

SAINT IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH



Ignatius was the bishop of the Church of Antioch at the close of the first century A.D. and one of the "Apostolic Fathers," the third generation of Christians and the last generation to have had direct contact with the original followers of Jesus. No one connected with the history of the early Christian Church is better known than Ignatius, and yet among the leading churchmen of the time there is scarcely one about whose career we know so little. Our only trustworthy information is derived from the letters which he wrote to various churches on his last journey from Antioch to Rome, and from the short epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians.

The earlier patristic writers seem to have known no more than we do. Irenaeus, for instance, gives a quotation from Ignatius' Epistle to the Romans and does not appear to know (or if he knew he has forgotten) the name of the author, since he describes him (*Against the Heresies*, v. 28.4) as "one of those belonging to us". If Eusebius, the well known fourth century historian possessed any knowledge about Ignatius apart from the letters he never reveals it. The only shred of extra information which he gives us is the statement that Ignatius "was the second successor of Peter in the bishopric of Antioch" (*Ecclesiastical History*).

Of course in later times a cloud of tradition arose, but none of it bears the least evidence of trustworthiness. The martyrologies, from which the account of his martyrdom that used to appear in uncritical church histories is taken, are full of anachronisms and impossibilities. There are two main types - the Roman and the Syrian - out of which the others are compounded. They contradict each other in many points and even their own statements in different places are sometimes quite irreconcilable. Any truth that the narrative may in fact contain is hopelessly overlaid with fiction.

We are therefore limited to the Ignatian Epistles for our information, and before we can use even these we are confronted with a most complex critical problem, a problem which for ages aroused the most bitter controversy, but which happily now, thanks to the labors of such scholars as Zahn, Lightfoot, Harnack and Funk, may be said to have reached a satisfactory solution.

I. The Problem of the Three Recensions.

The Ignatian problem arises from the fact that we possess three different recensions of the Epistles:

(a) *The short recension* (often called the Vossian) contains the letters to the Ephesians, Magnesians, Trallians, Romans, Philadelphians, Smyrnaeans and to Polycarp. This recension was derived in its Greek form from the famous Medicean Manuscript at Florence, Italy and first published by Vossius in 1646. In the Medicean Manuscript the Epistle to the Romans is missing, but a Greek version of this epistle was discovered by Ruinart, embedded in a *martyrium*, in the National Library at Paris and published in 1689. There are also (1) a Latin version made by Robert Grosseteste, bishop of Lincoln, about 1250, and published by Ussher in 1644 - two years before the Vossian edition appeared; (2) an Armenian version which was derived from a Syriac version not earlier than the 5th century and published at Constantinople in 1783; (3) some fragments of a Syriac version published in Cureton's edition of Ignatius; (4) fragments of a Coptic version first published in Lightfoot's work.

(b) *The long recension* contains the seven Epistles mentioned above in an expanded form and several additional letters besides. The Greek form of the recension, which has been preserved in ten manuscripts, has thirteen letters, the additional ones being to the Tarsians, the Philippians, the Antiochians, to Hero, to Mary of Cassobola and a letter of Mary to Ignatius. The Latin form, of which there are thirteen extant manuscripts, omits the letter of Mary of Cassobola, but adds to the list the Laus Heronis, two Epistles to the apostle John, one to the Virgin Mary and one from Mary to Ignatius.

(c) *The Syriac or Curetonian recension* contains only three Epistles, to Polycarp, to the Romans, and to the Ephesians, and these when compared with the same letters in the short and long recensions are found to be considerably abbreviated. The Syriac recension was made by William Cureton in 1845 from three Syriac manuscripts which had been brought from the Nitrian desert and deposited in the British Museum near the beginning of the twentieth century. One of these manuscripts has been dated to the 6th century, the other two are later. Summed up in a word, therefore, the Ignatian problem is this: which of these three recensions (if any) represents the actual work of Ignatius?

II. History of the Controversy

The history of the controversy may be divided into three periods: (a) up to the discovery of the short recension in 1646; (b) between 1646 and the discovery of the Syriac recension in 1845; (c) from 1845 to the present day.

