

## OTHER LETTERS OF A MARTYR? THE VOSSIAN RECENSION OF IGNATIUS RECONSIDERED

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### ***Abstract***

*From the days of the Dutch humanist scholar Vossius only seven or less letters from Ignatius' corpus are recognized as genuine. This article re-evaluates the basis for Vossius' restrictions in the light of a 15<sup>th</sup> and 16th century publications by Reinhardus and Martiales. It argues that the text-critical evidence and literary unity of the longer recension that is displayed by its Scripture references, argues against the Vossian recension, which may represent a medieval abridgement rather than original Ignatius material. As a result this article advocates two alternatives that should be preferred to the Vossian consensus of seven letters: 1) a complete rejection of the letter-corpus as a pious fraud to strengthen orthodoxy of a later date; or 2) for text-critical and historical reason, eleven congregational letters should be considered as of Ignatian origin rather than seven.*

### **1. Problem Statement: How many letters?**

Christian tradition tells us that it happened about nineteen hundred years ago. Accompanied by Roman guards, the Church father Ignatius left Syrian Antioch for Rome. In the eternal city his doom was waiting. It was only a matter of time before he would be mauled to death by wild animals in the amphitheatre. As he travelled on his way to martyrdom, Ignatius wrote several letters to Christian communities in Asia Minor and Syria. But how many, and, are they real? After ground-breaking

and probably unsurpassed work by the Dutch humanist Vossius<sup>1</sup> from Leiden in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the answer usually is: seven genuine letters. Confirmed by others, like Lincoln in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and Lightfoot in the 19<sup>th</sup>, and standard editions like Loeb's classical library in the 20<sup>th</sup>, the consensus view seems to have settled for 7 genuine letters that come straight from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Church historians have faithfully rehearsed this opinion. But did the ancient martyr really write seven letters? Did he write them at all and if he did, how do we know for sure that the collection that we possess is not an interpretation of his road to martyrdom by an orthodox novelist of later date? If the seven are genuine, how is it that they are historically part of a corpus of 11 or more letters that presents itself as a text-critical unity? Even earlier Greek manuscripts, on which the text of this so called "short recension" is based, belonged to the long recension, carrying twelve letters at least, albeit with what is supposed to be the un-interpolated text of the epistles mentioned by Eusebius in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* 3.36. Is it scholarly sound to break up this corpus and linguistic unity on the basis of a supposition that is based on a controversial interpretation of a passage in an unrelated work by a 4<sup>th</sup> century historian of suspect orthodoxy? Eusebius didn't say that Ignatius wrote seven letters only. He just mentions seven, perhaps the epistles that he was personally aware of or felt worth mentioning because of their wider appreciation in the Church. Who can say? Eusebius certainly doesn't make any conclusive statements that rule out a wider corpus off hand. And even if he did, why should one believe him, if a strong and old text-critical tradition seems to indicate differently. Why should Eusebius be regarded as omniscient, complete and infallible? These are questions that beg for an answer. The consensus view has been reluctant if not unable to provide such answers because it tried to have it both ways by isolating part of an Ignatius-corpus from an historical tradition that is as such rejected on the basis of a prejudice that only seven letters could be genuine. It was eager to distil and present the "real Ignatius" from a corpus and a tradition that was rejected as unreliable and not genuine.

### 1.1 Reinhardus

Historically and text-critically there are more than seven letters that present good credentials. Four or five other Greek letters that stem from the same historical tradition claim acceptance on the basis of text-critical unity. Of course, since they have been carefully left out of all publications for three centuries, many are unaware of their existence. Among reputable scholarship they have been largely ignored. After all, who dares to know better than the great Vossius and all the other big names that followed since? Nonetheless, the epistles are still with us. In the

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1 Scholars who only regard about seven letters of Ignatius as real, are called Vossian. This expression refers to the Dutch scholar Isaac Vossius, who published his first edition of the letter of Ignatius in 1646. This scholar was prepared to only recognise five letters as more or less genuine. A sixth, the letter to Polycarp, he accepted with great difficulty.

