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Saint Polycarp of Smyrna: Johannine or Pauline Figure?

D. Richard Stuckwisch

Introduction

The question of whether the Blessed Saint Polycarp of Smyrna is a Johannine or Pauline figure is far more complicated than would appear at first. From Saint Irenaeus onward theologians of the church catholic have invoked Polycarp as *the* apostolic link between the first and second centuries. He has been identified as such almost entirely on the basis of a presumed association with the apostle John. Thus, one would readily assume that Polycarp is without a doubt preeminently a Johannine figure. However, the single extant epistle of Saint Polycarp tells another story. For though it does include a number of similarities to 1 John, it makes no reference whatsoever to that apostle, nor does it use any obvious material from the Word of Saint John. Saint Polycarp, rather, fills his letter with quotations from 1 Peter and from the various Pauline Epistles, with a fair number of borrowed phrases and ideas from 1 Clement and the epistles of Ignatius as well. How and why is it, then, that this venerable saint came to be recognized and known throughout the Church as a crucial link to Saint John? To what extent is he truly a "Johannine" figure? To what extent is he "Pauline"?

In order to answer these questions, we must first have in mind what it means to speak in terms of "Johannine" or "Pauline" characteristics. In this respect, we are hindered by the "assured results" of critical biblical scholarship. For though it is certainly true that Saint John and Saint Paul utilize different emphases and styles in their respective writings, the all too common slicing of the early Church into "Johannine," "Pauline," "Petrine," and "Jakobian" schools typically goes too far. Perhaps this is largely due to the late dating of the documents of the New Testament. For such divisions of the church into partisan groups were opposed by the apostles themselves in the New Testament (for

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example, by Paul in 1 Corinthians). The various authors, moreover, of the books of the New Testament are far more uniform in their theology than most modern scholars will admit.¹ For the purposes of this present study we will use the terms "Johannine" and "Pauline" to designate a specific use of the writings attributed to Saint John and Saint Paul, as well as a favorable attitude toward the apostles themselves.

Polycarp and his epistle to the Philippians are intimately connected to Ignatius, who had written letters both to Polycarp himself and to his church in Smyrna, and who had also stayed with the Philippians on his road to martyrdom in Rome. In paragraph thirteen of his epistle to the Philippians, Polycarp indicates that he is responding to a request from the Philippians for copies of the letters of Ignatius; he also asks for any information on the martyrdom of Ignatius. Since Ignatius was martyred in approximately A.D. 115, Polycarp's epistle must be dated at about the same time. Most scholars now agree with P.N. Harrison, who argued convincingly that the extant epistle of Polycarp was originally two separate letters; paragraph thirteen (and possibly fourteen) being a cover letter to the epistles of Ignatius, sent at the time of his martyrdom, and the other paragraphs being a letter sent some twenty or thirty years later.² Although most are willing to accept the two-letter theory, many scholars disagree with Harrison's late dating of the "second" epistle; only a few years at most might separate the two pieces of correspondence.³

Regardless of whether he wrote one letter or two, it is clear that in the first twelve paragraphs of the extant epistle Polycarp is

¹Martin Hengel, who might be called a "conservative-critical" scholar, notes the many similarities between the Johannine and Pauline writings. He argues for a similarity in their christology and soteriology that surpasses their differences in language. Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989), 64 and following.

²P. N. Harrison, *Polycarp's Two Epistles to the Philippians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936).

³For example, L. W. Barnard, "The Problem of Saint Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians," *The Church Quarterly Review* (October-December 1962): 421-430.

writing more than a cover letter. He is responding in the first place to a request from the Philippians that he comment on "righteousness" (paragraph 3). This request apparently comes in the context of at least two different crises confronting the church in Philippi: first, the doctrinal threat of a gnostic and docetic Christianity, similar to that opposed by 1 John and Ignatius (paragraph 7); and, secondly, the problem of a disgraced presbyter, Valens, probably orthodox in his doctrine, who with his wife had been guilty of some financial impropriety (paragraph 11).⁴

