

IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH: GNOSTIC OR ESSENE? A NOTE ON RECENT WORK

The seven epistles of Ignatius of Antioch form one of the most beautiful treasures bequeathed by the second-century Church. In their Short (or Middle) Greek version, they present a strikingly vivid portrait of an aged Syriac bishop making his triumphal journey across Asia to do battle with the beasts of the Roman amphitheater. From Antioch he proceeds by land stages or by sea to Cilicia, then to the city of Philadelphia, to Sardis' ancient capital, and finally to Smyrna. At Smyrna Ignatius tells us he was met by Bishop Polycarp together with ecclesiastical delegates from the communities of Ephesus, Tralles, and Magnesia. It is at Smyrna that he writes, with the help of his scribe, the deacon Burrhus of Ephesus, epistles to Ephesus, Tralles, Magnesia, and Rome. From Smyrna he traveled to the Troad, in preparation for his trip via Macedon to Italy. Tradition has it that from Troas he sailed first to Philippi; but before leaving the coast he dispatched letters to Philadelphia, to Smyrna, and to Bishop Polycarp. Written within a few weeks in the summer before his execution—the letter to Rome is dated August 24, with the year unfortunately missing—the Ignatian collection, with its covering letter, Polycarp's *Epistle to the Philippians*, is a mine of information on the early Church, giving specific names and references to the first churches of Asia Minor.

At first sight Ignatius' teaching would appear to be the ultimate culmination of the Pauline doctrine of mystical union with Christ; in Ignatius, Jesus and God are one, for Jesus is the Logos that breaks the ineffable Silence which is God. In Ignatius the union with the Redeemer is achieved at its highest by the martyr's death, in becoming the "pure bread of Christ," ground by the teeth of the beasts of the arena. And yet Ignatius' mysticism is firmly anchored to the hierarchic and sacramental structure of the Church. For the union of the triune Godhead, revealed in the Logos, is expressed in the union of all those who have been baptized and remain subject, in love, to their bishops, presbyters, and deacons (cf. *Magn.* 6, 1); this harmony is the mark of the true, "catholic" Church (*Smyrn.* 8, 2), from which all heretical teachers have been "filtered out" (*Phil.* 3, 1), and excluded from the *agapē*. For the union with Jesus is enjoyed by those who eat "the suffering flesh" of the Saviour (*Smyrn.* 7, 1), that "medicine of immortality" and "antidote against death" (*Eph.* 20, 2). It is within this harmony that the See of Rome, "the Church which presides in Italy," is "pre-eminent in love" (*Rom.*, Introd.).

The achievement of Ignatius of Antioch has been subjected to fresh scrutiny in the first volume of a new series of monographs, Yale Publications in Religion, under the editorship of Prof. David Horne of the Yale Divinity School; it is *St. Ignatius and Christianity in Antioch*, by Dr. Virginia Corwin.¹ A craftsmanlike piece of work, which developed out of Miss Corwin's doctoral dissertation at the Divinity School, it summarizes the vast literature on Ignatius that has appeared over the last two or three centuries,² and sets his work against the background of the contemporary Christianity of Antioch as well as the Judeo-Gnostic theology of the times. The nine chapters of the book are divided into three parts. Part 1 (chaps. 1-3) deals with the historical background of Ignatius, the problems of text and authenticity, the topography and archeology of Christian Antioch. Part 2 (chaps. 4-7) treats Ignatius' theology in the light of recent research on the Essenians and the Gnostic sects. Part 3 (chaps. 8-9) deals with Ignatius' ascetical and mystical doctrine.

Corwin follows Zahn and Lightfoot in accepting the authenticity of the so-called Middle Greek version of the letters; the controversy which grew out of the coexistence of four distinct recensions has long since died down. And so, of the Longer (or Interpolated) version from a heterodox circle of the late fourth century, the Middle or Vossian recension containing only the seven well-known letters, a Latin version from the hand of Robert Grosseteste (1250) with four new Latin letters, and the shorter Syriac version published in 1845 by W. Cureton containing only three abridged epistles—of these four most scholars are resigned to dealing only with the Middle or Vossian version in their study of Ignatius' thought. For the textual critic the constitution of the Middle Version is made somewhat more complicated by the existence of several Coptic papyri (P. Rainier K

¹ New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1960; pp. xiv + 293. There is a good bibliography (pp. 272-81), and there are full indexes (pp. 283 ff.).

