

The seven epistles of Ignatius

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1 Introduction

1.1 Ignatius

Ignatius (ca. 40-110 AD) was the third bishop of Antioch in Syria, after the Apostle Peter and Evodius. Ignatius was arrested in Antioch and taken to Rome by ten Roman soldiers. The journey went overland through present-day Turkey via the northern Roman highway, to Laodicea, Philadelphia, Sardis and Smyrna.

In Smyrna, Ignatius was allowed to receive visitors; representatives from the churches in Tralles, Magnesia and Ephesus spent time with him, to encourage him and to ask for his ecclesial advice. Tralles, Magnesia and Ephesus were cities on the southern Roman highway that were not visited by Ignatius.

Those who had visited him from these churches carried letters from Ignatius back with them. From Smyrna, Ignatius also had a letter sent to the church in Rome to prepare them for his arrival. We know that he wrote this letter on 24 August; Ignatius does not mention the year.

The journey continued to Troas, from where Ignatius sent letters to the churches in Philadelphia and Smyrna, two of the cities he had visited previously. From Troas he also wrote a more personal letter to his friend Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna. Then Ignatius was taken to Philippi where the church received him warmly. We know this because Polycarp later thanks that church for its hospitality to Ignatius.

The journey continued to Rome where Ignatius was executed. There was enough confusion about the execution of Ignatius that his friend Polycarp was unsure of what actually happened in Rome; he wrote to the church in Philippi to find out what they knew about the last days of Ignatius. The stories of his martyrdom by so-called eyewitnesses were late fabrications.

1.2 History of the documents of the Seven Epistles

We have seven letters written by Ignatius, to:

- Church in Ephesus (written in Smyrna)
- Church in Magnesia (written in Smyrna)
- Church in Tralles (written in Smyrna)
- Church in Rome (written in Smyrna)
- Church in Philadelphia (written in Troas)
- Church in Smyrna (written in Troas)
- Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna (written in Troas)



The seven letters exist in three basic forms. The 'long recension', created in the fourth century, consists of an expanded (interpolated) version of the original letters. The 'short recension' is a Syriac abridgement of some of the letters. The 'middle recension', which was known to Eusebius, preserves the original form of the letters.

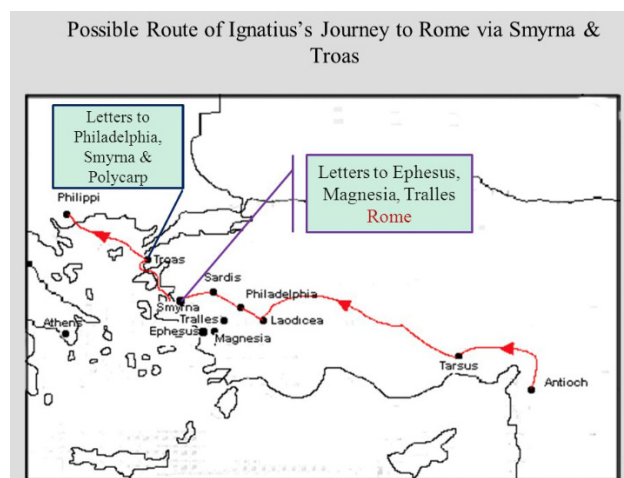
This multiplicity of forms and the existence of some spurious letters, created much confusion and debate about the authenticity of the letters. Catholics usually agreed about the authenticity of the seven letters of the 'middle recension', while Protestants were more critical. The traditional view, that the seven letters attributed to Ignatius are authentic, remains the most probable and the least problematic view.

1.3 Date of the epistles

There is a near-unanimous consensus that Ignatius was martyred during the reign of Trajan (AD98-117). According to Eusebius this happened somewhere in the middle of Trajan's reign. If his death occurred around 106-110AD, the letters must be written shortly before that. Hence, the letters must be dated ca. 106-110AD.

2 Content of the Seven Epistles

2.1 Map of the Journey



2.2 Suffering for Christ

On his way to Rome, Ignatius writes that in the capital city he expected to be eaten by wild animals in the arena. He hopes to convince the Roman Christians not to try to save him from martyrdom, even if they can:

> **Read together** Ignatius, Romans 1:1-2:2 (page 227)

'Let me be food for the wild beasts, through whom I can reach God.' (Ign, Rom 4:1) He hopes wild animals will eat him fully, so that 'I will truly be a disciple of Jesus Christ, when the world will no longer see my body.' (Ign, Rom 4:2) He considers his anticipated death to be 'a sacrifice to God' (Ign, Rom 4:2) and asks the Church in

Rome: 'Allow me to be an imitator of the suffering of my God.' (Ign, Rom 6:3). In vivid language Ignatius speaks of his desire to suffer for Christ:

> **Read together** Ignatius, Rom 5:1-3 (page 231)

In his other letters, Ignatius writes similar things, but less extensive. To the Church in Ephesus he writes that he expects to fight wild animals in Rome 'in order that by so succeeding I might be able to be a disciple.' (Ignatius, Ephesians 1:2) In this letter he further says: 'For even though I am in chains for the sake of the Name, I have not yet been perfected in Jesus Christ. For now I am only beginning to be a disciple.' (Ign, Eph 3:1) His chains are 'spiritual pearls' for Ignatius. (Ign, Eph 11:2) He hopes that carrying those, as well as the prayers of the Ephesians, will make him 'rise again' from the dead. (Ign, Eph 11:2) 'I am being led to Rome in chains, as I – the very least of the faithful there – have been judged worthy of serving the glory of God.' (Ign, Eph 21:2) To the Church in Tralles, Ignatius writes: 'I strongly desire to suffer' (Ignatius, Trallians 4:2) and that he carries his chains 'for the sake of Jesus Christ'. (Ign, Trall 12:2) He asks all churches for their prayers 'in order that I may reach God'. (Ignatius, Magnesians 14)

2.3 False Teaching of Judaism and docetism

Ignatius warns the churches about two heresies. The first one was Judaism, the original religion of many members of the churches.