In the first stage the controversy was theological rather than critical. The Reformation raised the question as to the authority of the papacy and the hierarchy. Roman Catholic scholars used the interpolated Ignatian Epistles very freely in their defence and derived many of their arguments from them, while Protestant scholars threw discredit on these Epistles. The Magdeburg centuriators expressed the gravest doubts as to their genuineness, and Calvin declared that "nothing was more foul than those fairy tales (*naeniis*) published under the name of Ignatius!" It should be stated, however, that one Roman Catholic scholar, Denys Petau (Petavius), admitted that the letters were interpolated, while the Protestant Vedelius

acknowledged the seven letters mentioned by Eusebius. In England the Ignatian Epistles took an important place in the episcopalian controversy in the 17th century. Their genuineness was defended by the leading Anglican writers, *e.g.* Whitgift, Hooker and Andrewes, and vigorously challenged by Dissenters, *e.g.* the five Presbyterian ministers who wrote under the name of Smectymnuus and John Milton.

The second period is marked by the recognition of the superiority of the Vossian recension. This was speedily demonstrated, though some attempts were made, notably by Jean Morin or Morinus (about 1656), Whiston (in 1711) and Meier (in 1836), to resuscitate the long recension. Many Protestants still maintained that the new recension, like the old, was a forgery. The chief attack came from Jean Daille, who in his famous work (1666) drew up no fewer than sixty-six objections to the genuineness of the Ignatian literature. He was answered by Pearson, who in his *Vindiciae Epistolarum S. Ignatii* (1672) completely vindicated the authenticity of the Vossian Epistles. No further attack of any importance was made till the time of Baur, who like Daille, rejected both recensions.

In the third stage - inaugurated in 1845 by Cureton's work - the controversy has ranged round the relative claims of the Vossian and the Curetonian recensions. Scholars have been divided into three camps: (1) those who followed Cureton in maintaining that the three Syriac Epistles alone were the genuine work of Ignatius. Among them may be mentioned the names of Bunsen, A. Ritschl, R. A. Lipsius, E. de Pressense, H. Ewald, Milman, Bohringer. (2) Those who accepted the genuineness of the Vossian recension and regarded the Curetonian as an abbreviation of it, *e.g.* Petermann, Denzinger, Uhlhorn, Merx, and in more recent times Zahn, J. B. Lightfoot, Adolph Harnack and F. X. Funk. (3) Those who denied the authenticity of both recensions, *e.g.* Baur and Hilgenfeld and in recent times van Manen, Volter, and van Loon. The result of more than half a century's discussion has been to restore the Vossian recension to the premier position.

III. The Origin of the Long Recension

The arguments against the genuineness of the long recension are decisive. (1) It conflicts with the statement of Eusebius. (2) The first trace of its use occurs in Anastasius of Antioch (A.D. 598) and Stephen Gobarus (*c.* 575-600). (3) The ecclesiastical system of the letters implies a date not earlier than the 4th century. (4) The recension has been proved to be dependent on the *Apostolical Constitutions*. (5) The doctrinal atmosphere implies the existence of Arian and Apollinarian heresies. (6) The added passages reveal a difference in style which stamps them at once as interpolations.

There are several different theories with regard to the origin of the recension. Some, *e.g.* Leclerc, Newman and Zahn, think that the writer was an Arian and that the additions were made in the interest of Arianism. Funk, on the other hand, regards the writer as an Apollinarian. Lightfoot opposes both views and suggests that it is better "to conceive of him as writing with a conciliatory aim."

IV. The Objections to the Curetonian Recension.

The objections to the Syriac recension, though not so decisive, are strong enough to carry conviction with them. (1) We have the express statement of Eusebius that Ignatius wrote seven Epistles. (2) There are statements in Polycarp's Epistle which cannot be explained from the three Syriac Epistles. (3) The omitted portions are proved by Lightfoot, after an elaborate analysis, to be written in the same style as the rest of the epistles and could not therefore have been later interpolations. (4) The Curetonian letters are often abrupt and broken and show signs of abridgment. (5) The discovery of the Armenian version proves the existence of an earlier Syriac recension corresponding to the Vossian of which the Curetonian may be an abbreviation. It seems impossible to account for the origin of the Curetonian recension on theological grounds. The theory that the abridgment was made in the interests of Eutychianism or Monophysitism cannot be substantiated.