² It is perhaps strange that there is no mention in the bibliography or elsewhere of a good number of articles and monographs by Roman Catholic patristic scholars who have treated Ignatius, as, for example, Altaner, Bardenhewer, Bardy, Bareille (*Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* 7/1, 686-714), Batiffol, Burghardt (*THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 1 [1940] 1-26, 130-56), Camelot (text and translation in *Sources chrétiennes* 10 [2nd ed., 1950]), Lebreton, Quasten, Rivière, G. Walsh (translation in *Fathers of the Church* 1 [New York, 1946]), to name but a few. Hence, for further bibliography one must still consult Johannes Quasten, *Initiation aux Pères de l'église* 1 (transl. by J. Laporte; Paris, 1955) 86-89 (Ignatius) and 92-93 (Polycarp), and Berthold Altaner, *Patrology* (transl. by Hilda C. Graef; New York, 1960) pp. 109, 112. Cf. also P. Carrington, *The Early Christian Church* 1 (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1957) 443-63, and F. L. Cross, *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford, 1957) pp. 676-77.

9416-21), a Greek papyrus (P. Berlin 10581), and fragments of another Syriac version and an Armenian translation.

In addition to setting Ignatius against the background of Antiochene Christianity, Miss Corwin's analysis of his thought is primarily an answer to the German religious-historical school of Reitzenstein, Bultmann, Schlier, and Bartsch. For Bultmann, the theology of the New Testament differs little from that of proto-Gnosticism; but the value of Christianity consists in an openness which allows for progress in history—a progress which gradually forced Christians to live in the real world of daily life, once the expected Parousia did not materialize. Christianity goes beyond Gnosticism, in Bultmann, only in so far as the faith demanded of the Christian frees him for his authentic existence; and this freedom is, in a sense, all that is left once the Gnostic complex of Christian theology is demythologized. Apart from the inherent difficulties in Bultmann's distortion of New Testament theology, I have on occasion underlined the fact that this view completely disregards the way in which the kerygma was understood and transmitted by the earliest Fathers of the Church. Bultmann's theology in general completely bypasses the voice of patristic tradition, and by a kind of Lutheran insight attempts to reinterpret the whole of Christian dogma. A good summary of this position can be found in Bultmann's *Primitive Christianity in Its Contemporary Setting* (New York, 1956).

Closely allied with this point of view is the attempt of a number of German theologians to reinterpret some of the earlier patristic writings from a Gnostic point of view. Here is where Corwin's book takes issue with recent scholarship on the Gnosticism of Ignatius. For H. Schlier,³ for example, Ignatius' thought developed from a pre-Valentinian gnosis and presents a kind of Mandaean redeemer who descends as an unknown aeon from the region of the Godhead to save man from the demonic powers of this world; after victorious battle, he finally ascends in glory, making his identity known at last to all. This Gnostic redeemer myth (often cited by many of the writers in this school) was current in such works as the *Ascension of Isaiah*, in the Mandaean *Ginza*, and in the excerpts from Theodotus, the disciple of Valentinian, preserved by Clement of Alexandria. H. W. Bartsch,⁴

³ See his *Religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu den Ignatiusbriefen* (Giessen, 1929) and the discussion by Corwin, *op. cit.*, pp. 175-79, 199 ff., and *passim*.

