

*'This book is the best available  
introduction to the world of  
Ignatius of Antioch.'*

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# IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH

A Martyr Bishop and the  
origin of Episcopacy



T&T CLARK THEOLOGY

ALLEN BRENT



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*In piam memoriam*



# Contents

Preface	ix
Abbreviations	xi
1 The Recovery of Ignatius' Genuine Letters	1
2 Ignatius' Personal History and the Church at Antioch	14
3 The Choreography of the Martyr Procession	44
4 Martyr Procession and Eucharist: The Christian Mysteries	71
5 Recent Attacks on the Authenticity of the Ignatian Letters	95
6 Ignatius and Polycarp	144
7 In Conclusion	159
Select Bibliography and Further Reading	163
Index	169



# Preface

Since the immediate aftermath to the Reformation in the West, the letters of Ignatius of Antioch have proven a subject for continuing controversy. Eusebius claimed that Ignatius had been, with Polycarp, a companion of the apostles, and that his putative date made his writing immediately consequent to the believed dates of the New Testament documents. Ignatius thus became a crown witness for the historic demand that churches should be ruled by bishops who are the successors both to the apostles and to the ministry entrusted to them.

But clearly the letters had experienced a long and complex reception history even before the Reformation which adds to their mystery. Such was the perceived importance of these documents that what appears to have been their original edition was considerably expanded, and its Christology significantly modified, in the course of the fourth and fifth centuries. Furthermore, new letters forged in Ignatius' name were added to bring the original seven up to a total of 13. Neither the original edition, nor its expansion, nor its forged additions were to lack patristic citations as the centuries rolled on.

But what of the original edition that we know today as the 'middle recension' because of a short, abbreviated Syriac version discovered in the nineteenth century? Since the time of Archbishop James Ussher and Nicolaus Vedelius in the seventeenth century, and their arguments with Presbyterian and Puritan divines such as John Milton, controversy has raged over the authenticity of the middle recension. Was Eusebius wrong to date the correspondence so early, and was not Ignatius a fictional character created in order to give substance to a later church order that had nothing to do with the age

of the New Testament and its allegedly pristine purity? At one point, before the 1980s, it had seemed that the 300-year-old controversy had been laid to rest in the work of two outstanding, nineteenth-century scholars, Bishop Joseph Lightfoot from England and Theodore Zahn from Germany. The scholarly consensus concurred with their defence of the authenticity of Ignatius' letters, and their solution to the problems that these had raised.

But in the course of the final quarter of the twentieth century, a number of scholars whose work I will discuss were to revive once again the arguments against the authenticity of Ignatius' letters and of their Eusebian date.

In my defence of the Lightfoot–Zahn consensus, I have not sought to present yet another vindication that revives old arguments in favour of that consensus in reply to old arguments to the contrary that have arisen from their graves at the hands of modern scholars. Rather, I have sought to use primary evidence for Ignatius' background mainly brought to light in the course of the twentieth century, and therefore not available to Lightfoot and his predecessors. The discovery and classification of epigraphic material has led to the creation of a new, non-literary corpus of evidence that is now larger than our surviving classical literary sources.

In my recent book *Ignatius of Antioch and the Second Sophistic* (STAC 36; Mohr Siebeck, 2006), and in previously published articles, I have sought to use extensive epigraphic remains in order to establish the background to Ignatius in the life and culture of the Hellenistic city-states of Asia Minor, and to argue that Ignatius' understanding of church order is to be understood in light of that life and culture. In such a context we can, I believe, satisfactorily resolve long-standing problems about the Ignatian correspondence that have mistakenly led some scholars into forgery hypotheses of various kinds.

This present volume offers my argument to a more general audience not necessarily involved in the minutiae of patristic scholarship but interested in the wider historical and theological context in which the letters of Ignatius are still relevant. I hope that my treatment will help to explain the details of the various puzzling aspects of Ignatius, and my own solution to them, to general historians and students of theology, including undergraduates and first-year higher-degree students studying early Christian life and thought.