In general, a number of critical issues faced the orthodox church of the second century: Judaism, Gnosticism, Marcionism, and Montanism. Of these, Judaism and Gnosticism were threatening the church already in Polycarp's day (as indicated, for example, by the polemics of the Ignatian epistles). Neither Marcion nor the Montanists had yet emerged as arch-heretics when Polycarp wrote. If anything, Polycarp and most of Asia Minor were at a stage of "Paulinism" that made the church ripe for the rise of Marcion.⁵ There are some indications that Polycarp (and those with whom he is associated) had some problems with the Jews and possibly the Jewish-Christians of Asia Minor. In the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, for example, the Jews are portrayed as playing a prominent role in demanding his death (for example, Mart Pol 13:1 and 17:2). Ignatius also had trouble with "Judaizers" (for example Ign Philad 6:1 and 8:2). Likewise, the message in the Apocalypse to the angel of the church in Smyrna refers to those who claim to be Jews but are not (Revelation 2:8-9). It is certain that in the period between the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and the Second Jewish War circa A.D. 135, there was an increasing tension and animosity between the Jews and

⁴Robert M. Grant, *The Apostolic Fathers: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York and Camden, New Jersey: T. Nelson, 1964-68), volume 5, *Polycarp, Martyrdom of Polycarp, Fragments of Papias*, by William R. Schoedel, 16-17.

⁵Charles M. Nielsen, "Papias: Polemicist Against Whom?" *Theological Studies* 35 (September 1974): 529-535; Charles Nielsen "Polycarp and Marcion: A Note," *Theological Studies* 47 (June 1986): 297-399; Charles Nielsen "Polycarp, Paul and the Scriptures," *Anglican Theological Review* 47 (April 1965): 199-215.

Christians, which adversely affected the relationship of the church to the Jewish-Christian apostolic tradition of the Twelve. The rise of Marcion in the years following Polycarp's epistle required the orthodox to define their relationship to Judaism and the Old Testament more precisely, and to clarify the place of Jewish-Christianity within the fold of the church catholic. Likewise, the threat of Montanism required a clarification of the source of authority of the church—in the written record of the apostles, as opposed to an ongoing inspiration of the Spirit. In answer to both crises, the church balanced the epistles of Paul with the Words and epistles of the Twelve.

Along with these considerations, several other important factors must be addressed in determining whether Saint Polycarp is a "Johannine" figure or a "Pauline" figure: What connection, if any, does Polycarp have with Marcion? How decisive is the contribution of Irenaeus to the church's later image of Polycarp? What might be learned from the *Life of Polycarp* by Pionius, which is typically dismissed out of hand? Finally, and perhaps most importantly, what was the status of the "canon" of the New Testament in Polycarp's day? His preference, after all, for the Pauline writings over those of Saint John might simply reflect his usage of books that were already recognized (at least in his circles) as "Scripture."⁶ Polycarp's relationship to the Apostle John—whatever it might have been—became important later in his life, and afterwards, when the traditions of Saint John (and of "Jerusalem Christianity" in general) became a source of canonized Scripture alongside Paul.

Polycarp as a Johannine Figure

Irenaeus of Lyons—and after him, Tertullian and Eusebius—indicate that Polycarp had known the Apostle John personally and had learned the Word from him (Eusebius, III.36, IV.14–15). If this information is correct, then one should expect a more "Johannine" flavor to Polycarp's epistle. There are, however, good reasons to question the identity of the "John" that

⁶Charles Nielsen argues ("Polycarp, Paul and the Scriptures") that Polycarp did regard the Pauline Epistles as Scripture.

Polycarp had known in his youth. If this man was not the Apostle John, but another John, then Polycarp's status as a "Johannine" figure becomes far more tenuous at best.

The question of another John, "the Elder," is raised by Eusebius, though not in connection with Saint Polycarp. Eusebius accepts the testimony of Ignatius that Polycarp had known the Apostle John, but he questions the similar relationship of Papias to Saint John. It seems likely that Eusebius was trying to discredit Papias, because he endorsed the notion of a millennial reign of Christ on earth, which Eusebius rejected. It is true, nevertheless, that Papias does seem to speak of both the apostle John *and* an Elder of the same name (Eusebius, III.39:1-7). Numerous modern scholars, including B. H. Streeter and Martin Hengel, are inclined to agree with Eusebius that there was indeed a John known as "the Elder" who was not the apostle John. This "other John" was apparently connected to his apostolic namesake; Streeter implies that the apostle John might have ordained John the Elder as the Bishop of Ephesus, and Hengel argues that John the Elder is the author of the Johannine Epistles.⁷

One of the documents that influenced Streeter in his conclusions regarding the Elder John is the *Life of Polycarp* by Pionius, a document normally dismissed as a pious legend.⁸

⁷Burnett Hillman Streeter, *The Primitive Church*, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1929): 92-100; Hengel, *The Johannine Question*, 24 and following.