⁴ Bartsch has been one of the foremost German spokesmen for Bultmann's theology. On Ignatius see especially Bartsch, *Gnostisches Gut und Gemeindefradition bei Ignatius von Antiochien* (Gütersloh, 1940).

another theologian who writes along the same lines, differs however sharply from Schlier and holds that the Gnostic influence in Ignatius was primarily in the area of his concept of the divine unity and in some of his terminology drawn from the Hellenistic cults. Bartsch offers Corwin a point of departure by distinguishing three strata in Ignatian theology: the nucleus of Christian kerygma, which is closely connected with Paul; an indirect Gnosticism which reached Ignatius (according to Bartsch) through Johannine circles; and, lastly, a direct Gnostic influence operating on Ignatius himself. Now, though Miss Corwin's study seems close to the tradition of Bartsch, she would again disagree with his conclusions. Admitting a certain Gnostic coloring in Ignatius' thought, she would also add a fourth and for her very important stratum to Bartsch's analysis: the theology of Judaic Essenianism, especially as we find it reflected in the *Manual of Discipline*, the *Psalms of Thanksgiving*, and related documents of the Dead Sea Scrolls, as well as in other Jewish apocalyptic works such as the *Syriac Odes and Psalms of Solomon*, *Jubilees*, and the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, as well as in the Gnostic *Gospel of Truth* discovered in the Jung Codex. Corwin assembles and discusses many parallels between these texts and the letters of Ignatius, especially where Ignatius touches on the transcendence and Silence of the Father, the speaking of God through the mouth of the Logos, the vision of the cosmic redeemer.⁵ But Ignatius, according to Corwin,

⁵ For Ignatius, Jesus is "the mouth by which the Father has spoken truly, and one that cannot lie" (*Rom.* 8, 2); compare the *Syriac Odes of Solomon* 12, 11:

"The mouth of the Highest spoke to them,
And He directed the course of His interpretation."

And compare also *Rom.* 7, 2: "There is in me no fire of love for material things, but only water *living* and *speaking* in me, inwardly saying to me, Come to the Father," with the *Odes of Solomon* 11, 6-9:

"Speaking waters came to my lips
Bountiful from the fountains of God.
And I drank and was inebriated
With the living water that does not die. . . .
And I renounced vanity
And turned to my God the most high."

Again, for Ignatius, Jesus manifests the Father because He is His Son, "His Word who proceeds from Silence, and was pleasing in all things to Him who sent Him" (*Magn.* 8, 2); and note also: "What is accomplished in silence is indeed worthy of the Father; for whoever possesses Jesus' word truly, can hear this silence, that he may be perfect; thus he might act through speaking, and by silence be made known" (*Eph.* 15, 1-2). Cf. the *Gospel of Truth*, published in the Jung Codex, pp. 37, 10 ff. (ed. Malinine, Puech, and Quispel; Zurich, 1956): His is "the Mind that utters a unique Word in silent grace." Corwin (pp. 118-30) discusses a number of other parallels to the Ignatian paradox Silence-

seems more closely related with the Jewish mysticism of the Scrolls and the other documents than with the pre-Valentinian Gnosis projected by Schlier, Bartsch, and others of the Bultmannian school. But, be it said in her favor, Miss Corwin is more interested in illuminating Ignatius' thought than in placing him in any definite category; for she has the insight to realize that Ignatius remains always uniquely himself, thoroughly within the Christian tradition of *Heilsgeschichte*, and the inheritor of a richly diverse theological background, drawing for his imagery on Jewish and Gnostic eschatology as well as the Pauline and Johannine vision. In this connection, Corwin thinks that such Johannine influences as there are would seem traceable to a common primitive heritage rather than to direct contact with the fourth Gospel.⁶ In short, Corwin's monograph is a rather complete and open-minded treatment of most aspects of Ignatius' complex thought.

It should be said, however, that her initial approach causes her perhaps to place too much emphasis on the importance of the theology of the Dead Sea Scrolls; and many of the parallels cited are far from convincing. Again, her long account of the city of Antioch (pp. 31-51) seems disproportionate in a discussion of Ignatius' theological heritage; but it manifests surely an understandable fascination with a city which played such an important role in the development of the early Church.⁷ It is almost as though in exploring the ruins of the ancient city we are acquiring a deeper insight into "the problems and opportunities of the church" (p. 51). On the whole, her work is a very thorough and balanced survey, a calm counterstatement to the excesses of the religious-historical school, without at the same time being

Speech in the revelation of the Godhead. But Corwin is everywhere at pains to emphasize that in Ignatius' time there were no clear-cut single movements which could be defined as Gnostic, but rather as vaguely proto-Gnostic. Ignatius everywhere manifests a freedom in his use of this early non-Christian thought and imagery. For a discussion of the imagery of the Essenian psalms, see Corwin, pp. 77 ff.