# Abbreviations

## ***Early Christian and Jewish Writers***

<i>Adv. Haer.</i>	Irenaeus, <i>Adversus Haereses</i>
<i>Antiqu.</i>	Josephus, <i>Antiquitates</i>
<i>CA</i>	<i>Constitutiones Apostolicae</i>
<i>Cor.</i>	Clement of Rome, <i>Corinthians</i>
<i>Did.</i>	<i>Didache</i>
<i>Didasc.</i>	<i>Didascalia Apostolorum</i>
<i>Eph.</i>	Ignatius, <i>Letter to the Ephesians</i>
<i>HE</i>	Eusebius, <i>Historia Ecclesiastica</i>
<i>Hom. in Luc.</i>	Origen, <i>Homilia in Lucam</i>
<i>Magn.</i>	Ignatius, <i>Letter to the Magnesians</i>
<i>Man.</i>	Hermas, <i>Mandate</i>
<i>Mart. Pol.</i>	<i>Martyrdom of Polycarp</i>
<i>Phil.</i>	Polycarp, <i>Letter to the Philippians</i>
<i>Phld.</i>	Ignatius, <i>Letter to the Philadelphians</i>
<i>Pol.</i>	Ignatius, <i>Letter to Polycarp</i>
<i>Prol. Cant.</i>	Origen, <i>Prologus Canticorum</i>
<i>Ref.</i>	Pseudo-Hippolytus, <i>Refutatio Omnium Haeresium</i>
<i>Rom.</i>	Ignatius, <i>Letter to the Romans</i>
<i>Sim.</i>	Hermas, <i>Similitude</i>
<i>Smyrn.</i>	Ignatius, <i>Letter to the Smyrnaeans</i>
<i>Trall.</i>	Ignatius, <i>Letter to the Trallians</i>
<i>Vir. Ill.</i>	Jerome, <i>De Viris Illustribus</i>
<i>Vis.</i>	Hermas, <i>Vision</i>

## ***Classical Works and Epigraphy***

<i>Coron.</i>	Demosthenes, <i>De Corona</i>
<i>Dig.</i>	Justinian, <i>Di esta</i>
<i>Dom.</i>	Suetonius, <i>Domitian</i>
<i>Eratost.</i>	Lysias, <i>Contra Eratosthenem</i>
<i>Fam.</i>	Cicero, <i>Ad Familiares</i>

<i>IGRR</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Graecae ad Res Romanas Pertinentes</i>
<i>Met.</i>	Ovid, <i>Metamorphoses</i>
<i>Or.</i>	<i>Oratio</i>
<i>Peregr.</i>	Lucian of Samosata, <i>De Morte Peregrinni</i>
<i>Pis.</i>	Cicero, <i>Oratio in Pisonem</i>
<i>SEG</i>	<i>Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum</i>
<i>VA</i>	Philostratus, <i>Vita Apollonii</i>

### **Other Abbreviations**

<i>ANRW</i>	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt</i>
<i>Aug</i>	<i>Augustinianum</i>
<i>HThR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>JECS</i>	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
<i>JEH</i>	<i>Journal of Ecclesiastical History</i>
<i>JRH</i>	<i>Journal of Religious History</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>JThS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>RivAC</i>	<i>Rivista archeologica christiana</i>
<i>SecCent</i>	<i>Second Century</i>
<i>STAC</i>	<i>Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum</i>
<i>VCh</i>	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
<i>VChSup</i>	<i>Vigiliae Christianae, Supplement Series</i>
<i>WUNT</i>	<i>Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament</i>
<i>ZAC</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum</i>

# 1

## The Recovery of Ignatius' Genuine Letters

On 30 January 1649 the young John Locke, the future political philosopher, gathered together with his fellow-pupils at Westminster School at their headmaster's bidding to attend public prayers for the king.<sup>1</sup> Two hours later he heard the shocking announcement about what had occurred in nearby Whitehall on a scaffold erected in front of the Banqueting House. Parliament, in a civil war with its monarch, had just executed King Charles I. Four years previously, on 10 January 1645, Archbishop Laud, primate of the Church of England by law established, had been executed on Tower Hill by the same parliament. The civil law was being challenged by a parliament, which, like Locke in the future, believed that political authority was a question of a social contract and not divine right. Church law similarly was not merely being challenged but revoked. Bishops did not rule over the Church by divine right as successors of the apostles: presbyters as a collective body were to replace them in a Presbyterian form of church government.