libraries of the medieval universities in Europe one may find eleven, thirteen, or even fifteen letters that purport to originate from Saint Ignatius. Some come in the Latin only, including sheer forgeries like a correspondence between the saint and the Virgin Mary. It is easy to reject those as frauds and not part of the original. However, it is much more difficult to find a consistent base of rejection or acceptance for the Greek tradition. Eleven letters present themselves as congregational letters, either addressed to the congregation or to one of their major leaders. The Dutch University of Utrecht keeps an edition of the wider recension, commonly accepted at the time of its publication in 1537 AD, edited by Reinhardus Lorichius Hamadarius, a 16<sup>th</sup> century German scholar. Reinhardus confirms the existence of eleven congregational letters of Ignatius (Reinhardus 1537: preface A2)<sup>2</sup>:

*“Primam eius epistolam scribit ad Trallianos, secundam ad Magnesios, tertiam ad Tarsenses, quartam ad Philippenses, quintam ad Philadelphios, sextam ad Polycarpum Smyrnaeorum Episcopum, octavam ad Antiochenses, no=nam ad Heronem diaconum Antiochenum, decimam ad Ephesios, & undecimam ad Rhomanos.”*

(“His first letter he wrote to the Trallians; the second to the Magnesians; the third to the <Christians> of Tarses; the fourth to the Philippians, the fifth to the Philadelphians; the sixth to the Smyrneans; the seventh to Polycarp, overseer of the Smyrneans; the eighth to the Antiocheans; the ninth to Heron, deacon of the Antiocheans; the tenth to the Ephesians; and the eleventh to the Romans.”)

These *epistolae undecim*, eleven letters have in common that they are all addressed to a congregation in some way or other and come with a Greek manuscript tradition. Of a distinct nature, although handed over in Greek as well, is the correspondence between Ignatius and Mary of Cassoboliten<sup>3</sup> and a letter to Mary of Neapolis. The queue of Mary’s raises suspicion; particularly as in the Latin it continues to include a letter to the Virgin Mary herself.<sup>4</sup> And why not, as Ignatius is writing to dead saints he is about to encounter beyond the veil, the Latin corpus also includes an epistle to the apostle John!<sup>5</sup> This is the obvious stuff that frauds

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<sup>2</sup> Reinhardus originally wrote this in 1527 as *Gloriosi Christi martyris Ignatii Antiochene, Antistitis, Epistolae undecim, item una beate Polycarpi Martyris Epistola, cum Argumento Tacabi Fabri Stapulensis in easdem, Argent orati MDXXVII.*

<sup>3</sup> *Martiales, sancti martyris Ignatii, Antiochiae Archiepiskopi Epistolae.* Nuc demùm, cum Latina interpretatione è regione Graecis apposita, in lucem editae, recognitae, & Notis illustratae. Per Martialem Maestrem, doctor Theologum; Parisiis, apud Marcum Orry, via Iacobaea ad infigne Leonis falientis M.DC.VIII (1608), p 3: epistola 1, Ad Mariam Cassoboliten (Greek an Latin). This Maria is not described as a disciple, but as a proselyte: “Maria proselyta Iesu christi”. See also Vossius (1680:65).

<sup>4</sup> B. Ignatio, ad S. Mariam. Virginem, Matrem Domini nostri Jesu Christi, (adscripta Epistola).

<sup>5</sup> B. Ignatio, ad S. Johannem. Apostolum & Evangelistam, (adscripta Epistola); Ad eundem Altera. Johanni Sancto Seniori, Suus Ignatius.

are made off, particularly as the connection between Polycarp and John was well known in the early Church. One should dismiss the Latin letters as forgeries not only because of their outrageous contents, but also because there is no text-critical basis that seems to extend beyond the late Middle Ages. It could be argued that the status of the letters to these Greek Mary's is also somewhat suspect because of the difference in genre. The remaining eleven congregational letters, however, seem to share the same pros and cons, historically and text-critically. The only difference being a prejudice from the outside, namely that four of these are not specifically mentioned by Eusebius. Despite general doubts about the corpus as such, the *epistolae undecim* as reflected by Reinhardus was the old consensus until the late Renaissance and Reformation.