> **Read together** Ignatius, Magnesia 6:1-2, 8:1-10:3 (page 207-209)

The other heresy Ignatius battles against, is docetism. (from Gr: dokein = to seem, to appear) This gnostic doctrine taught that Christ's body was not human but either a phantasm or of real but celestial substance, and that therefore his sufferings were only apparent. Especially in the letter to Smyrna, Ignatius stresses the physicality of Jesus. He praises the church because it is:

> **Read together** Ignatius, Smyrna 1:1-4:2 (page 249-251)

> **Read together** Ignatius, Smyrna 5:1-2 (page 253)

These quotes show, among other things, that docetism for Ignatius meant the denial of the value of his own physical Via Dolorosa. To the Church in Tralles he wrote in similar vein:

> **Read together** Ignatius, Tralles, 6:1-11:2 (page 219-223)

The letters to the other churches contain similar emphasis on the physicality of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

2.4 Division and Unity around the Bishop

Ignatius writes much about how the monarchical bishop and his priests and deacons have to relate. Ignatius is, for instance, pleased with the situation in the church of Magnesia, because the priests are subject to their bishop as 'to the Father of Jesus Christ, the bishop of all.' (Ign, Magn 3:1) He commends the deacon Zotion

from Magnesia because 'he is subject to the bishop as to the grace of God, and to the council of presbyters as to the law of Jesus Christ.' (Ign, Magn 2) Here is a representative selection of quotes from Ignatius' letter to the Magnesians showing his desire for unity through obedience:

> **Read together** Ignatius, Magnesia, 6:1-7:2 (page 207)

Ignatius writes similar things in all letters. Of interest are Ignatius' statements that all must be done 'in godly harmony' (Mag 6:1) and that the church must 'run together [in harmony] with the mind of the bishop.' (Ign, Eph 4:2) Christians are also called to be 'harmonious in unanimity' in their worship of Jesus Christ. (Ign, Eph 4:2) These concepts were congruent with the Roman State's desire for harmony. We meet here with the idea of the church being an alternative kingdom and a spiritual empire. That Christians did not want to sacrifice to the genius of the Emperor could easily be explained as a Christian rejection of the unity of the Roman Empire, notwithstanding the fact that they proved to be loyal citizens.

Harmony in the Church was a typical 'contextual' moral ideal. Not only from Ignatius but also in other Christian literature from this period, harmony is presented as an important moral good. In 1 Clement for instance, written by Clement of Rome around 95 AD, we see a similar stress on the need for harmony in the Church. Clement uses the concept, just as Ignatius does, in the context of unity in the Church through submission to its leadership. Ignatius uses the Greek harmonia in Magn 6:1. In Eph 4:2 he uses the Greek terms symphoonoi en homonoia. Symphoonoi is used in the New Testament; the other terms are never used in the New Testament.

2.5 Holy Eucharist

Interesting also, is that for the docetist heretics, Holy Eucharist was meaningless. They rejected it because it signified the physicality of the body of the Lord Jesus Christ. See for instance what Ignatius writes to Smyrna:

> **Read together** Ignatius, Smyrna, 6:1-7:1 (page 253-255)

To the Philadelphians, Ignatius writes that the heretics and schismatics disconnect themselves from the Kingdom of God; such people separate themselves from the suffering of Christ and from Holy Eucharist:

> **Read together** Ignatius, Philadelphia, 3:1-4:1 (page 239)

> **Read together** Ignatius, Ephesus, 13:1-2, 20:2 (page 193-195, 199)

The unity of the church around the bishop is for Ignatius the sine qua non of being able to celebrate Holy Eucharist and of being connected with the suffering of Jesus Christ. Without being subjected to the bishop and his priests, there is no proper Eucharist and no unity with the suffering of Christ, hence no salvation in eternity. This means that celebrating Eucharist is of utmost importance.

3 Conclusion

Ignatius considers his anticipated martyrdom as the ultimate participation in the suffering of Jesus Christ and as the final stage in becoming a true follower of Christ. His martyrdom is a sacrifice to God and will finally make him rise from the dead to bring him to God and Jesus Christ. He assumes his death will be a stronger witness to Christ than his life could ever be; he is therefore eager not to escape from the honour.

The physicality of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is of utmost importance for Ignatius, as he endures similar physical suffering and sets his hope on the physical resurrection in order to be with God. This suffering of Christ is reflected in the tangible Holy Eucharist that connects Ignatius with the Lord who suffered and rose again. Participation in this suffering of Christ through Eucharist is worked out in his own death for Christ.

For celebrating the proper Eucharist that connects the believer with Jesus Christ, unity of the Church under its proper leadership is important. This unity of the Church, a proper view of Jesus Christ and Eucharist, are threatened by heretics and schismatics.

For Ignatius, the pain of suffering is of lesser weight than the pain of heresy and division. A focus on Church unity through the office of the bishop (not an administrator but a teacher of apostolic orthodoxy!) was practical and necessary at a time when heretics were teaching that Christ did not physically suffer or rise from the dead.