⁸Streeter writes (*The Primitive Church*, 276-277): "The question whether *The Life [of Polycarp]* was written by Pionius, who was martyred A.D. 250 in the Decian persecution and who is known to have had a special veneration for the memory of Polycarp, has been hotly debated since Lightfoot wrote. Corsen and others have maintained that the martyr was the author. Delehaye argues for a date c. A.D. 400. . . . At the close of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* there is a sentence which suggests that the letter of the Church of Smyrna, which we call the *Martyrdom*, was merely intended as an installment. . . . This looks as if, at the time of writing, the authorities of the Church of Smyrna contemplated writing something like a *Life of Polycarp*. If they carried out that intention, there is not the slightest reason why Pionius, who was a prominent member of the church of Smyrna and whose devotion to Polycarp was of the nature of a 'cult', should not have got possession of a copy. Be this as it may, the first part of *The Life* purports to be based on an ancient document. . . ."

Streeter demonstrates that this so-called "legend" might have more to offer than fairy tales. Significantly, the *Life of Polycarp* never mentions the apostle John in Asia and seems to know of no connection between the him and Polycarp.⁹ Perhaps the apostle John never did reside in Asia Minor; and, if so, the "John" known to Polycarp might well have been "the Elder." Thinking along these same lines, we note that, while manuscript evidence supports an early date for the Gospel of John, as also a broad availability, the Fourth Gospel shows up primarily in Egypt and North Africa, and not so much in Asia Minor. 1 John, on the other hand, is known and used more extensively—by Ignatius, Polycarp, and Papias.

Having mentioned Papias a number of times already, we should also briefly note a theory set forth by Charles M. Nielsen. Nielsen argues that Papias wrote polemically against Polycarp, and generally against a growing "Paulinis" in Asia Minor, *circa* A.D. 125-135, just prior to the rise of full-blown Marcionism. He sees Papias as a representative of Jewish-Christianity and Polycarp as a significant figure among the many who were elevating Paul above the Twelve.¹⁰

Now, along with the items already raised, we must ask another question: *Why* might Polycarp have avoided the Gospel of John? Assuming that he was familiar with the Fourth Gospel, there might still have been good reason to avoid it. Several scholars have suggested recently that the Gospel of John was written primarily as a catechetical document for Jewish-Christians, prior to the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. If such was the case, the increasingly gentile congregations of Asia Minor might have viewed the Gospel of John as "obsolete." Perhaps it was not yet (or no longer) identified with the *apostle* John, or simply not yet considered as "Scripture." John's Gospel is ignored, in fact, by virtually everyone prior to Irenaeus. It was considered by some to be a "gnostic" Word; and it is true that a number of Gnostic teachers did use the Fourth Gospel, though not exclusively nor

⁹Streeter, *The Primitive Church*, 271 and following.

¹⁰Nielsen, "Papias: Polemicist Against Whom?"; "Polycarp and Marcion: A Note."

even predominantly so. Polycarp is certainly not alone among the orthodox in not using John's Gospel.

Interestingly, the popularity of John's Gospel and the connection of Polycarp with the apostle John both begin with Irenaeus. It is he who first relates how Polycarp "reported his living with John and with the rest of the apostles who had seen the Lord, and how he remembered their words, and what the things were which he heard from them about the Lord, and about His miracles and about His teaching, how Polycarp received them from eyewitnesses of 'the word of life,' and proclaimed them all in harmony with the Scriptures" (Eusebius, V.20). Irenaeus recalls all this from when he was "yet a boy," and it is entirely possible that he was mistaken about the "John" that Polycarp mentioned. If, by the time of Irenaeus, the apostle John and "the Elder" had already been confused, then Irenaeus might easily have jumped to the wrong conclusion. He was endeavoring to rescue John from the Gnostics by providing an orthodox interpretation of his Word, and it was clearly an advantage if he could claim the testimony of one who had presumably known the apostle personally. Tertullian and Eusebius both rely upon the writings of Irenaeus for their association of Polycarp with the apostle John, so they can hardly be regarded as corroborating his testimony.¹¹