## 2. Vossius and the short recension

Until the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the authenticity of the eleven letters as Reinhardus knew them was widely accepted. This was reinforced by the printed edition of Martiales in France, published in 1608. It was not till forty years later that the Dutch humanist Vossius of Leiden and Amsterdam marked the starting point of a more critical approach. Although Ussher in England published an edition of Ignatius two years before this (1644) in which he aimed to restore the text of the perceived short recension by the aid of a late Medieval Latin version, the real scholarly turning point in Ignatian scholarship is the Greek publication by Vossius.<sup>6</sup> The Dutch humanist only considered six letters genuine: the one to Polycarp, and five writings to the congregations of Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Philadelphia and Smyrna. However, even this was not a straightforward acceptance. Even these six letters carried several additions that Vossius considered of a later date. For this reason he used to speak about the “interpolated letters” (cf. Vossius 1680:115).

The Dutch scholar supported his views by manuscripts that he discovered during research in Italy (*ex Bibliothecâ Florentinâ*). However, what is less well known and what really should be common knowledge among scholarship to assess the issues fairly, is that Vossius published, in part, on the basis of an incomplete manuscript that he saw in Florence, *in codice florentino*. Although even this codex should be described as part of the “long recension” tradition, it omits or lost the epistle to the Romans on the way. Despite the nature of his sources, Isaacus Vossius opted to acknowledge only the authenticity of six Ignatius-letters, thus implicitly condemning the reliability of his sources. Like Usher in England, he had his doubts about the epistle to Polycarp as well, because of the power broking, high church character of the latter (cf. Jay 1981:125-162, Burrus 1989:42-47, Brent 1992:18-32).

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<sup>6</sup> This article used the second edition. Vossius, Isaacus; S. Ignatii Martyris epistolae genuinae ex Bibliothecâ Florentinâ, etc. adduntur S. Ignatii epistolae quales vulg circumferuntur adhac S. Barnabae Epistola. Accessit universis Translatio vetus; Eddidit & notas addidit Isaacus Vossius, editio Secunda; Londini; Johannis Cellibrand & Roberti Sollers, MDCLXXX (1680). This publication is kept in the restricted section of the library of the University of Leiden, the Netherlands.

## 2.1 Vossian?

Vossius' lack of consistency and arbitrary text-critical approach soon left the way open for others to include more than six letters in the accepted corpus. Several Church historians really liked Ignatius' letter to the Romans and applied the Eusebius interpretation (Laemmer 1862:36) more consistently as a rule to mark the genuine epistles, thus overruling the Vossian codex Mediceus Laurentius of their own accord. Except for Vossius' six letters, the one to the Romans is also included in the modern selection. It would have helped that the Frenchman Ruinart published a Greek manuscript of the letter to the Romans in 1689. These days the corpus of these seven letters is commonly referred to as the "Vossian" or "short recension." This is technically incorrect, as Vossius recognized only six letters, one of these only barely. By 1710 an English translation produced by the influential bishop Lincoln was published that flatly ignored the existence of any other Ignatian letters than the seven mentioned.<sup>7</sup> Almost three hundred years later, this approach has not been changed, as is evidenced by leading publications in the field (e.g. Schim van der Loef 1906, Lake 1977, Corwin 1960, Brown 1963, Schoedel 1985) and patristic introductions (e.g. Drobner 2007:49-51, Moreschini 2005:105-108, Young 2004:59-60). Even among the small minority of those who take the other Ignatian letters more seriously, the longer recension is considered a fraudulent addition "made about A.D.140 in the vicinity of Ephesus" (Hannah 1960:221, see also Brown 1964:146-151).

