' he is bidden, and he refuses to swear by the 'genius of Caesar.'" "It is," he adds, "at least a matter of surprise that these forms should be persistently used, if the event had happened during a divided sovereignty." [50.3] The bishop cannot, at this stage of the discussion, decently refuse to recognise the potency of his own argument. The three reasons just enumerated show conclusively that A.D. 155, for which the Bishop of Durham contends so strenuously, cannot be accepted as the date of the martyrdom.

For some years after this, Anicetus was not placed at the head of the Church of the Imperial city; and he must have been for a considerable time in that position, when Polycarp paid his visit to Rome. We have seen that the aged pastor of Smyrna suffered in the reign of Marcus Aurelius; and that A.D. 169 is the earliest period to which we can refer the martyrdom, inasmuch as that was the first year in which Marcus Aurelius was sole emperor. All the reliable chronological indications point to this as the more correct reckoning.

It has now, we believe, been demonstrated by a series of solid and concurring testimonies, that Archbishop Ussher made no mistake when he fixed on A.D. 169 as the proper date of Polycarp's

martyrdom. The bearing of this conclusion on the question of the Ignatian Epistles must at once be apparent. Polycarp was eighty-six years of age at the time of his death; and it follows that in A.D. 107, -- or sixty-two years before, -- when the Ignatian letters are alleged to have been dictated, he was only four-and-twenty.

The absurdity of believing that at such an age he wrote the Epistle to the Philippians, or that another apostolic Father would then have addressed him in the style employed in the Ignatian correspondence, must be plain to every reader of ordinary intelligence. No wonder that the advocates of the genuineness of these Epistles have called into requisition such an enormous amount of ingenuity and erudition to pervert the chronology. Pearson, as we have seen, spent six years in this service; and the learned Bishop of Durham has been engaged "off and on" for nearly thirty in the same labour.

At the close of his long task he seems to have persuaded himself that he has been quite successful; and speaking of the theory of Dr. Cureton, he adopts a tone of triumph, and exclaims. "I venture to hope that the discussion which follows will extinguish the last sparks of its waning life." [51.1] It remains for the candid reader to ponder the statements submitted to him in this chapter, and to determine how many sparks of life now remain in the bishop's chronology.

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