It is feasible, therefore, if not likely, that the supposed connection of Polycarp with the apostle John first originated with Irenaeus. We do not mean to suggest that Irenaeus was purposely deceptive; he was probably mistaken and, in his zeal to protect the church from heresy, he allowed himself to believe what he thought that he remembered. What, then, did Irenaeus gain by tying Polycarp to Saint John? What did he gain by tying Saint John to Polycarp? Perhaps Polycarp had become prone to accusations of Marcionism just as Saint John had become prone to accusations of Gnosticism. By tying the two men together, Irenaeus diffused both suspicions: Polycarp could hardly be accused of Marcionite tendencies if he had been a close associate of the apostle John; and one could, in turn, learn from Polycarp

¹¹Streeter, *The Primitive Church*, 96-97.

the authentic, orthodox, anti-gnostic interpretation of John. Worth considering, too, is the similarity between the stories that Irenaeus relates about John's encounter with Cerinthus and Polycarp's encounter with Marcion. Whether or not these stories are true, Irenaeus no doubt includes them as a way of defending the Johannine tradition and Polycarp from accusations of Gnosticism and Marcionism. Irenaeus was able, in this way, to rescue the memories of John and Polycarp from Gnosticism and Marcionism while the church catholic struggled to adopt a canon that would include both Paul and the twelve apostles of the "Jerusalem tradition."

We have already indicated above that Polycarp does make use of 1 John; there are, consequently, elements of "Johannine" theology in his epistle.¹² Polycarp, for example, makes frequent comments about the "Truth" (Pol Phil 1:1, 2:1, 3:2, 4:2, 5:2; compared, for example, with 1 John 3:18-19). Polycarp's commendation of the Philippians for welcoming the "representations of the true love" and for helping on their way "those men confined by chains suitable for saints" (Pol Phil 1:1) is reminiscent of a similar commendation in 3 John 5-8. The most remarkable "quotation" of any book of the New Testament in Polycarp's epistle is found in chapter seven: "Everyone 'who does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is the antichrist'..." (Pol Phil 7:1; compared with 1 John 4:2-3). Also suggestive of 1 John are the many references to the faith that was from "the beginning" (one may compare Pol Phil 3:2, 4:2, 7:2, and others with 1 John 1:1, 2:7,24). Polycarp's encouragements finally to "walk in the commandments of the Lord" are similar to exhortations in the Johannine Epistles (Pol Phil 2:2, 4:1, 5:2; compared, for instance, with 2 John 4-6).

¹²Schoedel's translation of Polycarp's epistle footnotes the following Johannine references: Revelation 19:12 (Pol Phil 1:1), 1 John 4:6 and 2 John 7 (Pol Phil 2:1), 1 John 2:17 (Pol Phil 2:2), 1 John 1:7, 2:29, 3:9-11 (Pol Phil 3:3), 1 John 2:6, 4:11, and 2 John 6 (Pol Phil 5:1), 3 John 4 (Pol Phil 5:2), 1 John 2:16 (Pol Phil 5:3), John 4:2-3, 8:44, and 1 John 3:8, 4:3, and 2 John 7 (Pol Phil 7:1), 1 John 4:9 (Pol Phil 8:1), John 13:34, 15:12 and 17, and 3 John 8 (Pol Phil 10:1), Revelations 1:3, 22:7 (Pol Phil 12:1).

Clearly, then, Johannine thought and terminology are not alien to Polycarp; yet almost all of his allusions are taken from the Johannine Epistles, with very little if anything from the Gospel of John. Perhaps 1 John was viewed as the authoritative "orthodox" interpretation of the Word, as many have suggested. Or, maybe the Johannine Epistles were written by "the Elder John," who was known to Polycarp, whereas the Word was written by the apostle John, who was not. We may conjecture, in other words, that even though Polycarp probably did not know the apostle personally, as Irenaeus thought, he was associated with the so-called "Johannine school" through "the Elder." In this case, the Elder John would be the Johannine figure that Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Eusebius considered Polycarp to be — a bishop of the church, who was taught and ordained by the apostle John, and who served as a living link between the apostles and the post-apostolic church. The Elder John surpasses the popular image of Polycarp, however, in that he was himself an eyewitness of the Lord. As such, it would have been easy for the later church to confuse this apostolic elder with the apostle John himself.