V. The Date and Genuineness of the Vossian Epistles

We are left therefore with the seven Epistles. Are they the genuine work of Ignatius, and, if so, at what date were they written? The main objections are as follows: (1) The conveyance of a condemned prisoner to Rome to be put to death in the amphitheatre is unlikely on historical grounds, and the route taken is improbable for geographical reasons. This objection has very little solid basis. (2) The heresies against which Ignatius contends imply the rise of the later Gnostic and Docetic sects. It is quite certain, however, that Docetism was in existence in the 1st century (see for example the letter of 1 John), while many of the principles of Gnosticism were in vogue long before the great Gnostic sects arose (see the Pastoral Epistles, I and II Timothy and Titus). There is nothing in Ignatius which implies a knowledge of the teaching of Basilides or Valentinus. In fact, as Harnack says: "No Christian writer after 140 could have described the false teachers in the way that Ignatius does." (3) The ecclesiastical system of Ignatius is too developed to have arisen as early as the time of Trajan. At first sight this objection seems to be almost fatal. But we have to remember that the bishops of Ignatius are not bishops in the modern sense of the word at all, but simply pastors of churches. They are not mentioned at all in two Epistles: *Romans* and *Philippians*, which seems to imply that this form of government was not universal. It is only when we read modern ecclesiastical ideas into Ignatius that the objection has much weight. To sum up, as Uhlhorn says: "The collective mass of internal evidence against the genuineness of the letters ... is insufficient to counterbalance the testimony of the Epistle of Polycarp in their favor. He who would prove the Epistles of Ignatius to be spurious must begin by proving the Epistle of Polycarp to be spurious, and such an undertaking is not likely to succeed." This being so, there is no reason for rejecting the opinion of Eusebius that the Epistles were written in the reign of Trajan.

Harnack, who formerly dated them about A.D. 140, now says that they were written in the latter years of Trajan, or possibly a little later (117-125). The majority of scholars place them a few years earlier (110-117).

The letters of Ignatius unfortunately, unlike the Epistles of Saint Paul, contain scant autobiographical material. We are told absolutely nothing about the history of his career. The fact that he speaks of himself as "the last of the Antiochene Christians" seems to suggest that he had been converted from paganism somewhat late in life and that the process of conversion had been abrupt and violent. He bore the surname of Theophorus, i.e. "God-clad" or "God-bearing." Later tradition regarded the word as a passive form ("God-borne") and explained it by the romantic theory that Ignatius was the child whom Christ took in his arms (Mark 9:36-37). The date at which he became bishop of Antioch cannot be determined. At the time when the Epistles were written he had just been sentenced to death, and was being sent in charge of a band of soldiers to Rome to fight the beasts in the amphitheatre. The fact that he was condemned to the amphitheatre proves that he could not have been a Roman citizen. We lose sight of him at Troas, but the presumption is that he was martyred at Rome, though we have no early evidence of this.

But if the Epistles tell us little of the life of Ignatius, they give us an excellent picture of the man himself, and are a mirror in which we see reflected certain ideals of the life and thought of the day. Ignatius, as Philip Schaff says, "is the incarnation of three closely connected ideas: the glory of martyrdom, the omnipotence of episcopacy, and the hatred of heresy and schism."

1. Zeal for martyrdom in later days became a disease in the Church, but in the case of Ignatius it is the mark of a hero. The heroic note runs through all the Epistles; thus he says: "I bid all men know that of my own free will I die for God, unless you should hinder me ... Let me be given to the wild beasts, for through them I can attain unto God. I am God's wheat, and I am ground by the wild beasts that I may be found the pure bread of Christ. Entice the wild beasts that they may become my sepulchre. .: come fire and cross and grapplings with wild beasts, wrenching of bones, hacking of limbs, crushings of my whole body; only be it mine to attain unto Jesus Christ" (To the *Romans* 4-5).

