POLYCARP'S WITNESS TO IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH

BY

WILLIAM R. SCHOEDEL

Polycarp's letter to the Philippians in its present form provides (as is well known) a strong early witness to Ignatius of Antioch and the letters written by him as he journeyed to Rome under guard. Polycarp alludes to the reception of Ignatius and others in Philippi at the beginning of his letter (1.1); he mentions them by name later (9.1); and finally toward the end of his communication he discusses a request addressed to him by Ignatius and the Philippians (13.1) and refers to a collection of Ignatius’ letters for which he himself was responsible (13.2). Those who deny the authenticity of the middle recension of the letters of Ignatius (M) have little choice but to deny the authenticity also of Polycarp’s letter or (since that seems hardly convincing) to treat some or all of the references to Ignatius in it as interpolations. The burden of proof for such radical surgery would seem to rest on those who practice it. Yet since the letters of Ignatius themselves represent a confusing tangle of textual and literary problems, and since Polycarp seems to contradict himself (apparently taking the death of Ignatius for granted in Phil. 9, yet requesting definite information about Ignatius’ fate in Phil. 13.2),¹ such scepticism is at least understandable. P. N. Harrison thought he had solved the problem by taking Phil. 13 (or 13-14) as a fragment of an early letter and Phil. 1-12 (or 1-12 + 14) as a later communication.² And it may be that if there is in fact a contradiction here, one could expect better of an interpolator. Robert Joly, however, remains unconvinced and returns to the older view that the difficulties are best explained by recourse to a theory of interpolation.³ In this connection, it has been held by some that all three references are interpolations (from δεξιμένως to the καί before δι: in 1.1-2; 'Ιγνατίων καί in 9.1; and the whole of section 13). Joly is less sweeping: he thinks that the interpolator built on an authentic reference to an otherwise unknown Ignatius in Phil. 9.1; that Phil. 13 was added to turn Polycarp’s communication into a covering letter for the forged Ignatian corpus.
(M); and that the reference to the martyrs in Phil. 1.1 was inserted to set the stage for the new picture of Ignatius and his writing that was being created.4

My purpose here is not to discuss all the points involved but to concentrate on the problem of the presumed interpolation in Phil. 1.1. This is the least explicit reference to Ignatius in Polycarp and does not tell us a great deal by itself. Yet it is recognized that if it stands, there is less reason for excising the other references to Ignatius. Moreover, it softens the presumed contradiction between Phil. 9 and Phil. 13; for Phil. 1.1 seems to presuppose a relatively recent encounter between the martyrs and the Philippians; thus if Phil. 1.1 and Phil. 9 are from the same hand, there is less reason to think that Phil. 9 need imply a significant lapse of time between the visit of the martyrs to Philippi and their martyrdom.5 And finally, Phil. 1.1 reinforces the traditional assumption that in Phil. 9 Polycarp was speaking about the martyrs as travellers (one of them, Ignatius, from Antioch to Rome) and not (as Joly suggests) inhabitants of Philippi itself (or at least people who were martyred in Philippi).6

Fortunately for the sceptics there is a grammatical inconsistency in Phil. 1.1-2 that seems to justify the elimination of the allusion to the martyrs in Phil. 1.1.7

1. The Grammatical Inconsistency in Phil. 1.1-2. The standard text of the passage reads as follows:

(1.1) συνεχάρην ύμιν μεγάλως ἐν τῷ κυρίῳ ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ δεξιόμενος τὰ μιμήματα τῆς ἀληθείας ἀγάπης καὶ προπέμψας, ὡς ἐπέβαλεν ύμίν, τοὺς ἐνειλημένους τοῖς ἀγιοπρεπέσιν δεσμοῖς, ἀτινὰ ἐστιν διαδήματα τῶν ἀληθῶς ὑπὸ θεοῦ καὶ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν ἐκκλησίας,

(1.2) καὶ ὅτι ἡ βεβαιὰ τῆς πίστεως ύμῶν ῥίζα, ἐξ ἀρχαίων καταγεγελλομένη χρόνων, μέχρι νῦν διαμένει καὶ καρποφορεῖ εἰς τὸν κύριον ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν,

And here is a possible translation of the passage:

(1.1) I rejoice with you greatly in our Lord Jesus Christ because you received the images of true love