Polycarp as a Pauline Figure

The predominance of Pauline thought and terminology in the epistle of Polycarp is a well-known and documented fact.¹³ In addition to the proliferation of quotations and allusions from the Pauline Epistles, the person of Saint Paul is also highly regarded in the epistle of Polycarp (Pol Phil 3:2, 9:1, 11:3).¹⁴ There are

¹³Albert E. Barnett, *Paul Becomes a Literary Influence*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1941), 170 and following; Boudewijn Dehandschutter, "Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians," in *The New Testament in Early Christianity*, 275-291 (Leuven: University Press, 1989); Robert M. Grant, "Polycarp of Smyrna," *Anglican Theological Review* 28 (July 1946): 143 and following; Andreas Lindemann, "Paul in the Writings of the Apostolic Fathers," in *Paul and the Legacies of Paul* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1990), 41 and following; Édouard Massaux, *The Influence of the Gospel of Saint Matthew*, 2 volumes (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1992), 2: 35 and following; Nielsen, "Polycarp, Paul and the Scriptures."

¹⁴Lindemann writes ("Paul in the Writings of the Apostolic Fathers," 28): "No other person from Christianity's beginnings is mentioned as often in the writings of the apostolic fathers as the apostle Paul. Peter is named four

numerous probable reasons for this heavy use of Paul. First of all, the church in Philippi was a Pauline congregation, a fact that Polycarp mentions more than once. Indeed, all of Asia Minor was, in a sense, "Pauline" territory. We may remember again the theory of Nielsen, that Polycarp lived in a pre-Marcionite "Paulinist" environment. Saint Paul was regarded as *the* apostle, especially in Asia Minor, up until the reaction against Marcion. And even after Marcion, Saint Paul did not by any means fall out of favor, but rather was balanced with the various "Jerusalem Apostles," Saint Peter and Saint John in particular.

Other reasons for Polycarp's use of the Pauline Epistles include the fact that Paul had addressed situations that were similar to those in Philippi. Certainly, the question of "righteousness" is, as Polycarp himself implies, a "Pauline" category of theological thought. Perhaps most importantly, moreover, the Pauline Epistles were already collected as "Scripture," as indicated by 2 Peter 3:15-16.

Excursus: Some Thoughts on Polycarp and 1 Peter

Alongside the Pauline Epistles, it is also a well-known fact that 1 Peter plays a prominent role in the epistle of Polycarp. 1 Peter is, in fact, the single most prominent writing of the New Testament in Polycarp. While this prominence might at first seem like an additional complication in determining whether Polycarp is a "Johannine" figure or a "Pauline" figure, it might in fact be a key to the solution. We note, on the one hand, the close association of Saint Peter and Saint John, especially in the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles (also Galatians 2:9). There is, on the other hand, an obvious similarity of "Petrine" thought (especially in 1 Peter) to that of Saint Paul. In the later history of the church, Saint Peter and Saint Paul are regarded together as the apostles, an image that really began with Paul himself (Galatians 2:7-8).

times. Twice he is mentioned in conjunction with Paul. . . . Other than Paul and Peter, no woman or man from the first century – with the exception of Jesus' mother, Mary – is mentioned in the writings of the apostolic fathers, not even James, the brother of Jesus"

In a sense, the apostle Peter plays the role of a unifying "foundation" of the church catholic. He represents the Twelve, he is closely associated with John, and yet he paves the way for Paul. 1 Peter is specifically and appropriately referred to as a "catholic" epistle; it addresses the entire church.

