

The Epistles Of Ignatius

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Ignatius is the only Bishop of the early Church in the East whose writings have come down to us¹, and of them we only possess a collection of seven letters—five written to Churches in the East in which he was interested (the Churches of the Ephesians, Magnesians, Trallians, Philadelphians, and Smyræans), one written to Rome, and one written to Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna. They were all composed when he was on his journey to Rome where he had been sent to be thrown to the beasts on the charge that he was a Christian. Their date is about A.D. 112.

As Ignatius was Bishop of Antioch, where the Gospel was first freely preached to the Gentiles, where Peter and Paul had both taught, and where some modern critics believe that the First Gospel was put in its final form, it is reasonable to suppose that his knowledge of Christianity and its origin comprised most of what was known about it at the beginning of the second century.

But in studying these Epistles it must be kept in mind that they are not formal doctrinal treatises. They were written at a crisis in the life of their author, probably in a hurry and certainly with a clearly defined object. This was, first of all, to exhort the Churches to unity under the control of their Bishop and Presbyters; secondly, to warn them against docetic teaching and Judaism; thirdly, to thank the members of these Churches for their help and encouragement, to commend them for their faith and to ask for their prayers, and, in the Epistle to the Romans, to request the members of that Church not to intercede for the writer with the authorities, and so deprive him of the honour of martyrdom.

The circumstances under which these Epistles were written and the objects which the writer had in view account in part for the few verbal quotations from the New Testament which are found in them. Even the Old Testament is less quoted than is usual in writings of this period, such as the First Epistle of Clement.

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There are certain obvious references to the outline of the story of Jesus as told in the First Gospel and some unmistakable quotations from the Epistles of St. Paul, but these are introduced incidentally, as any writer might use a short biblical phrase, because it accurately expressed his meaning. These quotations are seldom, if ever, used as proof texts in the way in which the writers of the Epistles in the New Testament use quotations from the Old Testament.

But anyone who uses a concordance in reading the Epistles of Ignatius cannot fail to notice to what an extent their vocabulary is based on that of the Pauline Epistles, and how far the metaphors and illustrations which are found in them are in the background of the thought of Ignatius. This is true to a lesser extent of the language and metaphors found in the First Epistle of Peter, the Epistle of James and the Epistle to the Hebrews. Ignatius adds little of his own except some fantastic metaphors and some strange tricks of Syrian rhetoric. He speaks of

¹ With the exception of the single Epistle of Polycarp, written after the martyrdom of Ignatius.

Christians as stones of the temple of God, just as St. Peter does, but he adds that these stones are raised to the heights by the engine of Jesus Christ, which is the cross, by means of a rope, which is the Holy Spirit. Faith is described as the windlass, and love as the way which leads to God (*Ad Eph.* ix).

Again he is not satisfied with the simple and dignified story of the star which led the wise men to Bethlehem as told in the First Gospel. He writes: "A star shone forth in heaven that surpassed all the stars, and its light was beyond description and its novelty caused perplexity. All the rest of the stars together with the sun and moon danced round the star, but the star surpassed them all in brightness" (*Ad Eph.* xix).

Apart from this rhetorical embellishment he keeps very close to the Gospel story as far as he mentions any incident in it. The birth of Christ from a Virgin is stressed (*Ad Eph.* xviii; xix; *Ad Smyr.* i; *Ad Trall.* ix). His baptism is mentioned with an obvious reference to Matt. iii. 15 (*Ad Smyr.* i). As a refutation to Docetism it is several times stated that Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate (*Ad Mag.* xi; *Ad Trall.* ix; *Ad Smyr.* i), and even the trial by Herod is mentioned, as if it was desired to fix once for all that Jesus was a character in history who lived and died at a definite point of time.

This same thought probably accounts for the mention of Pilate in the Apostles' Creed. Naturally the reality of the

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crucifixion and the resurrection is also emphatically asserted (*Ad Phil.* viii). There is a curious amplification of the story of the resurrection appearance as told by St. Luke (xxiv. 39-43) in *Ad Smyr.* iii, where Ignatius says that when Jesus appeared to those about Peter, He said, "Take, handle me and see that I am not a spirit without a body". This is the only place in which Ignatius may be quoting an extra-canonical book. There is also a probable reference to Acts x. 41 in this passage.