⁶ Corwin's comment in her note on Ignatius' knowledge of the fourth Gospel (p. 70, n. 28) seems insufficient. She concludes: "I find it difficult to deny [Ignatius'] knowledge of the [fourth] gospel, but think that it is in any case not the explanation of the likenesses." In addition to Loewenich (1932), Maurer (1949), and Grant (1950), there should have been included W. J. Burghardt, S.J., "Did Saint Ignatius of Antioch Know the Fourth Gospel?" *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 1 (1940) 1-26, 130-56, where, in addition to summarizing the literature from the time of Lightfoot down to 1939, Burghardt subtly stresses the importance of the oral catechesis as a possible source of Ignatius' knowledge of the Johannine Gospel.

⁷ Corwin, pp. 31 ff., with a map, and a plan of the city. To the bibliography on Antioch add now E. Hammerschmidt, "Antiochien am Orontes," *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* 1 (2nd ed., 1957) 647-48.

doctrinaire or polemical. The finished monograph does credit to Profs. Kraeling, Horne, Calhoun, and others who promoted its publication in the distinguished Yale series.

However, with regard to the authenticity of the text of the Ignatian corpus and the related letter of Polycarp to the Philippians and the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, perhaps somewhat more could be said. Most scholars are agreed that the original Ignatian text (for which Polycarp's letter somehow served as an introduction) comprises the seven letters of the Vossian or Middle version. The collection is, in a sense, completed by the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* (granted a few later accretions to the substantial account of the martyrdom); the so-called *Life of Polycarp* attributed to Pionius is a much later work of no historical value. It was this basic collection which served as a *corpus vile* for later, heterodox interpolators, and for the invention of the fantastic letters to Hero and Mary of Cassabola in Greek and to St. John and the Virgin Mary in Latin. Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 3, 36), speaking of Ignatius as the second after Peter in the See of Antioch, refers to the seven genuine letters and also quotes passages from Polycarp. It seems unreasonable to doubt that Eusebius possessed a copy of the collection substantially as we have it today. Indeed, there are a number of parallels with the letters and the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* to be found in the curious *Life of Peregrinus Proteus* written by the satirist Lucian of Samosata some time after the year 165 A.D.; and it was because of these parallels (recognized by Lightfoot and others) that the German scholar D. Völter, in his *Polykarp und Ignatius* (Leiden, 1910) and elsewhere, had assigned all the epistles save *Romans* to Peregrinus, who was portrayed by Lucian as a wandering renegade who became an apostate Christian and later an exhibitionist Cynic philosopher. But Völter's position has never been taken seriously.

In conclusion, despite the attempts of even modern scholars like M. Simon and H. Grégoire to cast doubt on the authenticity of the Ignatian corpus as exhibited in the Middle version (and with this position I once had some sympathy), the line established by Zahn, Funk, Harnack, and Lightfoot has held firm. It is true that we are still unsure of the dates of Ignatius' incumbency as bishop and patriarch of Antioch, and whether he was actually the second or third bishop after St. Peter. It is true that we are still unsure of the text of Polycarp's letter. But all the elements which are so characteristic of all Ignatius' authentic letters—his martyr mysticism, his poetic imagery, his doctrine of the two harmonies (within God and within the hierarchic organization of the Church), his relationship to Jewish mysticism and pre-Valentinian Gnosticism, even the parallels found later in Lucian—all these can well be reconciled with a date late in the reign of

Trajan or even early Hadrian. Certainly, from the stylistic point of view⁸ the letters of the Middle version all seem the work of one man. The upshot of it all would seem to be that, short of some new dramatic discovery, the problem of the Ignatian letters has come full cycle, and the question should perhaps be henceforth considered closed. There is still work ahead in the penetration of the full meaning of Ignatius' message; but for this task we would do well to take Dr. Corwin's monograph as our guide. Like John and Paul, Ignatius was one of the first ecstasies of the early Church; and that his few pages should arouse so much controversy and analysis is suggestive of his very importance as a witness to the mystery of Christianity.