The political dispute was therefore also a theological dispute: whether to be a true Church you needed a hierarchical structure of two archbishops, bishops, priests, and deacons, descended from the ancient and allegedly 'undivided' church before the Reformation. And the crown witness in such a debate, appealed to by monarchists and defenders of the established church against a Puritan and

<sup>1</sup> M. Cranston, *John Locke: A Biography* (New York: Arno Press, 1979), p. 20.

Presbyterian parliament, was the corpus of letters of Ignatius of Antioch.

Ignatius, as we are informed by Eusebius, whose church history is the earliest to have survived as a whole, wrote his letters in the reign of Trajan (AD 108–17):

After Nerva had reigned for a little more than a year, he was succeeded by Trajan ... Moreover at the time mentioned, Ignatius was famous as the second bishop of Antioch after St Peter ... At this time flourished in Asia Polycarp, companion of the apostles, who had been appointed to the bishopric of the church in Smyrna by the eyewitnesses and ministers of the Lord. Distinguished men at the same time were Papias ... and Ignatius ... The story goes that he was sent from Syria to Rome to be eaten by wild beasts in testimony to Christ. He was taken through Asia under most careful guard, and strengthened by his speech and exhortation the diocese of each city in which he stayed.

Eusebius then mentions specifically seven letters of Ignatius written to Ephesus mentioning Bishop Onesimus, to Magnesia and Bishop Damas, to Tralles and Bishop Polybius, to Rome, to Philadelphia, to Smyrna, and to Polycarp its bishop.<sup>2</sup>

Ignatius claims that for a church to deserve the name or to be correctly summoned together, it needs one bishop served by a council of priests (or presbyters), and attended by a number of deacons:

So then let everyone respect the deacons as they would Jesus Christ, and also the bishop who is to create an image of the Father; and let them respect the presbyters as the council of God and as the band of the apostles. Without these orders, a church is not called together.<sup>3</sup>

The parliamentary Puritans of the seventeenth century might object that though the term 'bishop' was used in the New Testament, it was simply a generic term for a number of church elders (or 'presbyters') who together as a council of equals allegedly ruled an originally 'presbyterian' church. Thus there was no 'divine right' of bishops any more than a 'divine right' of kings apart from a social contract freely entered into with conditions protecting the subject's rights.

<sup>2</sup> Eusebius, *HE* III.21–22 and 26.

<sup>3</sup> Ignatius, *Trall.* 3.1.

But here the defenders of episcopal church government could appeal to Ignatius, whose works, though not in the New Testament, were nevertheless close to the apostolic age. Eusebius, as we saw, numbered Ignatius and Polycarp as immediate associates of the apostles. Indeed Peter himself, Eusebius claimed, had consecrated Ignatius' immediate predecessor, Hero, as bishop of Antioch. Such men had championed orthodoxy against heresy. Therefore it seemed right to claim Ignatius as the defender of the episcopal form of the government of the Church of England. In the light of such a witness, the preamble of its reformed prayer book seemed fully justified in asserting that:

It is euident unto all men, diligently readinge holye Scripture and auncient aucthours, that from the Apostles tyme there hath bene these orders of Ministers in Christ's Church: Bishoppes, Priestes, and Deacons[.]