Ignatius was obviously familiar with what modern theologians call the *kerygma*, but he takes it for granted, except when he lays stress on the historical occurrence of the principal events recorded in it as a refutation of Docetism. He seems to be less concerned with the *didache*, but there is an obvious reference to the duty of meekness in the face of persecution in *Ad Eph.* x, where imitation of the Lord in striving to see who can suffer the greater wrong is also commended.

It is not that Ignatius is indifferent to the moral teaching of Jesus; it is always present as a background to his thought, but his object in writing his letters leads him, as we have said, to deal much more with the, necessity for unity and submission to the authority of the officials of the Churches in view of the danger of heresy than with questions of morals. He hardly mentions the sins of the flesh, and it is remarkable how he praises Churches in which St. Paul and the writer of the Apocalypse had found so much to blame. There is little trace of the doctrine of the Second Coming, except a passing reference to the "last time" in *Ad Eph.* x.

Traces of Johannine thought and language are present, but not obvious. There may be a reference to John xii. 10 in *Ad Eph.* vi. The words "The Spirit knoweth whence it cometh and whither it goeth" in *Ad Phil.* vii are the only certain quotation of a phrase from the Fourth Gospel. But single words which suggest acquaintance with its thought are not uncommon.

Jesus Christ is called the Word in *Ad Mag.* viii, and in the Introduction of *Ad Smyr.* The Magnesians are bidden to be obedient to their Bishop and to one another, as Jesus Christ was to the Father according to the flesh (*Ad Mag.* xiii). There is a reference to the hatred which the world feels to Christianity in *Ad Rom.* iii which recalls John xv. 18 and xvii. 14. The reference to the travail pains which Ignatius feels in *Ad Rom.* vi may allude to the reference to the woman in travail in John

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xvi. 21. There is a reference to "living water" in *Ad Rom.* vi, which recalls several passages in the Gospel.

In *Ad Phil.* ix Christ is called the Door of the Father, an obvious reference to John x. 7. In *Ad Smyr.* v those who do not admit that Jesus bore human flesh are referred to as blasphemers. This closely resembles the thought to be found in John i. 14 and in John iv. 2. In *Ad Trall.* v Ignatius writes: "Am I not able to write unto you heavenly things (ἐπουράνια)? "which looks like a reminiscence of John iii. 12. But this is followed by a reference to the "ordering of angels and the musterings of heavenly rulers" which is almost the only phrase in the Epistles which suggests a familiarity with Gnosticism apart from Docetism.

The passage in *Ad Phil.* vii: "Become imitators of Jesus Christ, as He was of His Father", suggests a thought which is found in several passages in the Fourth Gospel, especially John vii. 16 and viii. 29. In *Ad Mag.* i Ignatius prays for the unity of the Churches with Jesus and the Father in a way which recalls the high-priestly prayer in John xvii. ii. The words, "No man who professes faith lives in sin", in *Ad. Eph.* xiv, are the same, as far as the thought goes, as 1 John iii. 9 and v. 18.

The following doctrinal points seem worthy of note. In *Ad Mag.* xiii the words, "Be diligent therefore to be confirmed in the teachings of the Lord and the Apostles, that in everything that you do you may prosper in flesh and spirit, by faith and love, in the Son and Father and in the Spirit, in the beginning and the end", are in line with the Trinitarian formulae in Matt. xxviii. 19 and 2 Cor. xiii. 13. Christ is regularly referred to as God in such phrases as, "In the will of the Father and of Jesus Christ our God" (*Ad Eph.*, introd.), and again in section i "Being imitators of God and having your hearts kindled in the blood of God." In *Ad Smyr.* i we read, "I give glory to Jesus Christ the God who bestowed such wisdom upon you"; and in *Ad Rom.* vi, "Permit me to be an imitator of the passion of my God".