## 2.2 Vossius and Polycarp

It is worthwhile to have a closer look at some of the extra letters and consider the Latin edition of the "accepted" letters as well. What about the letter to Polycarp, can it really be trusted as a genuine letter from Ignatius? In 1644 archbishop Usher published (in Oxford of course!) an old-Latin translation of the Ignatian letters. In the Medieval Latin as it was handed down, the letter to Polycarp gives an institutionalised and dogmatic impression. This was not only true for the Latin, but is claimed for the Greek editions with similar justification. Everything seems to be about wielding power. Polycarp must defend his position eagerly. He must preserve the unity of leadership, because something better cannot be done (which seems to be in contrast with the spiritual unity promoted in John's Gospel, cf. Weiß 1979).<sup>8</sup> About the nature of Christ, detailed dogmatic definitions are formulated.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Lincoln, William; *The Genuine Epistles of the Apostolic Fathers*, translated and publish'd, with a large preliminary discourse relating to the several treatises here put together; the second edition, corrected; printed by W.B. for Richard Sare; London/Holbourn 1710. In this second revised edition Bishop William Lincoln adapted his earlier translation of the Vossian recension to the edition of Ruinart, although he mentions where it carries major differences with Vossius and the 'Old Latin' translation.

<sup>8</sup> *Martiales* (1608: Ad Polycarpum, ep.VII): "Defende locum tuū in omni diligentia. Unitatis curam habeto, qua nihil melius est." The word "curam" is derived from the Latin "cura," referring to his responsibility and office. It does not necessarily have Medieval associations of a powerful Roman clergy.

It comes as no surprise that because of its advanced theological contents, Usher doubted the authenticity of the letter to Polycarp. Although Vossius had his suspicions as well, he subjected himself to the testimony of Eusebius, who mentioned this letter separate from the one to Smyrna. But was the letter Eusebius referred to genuine? And even if so, who could give any guarantees that the Polycarp letter in the medieval collections was not a pious fraud on the basis of the fact that Eusebius had mentioned it in his Church history? People longed for such an extant letter, so someone produced it. Wasn't there an element of gullibility in Vossius' eagerness to accept the epistle? The Dutch scholar based his preferred selection of Ignatius on a manuscript that he found in Florence. In the 1980's, however, some new discoveries were made in the same Laurentian library of this Italian university town. A Medieval codex describes the rule of life for a monastery, but was found to also contain extracts from Scripture and the Church fathers. To the amazement of most experts, it was discovered that this edition doesn't support the short recension at all. The letter to Polycarp continues where the short recension ends. It quotes New Testament references as to the conduct and use of slaves. As a result elaborate theories have been presented why this should be so. Mainly by using a lot of speculation, the originals of this fragment are traced back to an imaginary original of the fourth century AD. As this opinion lacks any textual witness, it remains rather speculative and indicates a willingness to preserve the short recension at all cost, despite manuscript evidence that seems to indicate more and more that the Vossian recension is a scholarly construction rather than a historic fact.<sup>10</sup>

### **2.3 No manuscript tradition for Vossian recension**

The important fact remains that the text of the Vossian, Eusebian or short recension, is a theoretical construction. It is not based on textual witness. One always has to cut and glue existing textual traditions to satisfy the theory. Even Vossius applied pair of scissors. Even the Italian codex, on which he based his short recension, supports Reinhardus and a body of at least 11 congregational letters. It is slightly misleading to ignore these facts or to give the impression of the existence of a reliable textual transmission that presents seven pure letters! There is no such tradition. All letters contain elements that scholars feel less comfortable with. This is as true for the six or seven letters that are considered genuine as well. Vossius even felt that the supposed authentic letters had to be reconstructed to fit the date and reflect the ecclesiastical circumstances of Ignatius. This being the

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<sup>9</sup> Martiales (1608: Ad Polycarpum, ep.VII): "In uisibilem natura, uisibile in carne. Impalpabilem & intactū, ut corporem uero propter nos."

<sup>10</sup> The surprising support for the long recension by manuscript evidence is discussed by Crehan (1957: 23-32). To keep the integrity of the short recension alive, Crehan resorts to the invention of a supposed reviser who made adding verses from the Old Testament his rather freaky hobby. Reasoning along these lines, Crehan concludes that because the extra part of Polycarp hardly ever refers to Old Testament Scripture it should be regarded authentic. Cf. Schoedel's discussion of the 'middle recension' (1987:1-10).

case, one should reasonably argue whether the criterion is manuscript evidence or a preconceived idea about the beliefs and ideas of early second century Christianity.