2. Ignatius constantly contends for the recognition of the authority of the ministers of the church. "Do nothing," he writes to the Magnesians, "without the bishop and the presbyters." The "three orders" are essential to the church, without them no church is worthy of the name. "It is not lawful apart from the bishop either to baptize or to hold a love-feast" (*Smyrneans* 8). Respect is due to the bishop as to God, to the presbyters as the council of God and the college of apostles, to the deacons as to Jesus Christ (*Trallians*. 3). These terms must not, of course, be taken in their developed modern sense. The "bishop" of Ignatius seems to represent the modern pastor of a church. As Zahn has shown, Ignatius is not striving to introduce a special form of ministry, nor is he endeavoring to substitute one form for another. His particular interest is not so much in the form of ministry as in the unity of the church. It is this that is his chief concern.

Centrifugal forces were at work. Differences of theological opinion were arising. Churches had a tendency to split up into sections. The age of the apostles had passed away and their successors did not inherit their authority. The unity of the churches was in danger. Ignatius was resisting this fatal tendency which threatened ruin to the faith. The only remedy for it in those days was to exalt the authority of the ministry and make it the center of church life. It should be noted that (1) there is no trace of the later doctrine of apostolic succession; (2) the ministry is never sacerdotal in the letters of Ignatius. As Lightfoot puts it: "The ecclesiastical order was enforced by him (Ignatius) almost solely as a security for doctrinal purity. The threefold ministry was the husk, the shell, which protected the precious kernel of the truth."

3. Ignatius fights most vehemently against the current forms of heresy. The chief danger to the church came from the Docetists who denied the reality of the humanity of Christ and ascribed to him a phantom body. Hence we find Ignatius laying the utmost stress on the fact that Christ "was *truly* born and ate and drank, was *truly* persecuted under Pontius Pilate ... was *truly* raised from the dead" (*Trallians* 9). "I know that He was in the flesh even after the resurrection, and when He came to Peter and his company, He said to them, 'Lay hold and handle me, and see that I am not an incorporeal spirit'" (*Smyrneans* 3). Equally emphatic is Ignatius's protest against a return to Judaism. "It is monstrous to talk of Jesus Christ and to practise Judaism, for Christianity did not believe in Judaism but Judaism in Christianity" (*Magnesians* 10).

Reference must also be made to a few of the more characteristic points in the theology of Ignatius. As far as Christology is concerned, besides the insistence on the reality of the humanity of Christ already mentioned, there are two other points which call for notice:

(1) Ignatius is the earliest writer outside the New Testament to describe Christ under the categories of current philosophy; for example, the famous passage in *To the Ephesians* 7, "There is one only physician, of flesh and of spirit, *generate and ingenerate, God in man, true life in death, son of Mary and son of God, first passible and then impassible.*"

(2) Ignatius is also the first writer outside the New Testament to mention the Virgin Birth, upon which he lays the utmost stress. "Hidden from the prince of this world were the virginity of Mary and her child-bearing and likewise also the death of the Lord, three mysteries to be cried aloud, the which were wrought in the silence of God" (*To the Ephesians* 19). Here, it will be observed, we have the nucleus of the later doctrine of the deception of Satan.

(3) In regard to the Eucharist also later ideas occur in Ignatius. It is termed a *mysterion* (mystery or sacrament) (*Trallians* 2), and the influence of the Greek mysteries is seen in such language as that used in *To the Ephesians* 20, where Ignatius describes the Eucharistic bread as "the medicine of immortality and the antidote against death." When Ignatius says too that "the heretics abstain from Eucharist because they do not allow that the Eucharist is the flesh of Christ," the words seem to imply that materialistic ideas were beginning to find an entrance into the church (*Smyrneans* 6).

Other points that call for special notice are:

(1) Ignatius's rather extravagant angelology. In one place for instance he speaks of himself as being able to comprehend heavenly things and "the arrays of angels and the musterings of principalities" (Trallians 5).

(2) His view of the Old Testament. In one important passage Ignatius emphatically states his belief in the supremacy of Christ even over "the archives" of the faith, i.e. the Old Testament: "As for me, my archives - my inviolable archives - are Jesus Christ, His cross, His death, His resurrection and faith through Him" (Philadelphians 8).