But Ignatius had a sufficient tinge of Greek philosophy to write: "Look for Him who is above seasons, the eternal, the invisible, who became visible for our sake, who is beyond the touch of our hands, beyond suffering, who yet suffered for us and who endured in every way for us" (*Ad. Polyc.* iii). He

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boldly accepted the paradox that the Divine Nature, which seemed to Aristotle to have no connection with the sensible and ever changing world, and which seemed to the Epicureans to have no care for men, and which even he regarded as ἀποθής, became capable of suffering and change for our sake. He clearly saw the danger of Docetism which made the earthly life of Christ to be a mere show or economy, and in nearly every one of his Epistles, especially in that to the Smyrnæans, he insists that Christ was truly

of the race of David, according to the flesh, the Son of God according to His will and power, really born of a virgin, baptised by John that all righteousness might be fulfilled by Him, and under Pontius Pilate and Herod the Tetrarch truly nailed for us in the flesh. He truly suffered and truly raised Himself up, and it is not true, as some unbelievers affirm, that he suffered in semblance. Ignatius says that he knows and believes that Christ was in the flesh, even after the resurrection. He ascribes the courage with which the Apostles faced death to the fact that they touched Christ after the resurrection and ate and drank with Him, a statement which recalls many passages in the Gospels, though it quotes none of them.

He also warns his readers against Judaism. He tells the Philadelphians not to hear any man who interprets Judaism (vi). He reminds the Magnesians that those who lived in ancient observances attained unto newness of hope by no longer keeping the Sabbath, but by living a life ruled by the Lord's Day, "wherein our life had its rising through Him and His death" (ix). In a passage which recalls several figures to be found in the Gospels, he exhorts them to lay aside the evil leaven and to turn to the new leaven which is Jesus Christ and to be salted in Him, "that no one among you become corrupt, for by your savour you shall be proved" (*Ad Mag.* x).

These quotations give a very good idea of the way in which Ignatius uses the Gospels. The main outline of the story is in his mind and also some striking parts of the teaching, which he shapes to suit the purpose which he had in view, namely to insist on the importance of regarding the matter contained in the Gospels not as a myth, but as a true history of what really happened on this earth. One of the most remarkable features of his teaching is the complete absence of allegory, which became such an obstacle to an intelligent interpretation of the Gospels in Alexandria, and from there spread to the whole mediæval

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Church. Another instructive example of the way in which he handles the Gospel narrative is found in *Ad Mag.* ix, where we read: "For the prophets also became His disciples and awaited in the spirit His coming to teach them. And therefore He for whom they rightly waited came and raised them from the dead." This seems to refer rather to the story in Matt. xxvii. 52 than to the passages referring to the preaching to the dead in 1 Peter, for in them there is no question of preaching to the righteous dead.

In view of the way in which Ignatius makes use of the New Testament, his failure to quote verbally from the Fourth Gospel, except in one possible instance, is not as significant as it is generally made out to be.

It seems certain that he knew the First Gospel, but he nowhere uses it as Justin does, still less as Irenæus and later writers do. He does not seem to see much force in a written record as compared with oral tradition: the faith of the Churches as preserved by the Bishop and the other officials. Even with regard to the Old Testament his attitude is peculiar. He speaks disparagingly in *Ad Smyr.* v of those who did not believe the prophets or the law of Moses and who do not now believe the Gospel and the evidence to be derived from the sufferings of the Christians. In this passage he seems to be speaking, as usual, of the Docetists. But in *Ad Phil.* viii he says: "I have heard some saying, 'Unless I find it in the archives (ἐν τοῖς ἀρχείοις), I do not believe it in the Gospel'. And when I say, 'It is written', they answer,

'That depends'. But my archives are Jesus Christ: the inviolable archives are His cross, death and resurrection, and the faith which is through Him. In these I desire to be justified, through your prayer." This passage may point to a dispute with Jews or Judaisers who will receive nothing as true which is not foretold in the Old Testament. Ignatius obviously prefers to found his faith directly on the historical facts of the life of Christ rather than on the fact that these were foretold in the Old Testament, and in this he differs from most other early Christian writers.

His Epistles are full of words and metaphors which are found in the Epistles of St. Paul. There can be no reasonable doubt that he knew and used the First Epistle to the Corinthians and the Epistle to the Ephesians. But when men are speaking of similar subjects they tend to use similar words, and if Ignatius