The only letters that can and should be rejected on textual and historical grounds are the Latin those corresponding with Mother Mary and the Apostle John. No literary unity with the corpus, no manuscripts in the original to support them (no indication of any Greek transmission) and proposing a historically most unlikely correspondence which extended to the realm of the dead. Their contents and historical pretence is so far removed from the other letters in the Ignatian corpus, that they may easily be discarded as ‘pious’ Medieval falsifications. The other letters, about thirteen, must be reckoned with, particularly the congregational ones. These seem to be an integral part of the broader corpus of Ignatian letters, as historical textual transmission has handed these down through the ages.

The disturbing element in this debate is that it reveals a logical fallacy and carries a great element of faith in preconceived positions. It may be that there was a short recension of some sort in a distant past, but how to distil this from a manuscript tradition that is as such rejected is anybody’s guess. The Vossian recension implicitly denies the reliability of the tradition that carries the letters. In this context, doctrinal conclusions about Ignatius’ era become decisive rather than literary considerations. This is especially shown by the discussion about his supposed ‘high church’ convictions about office and sacrament. These doctrinal conclusions may be warranted, but why force these on textual unities that do not seem to be bothered by these considerations? Perhaps it would be more straightforward to reject the whole corpus as not authentic on this doctrinal-historical basis. The main problem of modern Ignatian research is this subjective doctrinal criterion that wants to cling to seven letters, versus a textual tradition that indicates either a wider corpus or a massive fraud. Acceptance or rejection does not take place on the basis of the facts, but on the basis of one’s understanding of the times and theological concepts in the first decades of the second century, when the bishop was supposed to have written these epistles on his way to martyrdom.

The long recension is not the only contrary position of the Vossian consensus that developed after the Reformation. Some prominent scholars like Joly (1979) and Ruis-Camps (1980, 1989:175-184, 1995:199-214) advocate an even more reduced selection and only recognize three or four letters as genuine. One can rightly question the foundation of such new selections. In many cases a new hypothesis about “the real Ignatius” is forced on the text, and what does not fit in, has to go. The “seven letter”-hypothesis, at least, tried to keep in touch with historical sources by appealing to Eusebius (cf. Trevett 1984:165-171). All in all, even Trevett, who opposed Ruis-Camps, had to admit that “there is little that is certain in Ignatian studies” (1984:165).

### **3. Four rejected letters and the Bible**

Because of the Eusebian standard or prejudice, depending on one’s point of view, four letters that had been commonly accepted as genuine until Vossius, were now

excluded. It was very difficult to prove, based on contents and textual tradition, why these were less acceptable than e.g. the letter to Polycarp. *Eusebius locutus, causa finita est*, became the hard and fast rule for Ignatian scholarship. As a result the letters to the congregations in Philippi, Tarsus and Antioch, as well as the one to the deacon Heron, suffered rejection. A closer look at their contents proves interesting.

Baptism is the main object of the letter to the Philippians (Martiales 1608:86, Vossius 1680:58). The other three epistles cast an interesting light on Ignatius' supposed knowledge of Scripture, something which is usually very much reduced by the proponents of the "seven letters"-hypothesis. One is left with the feeling that for some scholars, the main instrument of corruption of the supposed short recension was the inclusion of extra Scripture references. For some reason or other Ignatius would originally have been incapable to display a wide, knowledge of Scripture. This argument proves quite inconclusive as there are many early Christian authors who quote extensively from Scripture, not in the least within the New Testament itself.

The mail to the Christians in Tarsus shows that Ignatius was familiar with: Daniel 6, I Corinthians 16, Galatians 3, Galatians 6, Romans 6, I Timothy 2, Colossians 1, John 20, I Corinthians 7 and Proverbs 8.<sup>11</sup> Ignatius sends his greetings with the Biblical formula of blessing: "the Lord be with you!" (Martiales 1608:84.)

The remaining two letters are addressed to Christians in Ignatius' hometown of Antioch. The first is a general writing to the congregation (Martiales 1608:85). The second letter to Antioch is a special message for the deacon Heron, who would become Ignatius' successor as overseer.