The prayer book continued that what followed was to be done 'to the entent that these orders shoulde bee continued, and reuerentlye used, and esteemed, in this Church of England'.<sup>4</sup>

It is at this point in our story that we meet with Archbishop James Ussher, who began the modern study of Ignatius in England. Ussher was devoted to the royalist cause and was to serve as the chaplain of Charles I for his last days on earth in his imprisonment by parliament on the Isle of Wight. In seeking to defend intellectually the claims of episcopacy founded on the Ignatian writings, he was faced with a very great problem. There existed from the Middle Ages a corpus of 13 letters, which I set out as follows:

1. *Ephesians*
2. *Romans*
3. *Trallians*
4. *Magesians*
5. *Philadelphians*
6. *Smyrnaeans*
7. *Polycarp*
8. *Tarsians*

<sup>4</sup> *The First and Second Prayer Books of King Edward the Sixth* (London: Everyman and New York: Dent, 1938), pp. 292, 438.

9. ***Philippians***
10. ***Antiochenes***
11. ***Hero***
12. ***Mary to Ignatius***
13. ***Ignatius to Mary***

So to Ussher's contemporaries there were available six letters in addition to those listed in Eusebius, printed here in boldface.

Furthermore, in manuscripts containing all or some of these additional letters, there are expanded versions of those that do appear in Eusebius. Which particular list are we to accept, the seven of Eusebius or the late medieval 13? In what form are we to accept the former, the longer or the shorter form? Ussher was basing his defence of the Anglican hierarchy on the antiquity of these letters. Yet how could one be certain in view of these facts that they had not been changed and distorted over the course of time so that their originals were irrecoverable? John Milton, in his tract attacking episcopacy directed particularly at Ussher, had sneered:

To what end then should they cite him [Ignatius] as authentic for episcopacy when they cannot know what is authentic of him? ... Had God ever intended that we should have sought any part of useful instruction from Ignatius, doubtless he would not so ill provided for our knowledge as to send him to our hands in this broken and disjointed plight<sup>5</sup>

Both Ussher and Milton were living at a time when the impact of the Renaissance was being felt, and techniques of literary criticism were being developed in historical research. Previously quotations were taken from all 13 letters, such as St Bernard of Clairvaux's references to Mary.<sup>6</sup> But following the Reformation, an intellectual scepticism about the authenticity of the corpus of early literature in general, as it had come down to us, had set in.

It is hard to underestimate the significance for the recovery of early Christian history made by the impact of such literary criticism,

<sup>5</sup> John Milton, *Of Prelatical Episcopacy*, quoted in J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers: A Revised Text with Introductions, Notes, Dissertations, and Translations. Part I: St. Clement of Rome. Part II: St. Ignatius and St. Polycarp*, 2nd edn (London: MacMillan, 1890), I, p. 231.

<sup>6</sup> Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, II.1, pp. 224–25.

comparing work with work, and version with version, in order to establish the original version and to chart its alterations over the centuries. If you look today at that great nineteenth-century Catholic work Migne's *Patrologia*, you will find the original chronological arrangement of all the works attributed to all the Church Fathers, even though the author has indicated the spurious character of some of them. Thus along with the entire corpus of Ignatian letters we find also printed the forged letters attributed to early second-century popes such as Evaristus, Alexander and Sixtus.

These so-called 'papal decretals' were ninth-century forgeries whose first quotations date from AD 853. The otherwise unknown Isidorus Mercator claims to be the scribe who collected them together for publication. Such forgeries reflect church order and authority as it existed then, rather than at the time of their putatively second-century authors. But imagine now the effect of the production of such a forged literature on the late medieval historical consciousness.

Since there was no established historical and literary-critical methodology for analysing the differences between the hand of the forger and that of the original author, the impression given was that the past had always been like the present with very little change. Eusebius, indeed, had long contributed to the development of a view of the past and present fused into a timeless, ongoing present. For Eusebius, in writing the first church history as early as AD 318, had simply assumed that the church of the first century had been organized precisely like the church of his own time. Thus if bishops ruled the Church in the fourth century, convened ecclesiastical councils to put down heresy, deferred to the bishop of Rome as the central see of the empire, etc., their predecessors had acted in the same way with the same powers.