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reverenced St. Paul and St. Peter, as he certainly did, he would quite naturally use the words and figures of speech which they used, especially as he was obviously a man more remarkable for zeal and orthodoxy than for originality. Among Pauline words used by Ignatius may be mentioned: ἀδόκιμος, ἀναζωπυρίζειν, ἀναψύχειν, ἀνθρωπαρέσκειν, ἀπερίσπαστος, ἔκτρομα, ἐνότης, θηρωμαχεῖν, καινὸς ἄνθρωπος, μέλη Χριστοῦ, παρουσία, περίψημα, προορίζειν. Among Ignatian words used by the writers of the Epistle to the Hebrews, the Epistle of James and the First Epistle of Peter may be mentioned: ἀδιάκριτος, ἀποδοκιμάζειν, ἀρχιερεύς applied to Christ, βοτάνη, ὡς ὄντες λίθοι ναοῦ. It is curious that Ignatius, who undoubtedly distinguished between the Son and the Spirit, should use language very similar to the much-discussed phrase used by St. Paul in 2 Cor. iii. 17 and write: ἔρρωσθε ἐν ὁμονοίᾳ θεοῦ, κεκτημένοι ἀδιάκριτον πνεῦμα, ὅς ἐστιν Ἰησοῦς Χριστός (*Ad Mag.* xv).

But if Ignatius used the Pauline vocabulary, he was singularly little affected by the distinctive teaching of St. Paul. He is not in the least interested, as far as we can gather from these writings, in the rejection of the Jews, original sin, predestination or justification by faith only. He seems to place his hope of becoming a real disciple, and even his hope of salvation, on his approaching martyrdom by being devoured by the beasts in the amphitheatre. In this Professor Gwatkin considers that he was going beyond the common opinion of the time, which bade men endure martyrdom, if it was necessary, rather than deny Christ, but not seek it.

It is certainly remarkable that two men, such as St. Paul and Ignatius, both men of ardent temperament and sincerely devoted to their Master, should have looked on the essential meaning of their faith so differently. Ignatius actually quotes the words of Cor. iv. 4, "but I am not hereby justified", in *Ad Rom.* v, and implies that his justification does not depend on his patient endurance of the insults of his guards, though his advance in discipleship does, but on what he is to suffer from the beasts. St. Paul, on the other hand, uses them to show that he depends for justification on the judgment of Christ, and not on the fact that his conscience does not bear witness against him with regard to his conduct as a minister of Christ.

Ignatius shows no sign of a belief in the impossibility of the forgiveness of post-baptismal sin which so much interested the

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Church of Rome when Hermas wrote the *Shepherd* in order to modify the extremist view to a slight extent. He holds that there is hope of repentance for those outside the Church (*Ad Eph.* x) and for those inside the Church, provided that on repentance they turn to the unity of God and the council of the Bishop (*Ad Phil.* viii). He regards the repentance of heretics as difficult, but not beyond the power of Christ, our true life, to effect (*Ad Smyr.* iv). He obviously considers the celibate state as preferable, but regards marriage, so long as it is contracted with the approval of the Bishop, as a holy estate (*Ad Polyc.* v). Strangely enough, he is careful to warn Polycarp not to despise slaves, and he does not approve of slaves being freed out of the common fund. Like St. Paul and St. Peter, he commands slaves to serve to the glory of God, that they may obtain a better freedom (*Ad Polyc.* iv).

Ignatius shows little interest in baptism,² but has several references to the Eucharist. In *Ad Eph.* xx he speaks of the Christians "breaking one bread which is the medicine of immortality and the antidote for death, but life in Jesus Christ for ever". In *Ad Smyr.* vi he says that the heretics "keep away from the Eucharist and prayer, because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ". In *Ad Phil.* iv we read: "Be zealous therefore to use one Eucharist, for there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ and one cup of His blood with a view to unity: one altar, as there is one Bishop together with the presbyters and the deacons, my fellow-slaves, in order that you may do whatever you do according to God." In *Ad Trall.* viii he attempts an explanation of the Eucharist in an allegorical sense: "Do you therefore take upon yourselves gentleness and renew yourselves in faith which is the flesh of the Lord, and in love which is the blood of Jesus Christ." In *Ad Smyr.* viii we read: "Let that Eucharist be considered valid which is under the Bishop or him to whom he commits it."

From these passages we may gather that Ignatius held a high doctrine with regard to the Eucharist, although it was not in any way formulated into a theory, such as that of transubstantiation; indeed in one place he explains the meaning of the Elements in a manner which in no way suggests any connection with matter. But he shows an advance on any teaching definitely

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contained in the New Testament by laying it down that no Eucharist is valid without the presence of a Bishop or a minister deputed by him.