The general epistle claims to have been written from Philippi. Striking is Ignatius' use of the Old Testament references (cf. Klevinghaus 1948). The quotes make a very genuine and natural impression. The author doesn't pluck verses out of context and intended meaning to serve his new purpose. Every quote seems to do sufficient justice to its original reference in Scripture. Amongst other things, Ignatius warns against the fire and brimstone that was cast from heaven upon Sodom and Gomorra.<sup>12</sup> Ignatius feels at one with the prophets of old, who eagerly waited the Lord.<sup>13</sup> He sees Messiah Jesus in Isaiah's prophecies about the Immanuel's token and the suffering servant of the Lord.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> In his letter to the congregation in Tarsus, Ignatius refers to Daniel 6 (Martiales 1608:71); 1 Corinthians and Galatians 3 (1608:73); Galatians 6, Romans 6 (1608:75); 1 Timothy 2, Colossians 1, John 20, 1 Corinthians 7 en Proverbs 8 (1608:77).

<sup>12</sup> Reinhardus (1537: Ad Antiochenses ex Philippis, Epistola VIII): "Ignem & sulphur a domino de coelo."

<sup>13</sup> Reinhardus (1537: Ad Antiochenses ex Philippis, Epistola VIII): "Prophetam suscitabit vobis dominus deus vester sicut me... de domino nostro Iesu Christo, rursum prophetae proclamaverunt dicentes. Ecce puer natus est nobis,... Nam & de incarnatione eius ex virgine dicunt. Ecce virgo concipiet in utero & pariet filium, & vocabitur nomen Emanuel. Et de passione eius nihil ominus adiecerunt, dicentes: sicut ovis ad occisionem ductus est, & sicut agnus coram tondente sine voce."

Ignatius' respect for the Old Testament is particularly evidenced by his Scripture references in the letter to Heron. The bishop emphatically states that whosoever has something against the Law and the Prophets, has joined forces with the antichrist!<sup>15</sup> Could one put it any stronger?

The Ignatius that is put forward by the manuscript tradition used Scripture freely and literally, showing himself a careful exegete in his use of the Bible, rather a fundamentalist, consistent with the other early Church fathers, who understood the Old and New Testament scriptures as reliable historical sources and presented these to their readers as the end of all doubt.

#### **4. Eleven, seven or nothing?**

From the previous it is clear that the Renaissance consensus to accept a body of eleven congregational letters as authentic rests on reasonable grounds. From an historic and text-critical perspective their case seems stronger than that of the proponents of the Vossian recension. The short recension exists only in the minds of scholars and has no firm basis in any of the manuscript traditions. It is nowhere existent in its pure form. All manuscripts contain a "long recension" of some sort, even the main source, the codex Mediceus Laurentius lxii.7. But why could this codex not have been an abridgement rather than supposing interpolations in the longer recension? Abridgements are not exactly unfamiliar to the transmission of Ignatian letters. Even supporters of the Vossian recension had to admit that a Syriac version that was discovered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century turned out to be an abridgement of the (possibly) 'corrupted' Western tradition.<sup>16</sup> This was eventually admitted, despite the fact that it was initially suggested that this Syriac version represented the original text.

Perhaps one should make this apply further. If ancient shortened versions of Ignatius' letters existed in Syriac in medieval times, why could the same not have happened in the Greek version? For all that we know the short recension is based on a Syriac abridgement that was mistaken for the original by some monk in the Greek speaking Byzantine Empire. It is a distinct possibility. The manuscript tradition is just too weak to make firm statements either way. What we can say, however, is that the existence of the Syriac abridgement gives face-value support to a long recension.

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Isaiah 7:14; 53:7.

<sup>15</sup> Reinhardus (1537: *Ad Heronem ecclesiae, Antiochenae diaconum, quem et dominus ostendit se surum ins sede ipsius, ex Philippis, Epistola nona*): "Si quis insalsaverit legem & Prophetas, quos Christus praesens adimplevit, sit tibi tanquam Antichristus."

<sup>16</sup> At first sight the Syrian version seems to be an abridgement of the letters to Ephesus, Rome and Polycarp. The reliability of the textual tradition on which this short version rests, cannot be substantiated. After their discovery in 1845, some thought them to represent the original version of the Ignatian letters. Defenders of the "seven letter"-hypotheses, like bishop Lightfoot, assessed the Syrian version as an abridgement of 'their' Greek text. Cf. Lipsius 1859, Lightfoot 1989.