APPENDIX

A CHECK LIST OF THE CHRISTIANS MENTIONED IN THE
IGNATIAN-POLYCARP CORPUS

- ALCE: a Christian lady of Smyrna, friend of Polycarp and Ignatius: *Smyrn.* 13, 2; *Ad Polyc.* 8, 3; cf. *Mart. Polyc.* 17, 2.
- APOLLONIUS: presbyter of Magnesia: *Magn.* 2, 1.
- ATTALUS: a Smyrnaean: *Ad Polyc.* 8, 1.
- BASSUS: presbyter of Magnesia: *Magn.* 2, 1.
- BURRHUS (BURRUS, BORRUS): a deacon of Ephesus, scribe and secretary to Ignatius: *Phil.* 11, 2; *Smyrn.* 12, 1; *Eph.* 2, 1.
- CRESCENS: bearer of Polycarp's letter: *Ad Philipp.* 14, 1. Cf. 2 Tim 4:10.
- CROCUS: a Christian of Ephesus: *Rom.* 10, 1.
- DAMAS: the youthful bishop of Magnesia: *Magn.* 2, 1 (not to be confused with the Demas of Paul, Phm 24; and cf. 2 Tim 4:9).
- DAPHNOS (or -IS?): perhaps also known as Eutechnus, a Smyrnaean: *Smyrn.* 13, 2.
- EUPLUS: an Ephesian: *Eph.* 2, 1.
- EUTECHNUS: cf. Daphnos.
- FRONTO: an Ephesian: *Eph.* 2, 1.

⁸ It is interesting to note that this is confirmed by my own check of the clausulae in the Ignatian letters according to W. Meyer's system for counting accentual clause-endings (see my article in *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 17 [1956] 221-22, for an explanation of the system; and cf. also V. Buchheit, *Studien zur Methodios von Olympos* [Berlin, 1958] pp. 114 ff., where Buchheit explains the use of the ending-formulae in textual criticism). Now, using the numerals 0 to 6 to designate the seven types of clause-ending, we find that in Ignatius, *Eph.*, the order is 3 2 1 4 0 5 6; in *Magn.*, *Trall.*, *Philad.*, and *Ad Polyc.*, the order of frequency is approximately the same for each epistle, namely, 2 3 1 4 0 5 6, which barely differs from the formula for *Eph.*; *Rom.* and *Smyrn.* each have the same pattern, namely, 1 2 3 0 4 5 6. But from the percentages for each type there is hardly a major difference among all the seven epistles, since endings 2 and 3 always make up about 48-62% of the total. From the analysis of clausula-frequency, therefore, there is good probability that all the letters were written by the same person.

GAVIA: see Tavia.

IRENÆUS: of Smyrna, disciple of Polycarp: *Mart. Polyc.* 22, 2.

ONESIMUS: bishop of Ephesus: *Eph.* 2, 1; 6, 2 (perhaps identical with Onesimus, the slave of the Pauline epistle to Philemon; cf. Col. 4:9).

PHILO: a deacon of Cilicia: *Phil.* 11, 1.

PIONIUS: bishop and disciple of Polycarp: *Mart. Polyc.* 22, 3.

POLYCARP: bishop of Smyrna: *Ad Polyc.* (Introd.); author of *Letter to the Philip-
pians* which mentions Ignatius as a martyr (9, 1), and also as apparently alive
(13, 1).

RHEUS AGATHOPUS: a Christian follower of Ignatius, perhaps of Antioch: *Phil.*
11, 1.

RUFUS: a martyr mentioned with Ignatius: Polycarp, *Ad Philipp.* 9, 1.

TAVIA (or, more likely, GAVIA): a lady of Smyrna: *Smyrn.* 13, 2.

VALENS: an apostate presbyter of Philippi: Polycarp, *Ad Philipp.* 11, 1.

ZOSIMUS: a martyr mentioned with Ignatius and Rufus: Polycarp, *Ad Philipp.*
9, 1.

ZOTIION: a deacon of Magnesia: *Magn.* 2, 1.

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