So far we have found that the opinions of Ignatius are in perfect accord with the general teaching of the New Testament, although they completely lack the form which later councils gave to Christian dogma under the pressure of heresy. But in one respect he does formulate a matter which only appears in embryo in the New Testament and that is the character and powers of the threefold ministry.

Deacons clearly appear in the New Testament as administrators of the property of the Church and as ministers to the poor. Both Bishops and Presbyters are mentioned, but the names seem to be interchangeable. It is assumed that these ministers are ordained by the Apostles, but their functions are not exactly defined.

² He mentions it in *Ad Smyr.* viii: "It is not lawful apart from the Bishop either to baptize or to hold a love-feast."

In Ignatius it is plain that a monarchical Episcopate has been established, at least in the East. The Presbyters are the council of the Bishop. God is the Bishop of all men (*Ad Mag.* iii). The Bishop is almost treated as His representative on earth. Submission to the Bishop is continually commanded, especially with a view to unity and as a protection against heresy. The Church of Smyrna is exhorted to "follow the Bishop, as Jesus Christ followed the Father, and the Presbyters as the Apostles" (viii). "He who does anything without the knowledge of the Bishop serves the devil" (ix). In like manner the Trallians are to "reverence the Bishop, regarding him as a type of the Father, and the Presbyters as the Council of God and the band of the Apostles. Without these there is no Church worthy of the name" (iii). "He that is within the precincts of the altar is pure: he that is without the precincts of the altar is not pure. That is, he who acts in anything apart from the Bishop, the Presbytery and the Deacons is not pure in conscience" (vii).

Ignatius declares that it was the Spirit which made him cry aloud among the Philadelphians, "Do nothing without the Bishop" (vii). Language could hardly be stronger, even among modern Ultramontanes. But the strangest thing is that when Ignatius writes to the Church of Rome, he makes no mention of any Bishop there. Moreover, when Clement writes to the Corinthians he does not write as Bishop, but in the name of the Church. In view of the fact that St. Peter and St. Paul were

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certainly in Rome and in view of the tradition that they appointed a Bishop there and of the archaeological evidence which supports the view that Linus and Clement were persons of importance in the Roman Church, it seems to be going too far to suppose with Canon Streeter and some other critics that the Church of Rome had no monarchical Bishop until the beginning of the second century, and that a Bishop like those which certainly existed in Asia was finally accepted in Rome in consequence of the exhortations of Ignatius and the admiration that was felt for his heroic death. But nothing could be more fatal to the Roman claim that the Bishop of Rome is the supreme head of the Church than the assumption of Ignatius that the Bishop of each several Church is a type of God the Father and his complete omission even to mention a Bishop at Rome. He clearly believes that Peter and Paul went there (*Ad Rom.* iv) and that they had supreme authority there. If he had known that the sovereignty of the whole Church had been vested by Peter in his successor at Rome, is it credible that he would have failed to mention this? We can clearly trace how the pretensions of the Bishop of Rome grew in the second and third century and how the Bishops of the East and such men as Tertullian and Cyprian were not at all prepared to submit to it. But the "silence of Ignatius" is the earliest evidence against this claim, and, coming from a man of his opinions, it is decisive.

To sum up: Ignatius had a firm grasp on the elements of the Christian faith as set out in the New Testament, especially on its historical side. He seems not to have cared to support his beliefs by appeals to proof texts. He relied on the historical tradition which led him to say that he *knew* and believed that Jesus was in the flesh after the resurrection (*Ad Smyr.* iii). He assumes that his readers agree with him, in so far as they are not led away by Docetism. There is no dispute about the outward semblance of the facts of the life of Jesus, but only as to whether it was a reality and not merely a semblance. He is quite certain of the divine origin of the monarchical Episcopate and of its essential character, and expects his readers to agree with him in this, in so far as they are orthodox believers. His sincerity cannot be doubted, nor can it reasonably be questioned that the seven Epistles now commonly ascribed to him are by

the same hand. They are most valuable evidence for the general belief of the Church of the early second century, as they are so

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spontaneous and so obviously not formal theological treatises. They are certainly a light shining in a dark place, and the courage and spirit which are displayed in them are sufficient to account for the triumph of the Church in a world which had lost hope and which was degraded beyond all hope of recovery, if left to depend on its own strength.

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Prepared for the Web in December 2007 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

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