However, there is one other alternative that should be contemplated. Who can say for certain that any of the letters that have been handed down as coming from Ignatius is genuine? We may never know if any of these, not even the Vossian selection from this wider body, was really written by the second century martyr. History indicates that he wrote letters, but whether we possess the real thing is an open question. It could well be that the collection of letters is some pious Christian literary product in memory of Ignatius, stimulating religious sentiment in a later age that venerated martyrs and initiated cults around their demise. If Ignatius indeed became a martyr, as the reports of his actual execution are very late and contradictory. All that the letters show us, is the description of a man who anticipates martyrdom. The epistles are lacking in historical detail as to the times and surroundings that would have enabled us to look at this process with more discernment. The manuscript tradition cannot be called strong or conclusive either. The oldest fragment of papyrus, which no more than presupposes a complete letter to the Smyrneans, cannot be dated before the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD.<sup>17</sup>

Despite these considerations, one should realize that the text of the longer recension actually pleads against such a scenario. Not Ignatius, but God and particularly his holy Word are the focus of these letters. There is extensive Bible reference and mature and balanced exegesis in the long recension. In a context of venerating martyrs one would have expected a larger emphasis on action and bravery, like in the early martyrs' acts, more of Ignatius the man. One would expect additions and interpolations to reflect this. Instead we find Bible verses and theology. Add to this the general emphasis of the eleven congregational letters to follow God, Jesus and the Apostles, and then a fake literary production from a martyrs-cult becomes a less likely scenario.

Whatever might be one's judgement in this matter of authenticity, the question remains whether a theological conclusion about Ignatius can be responsibly based on the selection of only seven letters from a wider body that seems a literary unity. This question should probably be answered in the negative.

As Vossius was discussed it became clear that the reasons for this selection were not wholly motivated by a comprehensive historical method. Vossius lived in a historical context of aversion to Roman Catholicism, the ecclesiastical system and secular power of which proved to be a great threat to the protestant faith, freedoms and safety in continental Europe and the UK. As Ignatius seemed to lend his support to the ecclesiastical organisation of the Roman Church, discrediting Ignatius meant undermining some of the historic sources for what was regarded a wicked and violent church system that posed a major threat to one's life and safety. Even the learned Vossius must have been a child of his century, writing during the 80-year war between the united provinces of the Netherlands and the Roman

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<sup>17</sup> The Berlin Papyrus contains a small portion of Ignatius' letter to the congregation in Smyrna (Ad Smyrn. iii.3-xii.1). It is known as P.10581 and was published in 1910 by C. Schmidt & W. Hubert, *Altchristliche texte in the Berliner Klassikertexte*, Heft VI. Cf. Lake 1977: 170).

Catholic house of Habsburg. The Dutch government was always keen if scholars proved their loyalty to the new protestant order and did their bit to prevent a new edition of the Spanish inquisition.

Vossius had a profound knowledge of Greek and Latin. This has become rare these days, and may be partly the reason for a lack of interest in the contents of the other Ignatian letters that exist. This offers an explanation to the fact that twentieth century research has mainly concerned itself with upholding the selection of seven epistles, or reducing them, not with comparative research of the rest of the corpus.

## 5. Conclusion

Ignatius' letters can only be approached from two workable hypotheses.

- a) Eleven congregational letters are recognized in a more or less reliable textual transmission that has its originals in the Ignatius of Antioch in the second century.
- b) The corpus of letters, as textual history presents them, is unreliable. Whether their origins are to some extent in Ignatius historical letters or not, views of the bishop cannot be properly established on this basis as their textual tradition is simply not authentic. They might be classified as Ignatian material (in the spiritual sense, written in what was considered in his spirit and passed on in circles of those who admired Ignatius) at best. One may be edified by their theological content, but should not use them to establish any views or practices of the Church in the early decades of the second century.

False or genuine, the letters of Ignatius have indeed proved themselves a stimulus for theological thought during many centuries. True or false, they have continued to encourage Christians to follow God and to revere his holy Word, and to be an inspiration to many. Perhaps this is where the future contribution of Ignatian research may be found.

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