

FACTFILE: GCE RELIGIOUS STUDIES

UNIT AS 4: EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITERS



Early Christian Writers

The Apostolic Fathers

The term 'apostolic fathers' is applied to the writings of some disciples and successors of the 12 apostles. In a general sense, the term applies to many early church leaders in the late 1st and early 2nd centuries. In a more restricted sense, the term applies to a group of Greek-speaking leaders who were martyrs and writers in the late 1st and early 2nd centuries.

Although their writings were not included in the New Testament, they were understood as a continuation of the writings of the apostles themselves and were often read in church services. They had a recognized authority because they were 'close to Jesus'. Arguably, the most famous writings include those of I and II Clement, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas.

Ignatius of Antioch

Ignatius was bishop of Antioch in Syria c. 68/75–c. 116. Nothing is known of Ignatius prior to his time as bishop. Syria was a cosmopolitan city with Greek culture and language. In the Christian era it was the third ranking city in the Roman Empire (after Rome & Alexandria). It had a famous main street which was 2 miles long with double storied colonnades on each side. Additionally it had a large hippodrome, 2 theatres, a library and imperial palace (built by Diocletian), numerous temples (8 in 4th century) and a large octagonal church. The population of Antioch in the 4th century was about 500,000–800,000.

The Church in Antioch was founded by Palestinian Christians fleeing Jerusalem. The believers were first called 'Christians' in Antioch (Acts 11:19–26). Barnabas and Paul were sent by the church in Antioch on the first missionary journey.

There were some difficulties between Jewish and Gentile believers here (cf. Galatians 2:1–4). Antioch was a Gentile Church experienced frequent clashes with the local Jewish community.

Towards the end of Trajan's reign (98–117) Ignatius was arrested. He was taken, under armed guard, for trial in Rome. He is the first Christian martyr who gives us evidence of his state of mind as he approaches his martyrdom. On his journey to Rome Ignatius wrote 7 letters: from Smyrna he wrote to the churches in Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Rome and from Troas he wrote to the churches in Philadelphia and Smyrna and a personal letter to bishop Polycarp of Smyrna.

The letters of Ignatius give interesting information and insights into the second century Church (by the topics raised) and also into his own personality (highly strung, passionately devoted to Christ and eagerly anticipating his own martyrdom).

Ignatius travelled as a prisoner across Asia Minor and the last information about him is at Troas. Both Ignatius and Origen testify to his martyrdom in Rome. (possibly in the Colosseum). The official 'Acts' of his martyrdom is a late document and relatively untrustworthy.



The Letters of Ignatius

1. Letter to Ephesus

Background

Ephesus was a major port on west coast of Asia Minor with an estimated population of c. 250,000 in the 2nd century. Paul preached here for 2 and 3 year periods (Acts 19:10; 20:31).

Paul wrote *I and II Corinthians* and *Romans* and *I and II Timothy* while in Ephesus. The disciple John was bishop of Ephesus.

The letter consists of 21 sections.

Themes

Bishop

This is an important theme for Ignatius. The bishop is the ultimate leader and represents Christ. (cf. sections 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 20).

Analogies

Two analogies are employed; music (section 4) and a building (section 9).

Harmony/Unity

A musical analogy encourages church unity (section 4). Ignatius commands unity and forbids anyone to be in isolation from the congregation (section 5).

Pure Teaching

Christians are to avoid heresy (section 6) and 'evil doctrine' (section 9). They are to be in agreement with the apostles (section 11) following authentic teaching. Evil teaching corrupts faith and leads to eternal punishment (section 16).

Christology

Ignatius preserves a careful balance in understanding both the human and divine nature of Christ. For example; human and divine (section 7), 'seed of David and Holy Spirit' (section 18), the 3 mysteries of conception, birth, death (section 19), 'God appeared in human form' (section 19) and 'Son of man & Son of God' (section 20).

The Devil

Permit 'no weed of the devil' (section 10). 'the powers of Satan are overthrown ...' (section 13).