1 Peter is readily evident, not only in Polycarp, but also in 1 Clement and Papias as well. 1 Peter was probably among the very first documents of the New Testament to be regarded as "Scripture" — alongside the Pauline Epistles and possibly 1 John. It is perhaps significant in this respect that 2 Peter — while not as widely or readily received or even used — takes the authoritative position and task of defending the Pauline Epistles, in much the same way that Saint Peter himself validated the Pauline mission in Acts. Again, the "Petrine tradition" represents the central and unifying tradition, which eventually emerged as the Rule of Faith in the church. Saint Peter is a popular figure in apocryphal works of the early centuries, he is prominent and positively portrayed in all four canonical Words, and he is favorably mentioned by Paul in several epistles. Even Paul's rebuke of Peter at Antioch (Galatians 2:11-14) demonstrates, albeit in a negative fashion, the centrality and importance of Saint Peter both for the church catholic and for the gentile mission specifically. All these points are in addition to the Petrine Epistles. Thus, it is no surprise that 1 Peter emerges in Polycarp's epistle in greater proportion than any other document of the New Testament. In a sense, this use of the "Petrine tradition" marks Polycarp as the figure he truly is — one who represents the unified tradition of both Paul and the Twelve, Jerusalem and Antioch and all of Asia Minor.

Conclusion

The following paragraphs present a tentative answer to the question of whether Polycarp is to be regarded as a Johannine figure or a Pauline figure. When Polycarp wrote to the Philippians, Saint Paul was regarded as *the* apostle, especially in Asia Minor among the congregations that he had founded. The climate was ripe for the rise of Marcionism, and even many orthodox theologians (like Polycarp) preferred the Pauline Epistles. The Old Testament was not disparaged, but the

apostolic writings had surpassed it. For this reason, and because of the circumstances that were to be addressed in Philippi, Polycarp relied heavily upon the Pauline Epistles, which had already been gathered together as a body of writings and were coming into their own as "Scripture." Likewise, Polycarp made use of 1 Peter (which was recognized as an authoritative writing from the start), as well as 1 Clement (which was regarded by many as "Scripture" in the early years of the church) and the letters of Ignatius (so fresh in the memories of both Polycarp and the Philippians). 1 John is also used, not only because it, too, was regarded as an authoritative writing, but especially because it addressed docetic heresies and internal strife similar to that being experienced at Philippi. The Gospel of John is avoided, on the other hand, because it had been abused in the hands of the Gnostics; both because it had been written primarily as a catechetical document for Jewish Christians and by the beginning of the second century had fallen out of common usage and because it did not circulate to any great degree in Asia Minor.

Irenaeus is responsible for tying Polycarp so closely to John. By doing so, he preserved Polycarp from any accusations of Marcionite tendencies, and he rescued Saint John and his Word from the Gnostics. Whether the "John" that Polycarp knew was the apostle John or simply a pious and apostolic elder, Irenaeus recognized the polemical value of identifying Polycarp as a living link between the apostles and the church of the second century. It would be a safeguard and defense, not only against the Marcionites and Gnostics, but also against the Montanists. A balancing, furthermore, of the Twelve and Saint Paul would also help to clarify the relationship of the Old and New Testaments of gentile and Jewish Christianity.

Polycarp is to be regarded as an apostolic link between the first and second centuries of the church, although not necessarily in the way envisioned by Irenaeus. The importance of Polycarp lies not so much in his supposed personal knowledge of Saint John or the other apostles (much less in the pious legend of his ordination at the hands of the apostles) as in his role as a bishop who consciously stood on the foundation of the apostles—Peter, Paul, and John—in addressing the theological questions and issues of

his day. It was not the only option available, and many others took a different route. Unlike Marcion, Polycarp did not choose one apostle over all the others, even if he did prefer Saint Paul. Unlike the Gnostics, he did not rely on a secret, personal knowledge supposedly passed down orally from the apostles. Unlike the Montanists, he did not look within himself for creative answers or new inspiration. Whether Polycarp had known any of the apostles personally or not, he chose to address the Philippians in very much the same way that pastors today must address their flocks—on the basis of the recorded word of the apostles. In doing so, he anticipated the orthodox solution to the major crises that faced the church throughout the second century. Perhaps it would be best, therefore, in the final analysis, to regard Polycarp as neither a “Johannine” figure nor a “Pauline” figure, but simply as the truly apostolic figure that he was.

Polycarp was indeed the “teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians” (Mart Pol 12:2), and despite the brevity of his epistle, he stands as a true apostolic father of the orthodox church catholic. In his epistle he binds himself to the witness of “Scripture,” and as his life continued and the definition of the “New Testament” broadened, he also came to serve in his person as a vital link to the Johannine branch of the apostolic tradition, if not through the Apostle John, then certainly through John “the Elder.”