There was no historical development of such ecclesiastical institutions to be traced by the critical study of historical sources that as yet did not exist. It was only when critical literary and historical methodologies came to be generally used by historians that the medieval consciousness of a timeless historical present could give way to a consciousness of historical development. The medieval historical consciousness was then specifically witnessed in the reflections of Ussher's predecessors on Ignatius, who quote from 13 letters composed and embellished over a thousand years, and

regard him with Eusebius as a companion of the apostles who could thus bear sure witness to their support for medieval episcopacy and orthodoxy. For them past and present are fused together into one timeless present moment and Ignatius can appear to speak with a voice that is unconditioned by his real place in past history.

It is not without significance that such a medieval consciousness has been reborn in our time in the writings of post-modernists who deny the possibility of any historical objectivity. Thus we are invited just to respond to the page as we read it and generate what meanings they suggest to us unfettered by the restrictions of a critical history. People who boast of teaching texts and not periods of history suffer from the illusion of having advanced to some new position, but are fated simply to lapse into the pre-historical consciousness witnessed in the late Middle Ages. Such is our fate once we abandon any form of a historico-critical methodology.

Ussher's work on Ignatius belongs to the Renaissance, which began the development of such a critical methodology, and the liberation of late medieval consciousness from its ahistorical dream world. Only by distinguishing the genuine corpus of letters of Ignatius from added forgeries, and then the genuine letters from textual additions and alterations by later scribes, could the real, historical Ignatius emerge and his original ideas be studied in their true historical context freed from later distortions. Ussher has had a very bad press because of his claim, based upon analysis of the chronology of the patriarchs in the book of Genesis, that the world was created in 4004 BC. Indeed, in the light of this he cannot be regarded as having any general concept of development. But in respect to Ignatius, he was to assist in such a project because of his skill at textual criticism, which places his work in that respect on a footing more contemporary with ourselves.

Ussher was to use the tool of textual criticism to establish the authenticity of one version of the received corpus of the letters of Ignatius in his argument with Milton and other puritans. Ussher noted that three medieval English writers quoted a version of Ignatius quite different from that of their contemporaries: Robert Grosseteste (1250), John Tyssington (1381), and William Wodeford (1396). They used only the seven letters known to Eusebius, and their quotations from those letters were more abbreviated than those appearing in later church fathers and in medieval and post-

Reformation writers. Many of their quotations, however, correspond to those of Eusebius and the early father Theodoret, who used him extensively. The quotes were in Latin and not Greek.

Ussher therefore came to the conclusion that there must be a Greek manuscript of Ignatius' letters somewhere in England, from which Grosseteste had made his Latin translation. Ussher succeeded in finding the Latin translation, though not the Greek, in two manuscripts, one in the library of Caius College, Cambridge (Caiensis 395) given to them in 1444, and another in the library of the bishop of Norwich (Montacutianus), now lost. Without a Greek original, Ussher now resorted to correcting the expanded Greek texts of available manuscripts of what we now know as the 'long recension' by means of these Latin manuscripts: what was omitted in the Latin he omitted in the Greek, and otherwise textually amended individual Greek words in the light of the Latin.

Although more text-critical than literary-critical in its approach, Ussher's accomplishment was a literary critic's dream. Vedelius, his contemporary, had brought out an edition (in 1623) of what we now know as the middle recension based upon early patristic citations and Eusebius' list. He claimed the seven genuine letters had been corrupted, pointing to the influence of the third-century *Apostolic Constitutions* upon texts that had obviously been expanded. But Ussher had found a manuscript containing six and only six, in the non-expanded form of the middle recension. The problem with a purely hypothetical reconstruction of a lost document is that, in the absence of the empirical corroboration provided by the discovery of the actual text, the hypothetical document is always open to challenge from other literary critics proposing quite different reconstructions, often on equally plausible grounds.

Consider as an example source-critical approaches to the Synoptic Gospels and attempts to solve the 'Synoptic problem'. Matthew and Luke are compared with Mark and found to contain most of Mark. The conclusion is that they used (some edition of) Mark. Then they appear to have material in common that is not found in Mark. So this is attributed to a hypothetical document called 'Q'. Further hypothetical documents (M and L) are then claimed to account for the sources for their individual material.

But there are minor agreements between Matthew and Luke against Mark. So matters can be seen quite differently: Mark