Ignatius

'I am a convict.' Should this be interpreted literally, after his trial in Antioch, or is it simply a figure of speech (section 12)? 'I am a sacrifice' seems a reference to his coming death (section 18). He intended to write a second letter to the Ephesians (section 20). He is writing from Smyrna where Polycarp is bishop (section 21). He is 'in chains'. Should this be taken literally or is it a figure of speech (section 21)?

The Church

The church is holy so a distinguishing mark is its 'incorruptibility' (section 17).

Eucharist

The Eucharist is the Section 20: Eucharist = 'medicine of immortality' (section 20). Is this a superstitious understanding or a clever analogy?

2. Letter to Magnesia

Background

Magnesia was an important regional centre containing an Imperial mint and treasury. It was famous for its mysterious local stones that could repel and attract metal (magnets).

The letter consists of 15 sections.

Themes

Bishop

Individuals are named; Bishop Damas, Presbyters Bassus & Apollonius and Deacon Zotion as '*subject to the bishop*' (section 2). Jesus Christ is '*the Bishop of all*' (section 3). '*do not take advantage of the youthfulness of your bishop*' (section 3). False Christians are those who can call a man bishop then act independently of him (section 4). Harmony occurs when bishop, presbyters and deacons combine... '*be united with the bishop*' (section 6). You must not do anything without the bishop and the presbyters (section 7). Prosper ...with your bishop, presbytery & deacons...'*be subject to the bishop and to one another, as Jesus Christ in the flesh*' (section 13).

Analogies

Three analogies are employed: coinage (section 5), baking (section 10) and a crown (section 13).

Harmony/Unity

... *'be united with the bishop and with those who lead'* (section 6). *'one prayer, one petition, one mind, one hope ...'* (section 7).

Christology

Section 11: *'do not get snagged on the hooks of worthless opinion'* ... focus upon the reality of Jesus Christ – his birth, suffering, resurrection under Pontius Pilate.

Ignatius

'Remember me in your prayers' and *'the church in Syria'* (section 14). Ignatius, in writing from Smyrna, mentions Ephesians, Polycarp and the Smyrnaens (section 15).

Judaism

Christians and Jews clashed frequently in the Early Church era, mainly over Old Testament interpretation and identifying Jesus as the Messiah. To hold to Judaism is to reject grace (section 8). Christians should keep the Lord's Day rather than the Sabbath (section 9). Judaism is like old leaven: stale and sour (section 10). Perhaps the initial trouble for Ignatius in Antioch was a conflict between Jews and Christians.

3. Letter to Tralles

Background

Tralles was situated in a fertile region of the Menderes River valley.

The letter consists of 13 sections.

Themes**Bishop**

'Polybius your bishop ... visited me in Smyrna' (section 1). Be *'subject to the bishop as to Jesus Christ'* *'do nothing without the bishop'* *'be subject to the presbytery'* *'deacons'* (section 2). Respect the deacons, bishop and presbyters. *'Without these no group can be called a church'*. The power of Bishop Polybius is his gentleness (section 3). The presbyters are to encourage the bishop (section 12). Good Christians are *'subject to the bishop ...and likewise to the presbytery'* (section 13).

Analogies

Three analogies are employed: babies (section 5), cleanliness (section 7) and poison (sections 6 and 11).

Harmony/Unity

As a head and limbs united, so *'God promises unity'* (section 11).

Christology

Faith in Christ's resurrection delivers us from death (section 2). Christ's death (his flesh and blood) is referred to (section 8). There is an emphasis on the real humanity of Jesus -possibly Docetism was a problem in Tralles (section 9). More anti-Docetism sentiments (section 10).

Ignatius

Ignatius – *'called Theophorus,' 'a prisoner in Jesus Christ'* (section 1). *'I, a convict'* – a possible reference to his earlier trial in Antioch? (section 3). Ignatius has a strong desire to be martyred (section 4). *'Why do I want to fight with wild beasts?' (section 10). 'Pray... that I may be worthy of the fate which I am eager to obtain' (section 12).*

The Church

'the holy church at Tralles . . . at peace in flesh and spirit' (section 1). The bishop, presbyters and deacons are the essential mark of the church (section 3).

Devil

'I foresee the snares of the devil' (section 8).

4. Letter to Rome

Background

Rome was capital of Empire and (soon to be) the most important church in the world.

The letter consists of 10 sections.

Note the elaborate introduction – *'worthy of God, honour, blessing, praise, success, sanctification'*

Themes**Bishop**

Ignatius refers to himself as a bishop (section 2). In regard to his own church in Syria (i.e. Antioch), he says, *'Christ alone will be its bishop'* (section 9). There are no other references to 'bishop' in this letter, possibly because Rome already knew of the importance of this position.

Analogies

Two analogies are employed: the rising and setting sun (section 2) and slaves gaining freedom (section 4).

Christology

Mention of the Father and Son (not Holy Spirit) in Introduction. *'Jesus Christ is more visible now than he is in the Father'* (section 3).

Ignatius

Ignatius is called '*called Theophorus*' (same phrase as Tralles 1); '*provided that I attain the grace to receive my fate without interference*' (section 1). He has a golden opportunity to reach God now, wishes to be poured out as an offering to God and has been declared worthy by God to be found in the West (section 2). He wishes to prove that he is really a Christian, not only in name (section 3). Do not interfere '*I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts ... a sacrifice to God*', '*I am a convict...a slave...suffer ...freedman of Jesus Christ*' (section 4). Ignatius is very keen to die under attack from wild animals. He is bound with 10 Roman soldiers (section 5). He pleads to be allowed to follow Christ's example in death (section 6). He is in love with death (section 7). He has received practical support from churches near his route (section 9). '*I am writing to you on the 9th day before the Kalends of September*' –24 August (section 10). Was Ignatius simply a very strong Christian who was fully prepared to die as a martyr, or has he perhaps an unhealthy death wish fuelled by a theological conviction that martyrdom is equivalent to a second baptism?

Devil

The ruler of this age wants to take me captive' (section 7).

5. Letter to Philadelphia**Background**

Philadelphia was one of the 'seven churches' of Revelation, the only one to receive praise. The church here was persecuted by Jews in the 1st century.

The letter consists of 11 sections.

Themes**Bishop**

The bishop is chosen by God & impressed Ignatius with his gentleness (section 1). '*Those who belong to God & JC are with the bishop ...the unity of the church*' (section 3). As there is one cup at Eucharist and one altar so there is one bishop, symbols of Christian unity (section 4). '*Pay attention to the bishop and to the presbytery and to the deacons,*' '*Do nothing without the bishop*' (section 7). '*... return to the unity of God and the council of the bishop*' (section 8). Some neighbouring churches have sent bishops, presbyters, deacons to church in Antioch where peace has now been restored (section 10).

Analogies

Three analogies are employed: The John 10 biblical image of shepherd and sheep (section 2), evil plants (section 3) and the High Priest (section 9).

Christology

Mention of the Father and Son (not Holy Spirit) in Introduction. The ultimate authority in church is Jesus Christ and '*the archives*' -Bible? – (section 8).

Holy Spirit

'The Spirit is not deceived ... it is from God ...exposes hidden things' – it? he? (section 7). Is the Early Church theology of the Holy Spirit deficient?

Ignatius

Section 10: Ignatius has heard that peace has been restored in Antioch church and wants a deacon sent from Philadelphia. Some neighbouring churches have sent bishops, presbyters, deacons (section 10). This letter is written from Troas (section 11).

Devil

'Flee the evil tricks and traps of the ruler of this age' (section 6).

Harmony/Unity

Be at one with bishop, presbyters and deacons (Introduction). '*Flee division and false teaching*' (section 2). '*Those who belong to God and Jesus Christ are with the bishop...the unity of the church.*' '*A schismatic...will not inherit the Kingdom of God*' (section 3).

As there is one cup at Eucharist and one altar so there is one bishop, symbols of Christian unity (section 4). '*God does not dwell where there is division and anger... return to the unity of God and the council of the bishop*' (section 8).

Judaism

Reject Judaism: to be a Jewish Christian is better than a Gentile Jew (section 6).

Eucharist

As there is one cup at Eucharist and one altar so there is one bishop, symbols of Christian unity (section 4).

6. Letter to Smyrna

Background

Smyrna was a coastal city famous for its wealth, architecture and scientific studies. The church here was one of the seven in the book of Revelation.

The letter consists of 13 sections.

Themes

Bishop

Follow the bishop and the presbytery and respect the deacons. *'Let no one do anything that has to do with the church without the bishop.'* *'Only that Eucharist which is under the authority of the bishop is ...valid.'* *Wherever the bishop appears, there let the congregation be; just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church.'* *This is the first written usage of the phrase 'the catholic church.'* *'It is not permissible either to baptize or to hold a love feast without the bishop.'* (section 8). *'It is good to acknowledge God and the bishop. The one who honours the bishop has been honoured by God; the one who does anything without the bishop's knowledge serves the devil'* (section 9). *'I greet the bishop... the presbytery...the deacons'* (section 12).

Analogies

Three analogies are employed: 'a safe harbour' (section 11).

Christology

Mention of the Father and Son (not Holy Spirit) in Introduction. A very explicit reference to Jesus Christ as human & divine section 1). *'Jesus truly suffered ...was truly raised ...not in appearance'* (section 2). A further expansion regarding 'doubting Thomas' – Jesus Christ was really flesh (section 3). *'Certain people ignorantly deny him'* (Christ). Even angels will be judged if they do not believe in the blood of Christ (section 5). Heretics have no compassion for others & abstain from Eucharist (section 6). Avoid such people (heretics) (section 7). The suffering of Jesus Christ *'was both physical and spiritual'* (section 12).

Ignatius

Ignatius is called *'called Theophorus'* (Introduction). On martyrdom; to be *'near the sword is to be near God and to be with the beasts is to be with God'* (section 4). Thanks for helping Philo, Rhiaius and Agathopus, his helpers -cf. Phil 11 – (section 10). Send an ambassador to congratulate the church in Antioch as peace has been restored there. My 'God-pleasing chains.' *'By your prayer I may reach God'* - through martyrdom? (section 11). Ignatius is writing from Troas via Burrhus (cf. Eph 2) (section 12).

Harmony/Unity

'Flee from divisions, as the beginnings of evils' (section 8).

Pure Teaching

A warning against even meeting false teachers; *'wild beasts in human form'* (section 4).

7. Letter to Polycarp

Background

Polycarp was the bishop of Smyrna. He heard the disciple John preach and was appointed in Smyrna by apostles. He wrote several letters to surrounding churches but only his letter to Philippi survives. Polycarp was arrested and executed; the earliest account of a Christian martyrdom outside the New Testament.

The letter consists of 8 sections.

Themes

Bishop

'To Polycarp...who has God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ as his bishop' (Introduction). *'Let nothing be done without your consent'* (section 4). In relation to boasting regarding chastity, *'If it is known to anyone other than the bishop, he is ruined.'* *'It is proper for men and women who marry to be united with the consent of the bishop'* (section 5). *'Pay attention to the bishop, in order that God may pay attention to you.'* *'...those who are obedient to the bishop, presbyters and deacons'* (section 6).

Analogies

Three analogies are employed: medicine (section 1), ships (section 2) and occupations (section 6).

Christology

Mention of the Father and Son (not Holy Spirit) in Introduction. *'We wait expectantly for him who is above time: the Eternal, the Invisible, who for our sake became visible; the Intangible, the Unsuffering, who for our sake suffered'* (section 3).

Holy Living

'Do not let the widows be neglected' *'Do not treat slaves...contemptuously'* (section 4).

Sexuality/family relations

'Tell my sisters to love the Lord and to be content with their husbands physically and spiritually.' *'Command my brothers to love their wives.'* *'If anyone is able to remain chaste...without boasting.'* *'It is proper for men and women who marry to be*

united with the consent of the bishop ... not due to lustful passions' (section 5).

Ignatius

Ignatius is called 'called Theophorus' (Introduction). 'The church at Antioch in Syria is at peace through your prayer' so send someone to Antioch. 'Through suffering I reach God' (section 7).

Harmony/Unity

'Focus on unity, for there is nothing better' (section 1).

Summary

The key themes in the letters of Ignatius are:

1. The importance of the bishop (he represents Jesus Christ)
2. The importance of maintaining unity and peace within the church
3. The importance of having a correct knowledge of Jesus (human and divine)
4. The need to guard against all Judaising influences
5. The glory of Christian martyrdom

Justin Martyr

Justin is the most important of the second century Greek Apologists. He contended with great zeal on various fronts, against the Roman State, pagan philosophy, Judaism and heretical Christianity.

The date of his birth is unknown, could be late first or early second century. He was born in Flavia Neapolis in Samaria (biblical Shechem and now Nablus on West Bank). Justin was 'son of Priscus and grandson of Baccius' and neither of his parents were Christians.

By 132–5 he had studied philosophy, become a Christian and engaged in evangelistic work.

Justin tried several philosophies in turn (e.g. Stoicism, Aristotelianism, Pythagoreanism and Platonism) but unconvinced by each of them. He admired the founding leaders but thought the contemporary followers were too uncritical in their acceptance.

His quest for truth eventually led him to Christianity and he was converted c. 130–5 as an adult (cf. *Dialogue* 2–8). He observed Christian bravery in the face of death and this made a significant contribution to his own conversion. Honest searching after truth and humble prayer

brought him finally to faith in Christ. 'I confess that I both prayed and strove with all my might to be found a Christian' (*Apol.* 2, 13). Justin was most likely converted in Ephesus.

He seems to have lived here for some time both learning and teaching the Christian faith and devoted the rest of his life to the defence of Christianity.

Justin wore a *pallium* (a Greek philosopher's cloak) and travelled as an itinerant teacher. He arrived in Rome during the reign of Antoninus Pius (138–161) and founded a school there.

Here he argued with a fierce opponent, the Cynic philosopher Crescens (2 *Apol.* 3.1). An authentic account of his death has survived, based upon official court proceedings.

Justin challenged the Roman judicial treatment of Christians in his 2 *Apology* and this brought him into conflict with the authorities in Rome. The city prefect, Junius Rusticus, challenged Justin to make a pagan sacrifice but he refused. As a result, Justin and six other Christians were scourged and then beheaded in Rome c.165 (certainly between 163–7). Hence his name: Justin Martyr.

The Writings of Justin Martyr

Eusebius knew of 8 works of Justin, but only 3 have survived and all on a poor quality 14th century manuscript dated 1364. There is also a 1541 manuscript which is a copy of the 1364 manuscript.

The 3 writings are: **1 and 2 Apologies** against the pagans and his **Dialogue** with the Jew Trypho. Justin's writing style is not pleasant. His apologies appear to have no thought out plan. He follows the inspiration of the moment, digresses frequently and is often disjointed.

He favours long sentences and is rarely eloquent. However, his writings represent an open and honest attempt to reach an understanding with his opponents.

Both apologies were composed in Rome in reign of Antoninus Pius (138–161). In **1 Apology** 1.46. Justin states, 'Christ was born 150 years ago under Quirinius'. If Jesus was born at Bethlehem in 6BC then 1 Apology was written in AD 144.

There is some scholarly debate about the relation between the two apologies. Perhaps 2 Apology was originally an appendix of 1 Apology and the real 2 apology has been lost!

Other scholars doubt that there ever was a 2 apology.

1. First Apology

1 Apology comprises 68 chapters and is addressed to Emperor Antoninus Pius. Chapters 1–3 form an introduction. Justin pleads with Antoninus to form his own opinion about Christianity without listening to mob bias or hatred.

The main part of 1 Apology has 2 parts; Chapters 4–12 represent a criticism of government judicial procedure employed against Christians. Why should an individual suffer simply for admitting the name 'Christian'? Christians are not 'atheists', they worship the true God, not pagan gods who are not gods.

Christians are good citizens; they live by a code of high personal morals and are the best supporters of government.

Chapters 13–67 represents a justification of Christianity. Divine prophecies prove that Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus founded Christianity in order to transform and repair mankind.

The demons imitated Old Testament prophecies and so pagan religion can resemble Christianity. Justin also describes Christian baptism, eucharist, and social life.

Chapter 68 is an immensely important document for Church history. It records a copy of Hadrian's direction to Minucius Fundanus, proconsul of Asia, c. A.D.125.

Here are given 4 regulations to ensure just and correct court procedure against Christians.

1. Christians should be sentenced through a regular procedure before a criminal court.
2. A condemnation can take place only where there is proof that the defendants committed an offence against Roman law.
3. Punishment must be proportionate to the nature and the degree of their crimes.
4. Every false accusation must be punished severely.

2. Second Apology

This work begins by relating a recent incident in Rome. The prefect, Urbicus, had beheaded 3 Christians simply because they confessed to being Christians. Justin appeals directly to the Roman people at the injustice of this action. He believes that persecutions against Christians are at the instigation of the demons against truth and virtue.

Such persecution gave the Christians an opportunity to demonstrate the superiority of their religion over all pagan philosophies. Justin concludes with an appeal for the Emperor to judge Christianity according to justice, piety, and love of truth.

3. Dialogue with Trypho the Jew

The Dialogue was composed after the Apologies. This is the oldest existing Christian apology against the Jews and consists of 142 chapters. It was probably the longest Christian book then written; almost as long as the 4 gospels. It is not complete as the introduction and much of chapter 74 are lost. Chapters 2–8. Are an account by Justin of his intellectual development and conversion to Christianity. They contain important personal information.

Chapters 9–47 comprise a Christian view of the Old Testament in which Justin argues that the Mosaic Law had only temporary jurisdiction. Christianity is the new and eternal law for all mankind.

Chapters 48–108 is a justification for the adoration of Jesus as God.

Chapters 109–142 represents a comprehensive argument that the nations who believe in Christ are the new Israel, the true divinely chosen people.

At the end of the Dialogue Trypho is not converted and he and Justin part with courtesy and good feeling.

It is perhaps a little unfair to judge Justin as a theologian on his surviving works. His pure theological works have not survived. His apologies attempt to find common ground with Greek philosophy and then demonstrate that Christianity is the best philosophy.

Four areas of his teaching are of note:

a) Logos.

The doctrine of the Logos is the most important in Justin. This doctrine forms the bridge between pagan philosophy and Christianity. Although the Divine Logos appeared only in its fullness in Christ, yet every human being possesses in his reason a seed (*sperma*) of the Logos.

b) Mary-Eve.

Justin is the first Christian writer to expand Paul's notion of Adam-Christ. He similarly compares Eve-Mary.

'For Eve, who was a virgin and undefiled, having conceived the word of the serpent, brought forth disobedience and death. But the Virgin Mary received faith and joy when the Angel Gabriel announced the good tidings to her...'

c) Angels and Demons.

Justin attributed human like bodies to angels. The angels ate 'manna' (*Dial.* 57) and the Israelites ate 'angel's food'. 'The angels transgressed this appointment and were captivated by love of women and begot children who are those that are called demons'. (*Apol.* 2,5.)

Demons exist to prevent human conversions to the Logos. The demons blinded the Jews to Christ and made them crucify him. The demons use heretics to confuse and mislead people.

d) Baptism and Eucharist.

Justin's description of baptism and Eucharist are very valuable.

Baptism.

Preparation for baptism is with prayer and fasting. Baptism is always in the triune Name. This washing (baptism) is called 'illumination'.

Eucharist.

Justin gives two descriptions; a first Eucharist and regular Eucharist.

i) first eucharist. (*Apol.* 65)

This follows immediately after baptism and prayers. Worshippers greet each other with a kiss. The president gives thanks at some length for the bread and wine (mixed with water).

All those present say 'Amen' at end of these prayers. The deacons distribute bread and wine to all present and keep portions for those absent. Only Christians who have been baptised may participate.

ii) regular eucharist. (*Apol.* 67)

This is celebrated every Sunday (God completed creation and Christ rose on this day). The 'memoirs of the apostles' (gospels) and prophets are read. The president verbally exhorts and instructs us to imitate what we have heard. The entire congregation stands together for prayer and everyone says 'Amen'. Bread and wine is brought in. The president gives thanks and once more everyone says 'Amen'. The bread and wine are distributed with some retained for those who are absent. There is a collection. for widows, orphans, and the poor, prisoners and strangers on journeys.

