



The Post-Apostolic Fathers: Polycarp of Smyrna

Who was Polycarp of Smyrna?

Polycarp was the overseer of the Assembly at Smyrna during the end of the 1st century CE. Both Irenaeus and Tertullian, 2nd century witnesses, attest that he was a disciple of John the Apostle. It is also known of Polycarp, mainly through the attestation of Irenaeus, that he was companions with both Papias of Hieropolis and Ignatius of Antioch.

A study of Polycarp from a Hebraic perspective will prove most interesting; it is believed from the account of his martyrdom (and through tradition) that he kept the weekly Sabbaths, and furthermore that he was martyred on “the great Sabbath,” i.e. Passover. He was even called “a Nazarene” by Jewish Rabbi Isaac in the 15th century. Some have speculated that, under his oversight, the Assembly at Smyrna was also observant of the Sabbath.

Quite possibly one of the most intriguing things about Polycarp is that he, like many of the New Testament writings, teaches obedience to the commandments of God, but unlike others, he does so through a very much “New Testament” focused way. His overt acceptance of the Apostolic Writings as Scripture is relatively unique to his writings as compared to (for instance) Clement of Rome.

Polycarp’s gentle approach to obedience to God’s commands serves as a strong reminder us today that the Shepherds of our flocks should be likewise gentle in their approach; “feeding the flock of God, and taking the oversight thereof not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but being examples to the flock.” (1 Peter 5:2-3)

Authorship of the Letter of Polycarp

There is little to no doubt that Polycarp’s letter to the Philippians is anything other than genuine.

Martyrdom of Polycarp

Though not included here, there is an account written from the perspective of the Assembly at Smyrna, recounting the martyrdom of their beloved overseer Polycarp. According to this account of his martyrdom, if it can be trusted, he was martyred on the “the great Sabbath” for his stark refusal to acknowledge Caesar as Lord, and to offer incense to him.

The Letter of Polycarp of Smyrna

to the Philippians

Chapter One

^{1:1} From Polycarp and the elders who are with him, to the Assembly of God which sojourns at Philippi. May mercy be upon, and peace be multiplied from God Almighty and from Yeshua the Messiah our Savior.

^{1:2} I rejoiced with you greatly in our Lord, Yeshua the Messiah, because you have received the followers of the true Love, and have escorted them on their way, as befitted you. Those men are encircled in saintly bonds, which are the diadems of those who are the truly chosen of God and of our Lord. ^{1:3} The steadfast root of your faith, which was famed from primitive times, abides until now, and bears fruit to our Lord, Yeshua the Messiah. He endured to face even death for our sins; ^{1:4} and God raised him, having loosed the reigns of Sheol. You believed on him with unspeakable joy, though you did not see him, full of glory. ^{1:5} Many desire to enter into this joy, knowing that *“it is by grace you are saved; not by works,”* ¹ but by the will of God through Yeshua the Messiah.

^{1:6} Gird up your loins, and serve God in fear and truth! Forsake the vain talk and empty speech, the error of the many, for you have believed on He who has raised our Lord, Yeshua the Messiah, from the dead, and has given Him glory and a throne at His right hand. ^{1:7} All things that are in heaven and on the earth were made subject to him, just as every creature that has breath serves him. He comes as judge of both the living and the dead, just as God will require an account of his blood from those who are disobedient to Him. ^{1:8} He who raised Him from the dead will raise us also if we do His will by walking in His commandments, by loving the things which He loved: ^{1:9} by abstaining from all unrighteousness, covetousness, love of money, evil speaking, bearing false witness; not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing, or blow for blow, or cursing for cursing; ^{1:10} but remembering the words which the Lord spoke as He taught, *“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged yourself. ² Forgive, and you will be forgiven. ³ Have mercy, and you will receive mercy. ⁴ With what measure you measure out, it will be measured back to you.”* ⁵ ^{1:11} Again, *“Blessed are the poor, and those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of God.”* ⁶

Chapter Two

^{2:1} I write these things to you, brethren, concerning righteousness, not because I took it upon myself to do so, but because you invited me. ^{2:2} For neither myself, nor any other man like me, is able to follow the wisdom of the blessed and renowned Paul, who, when he came among you, taught carefully and surely the Word of Truth. He also, in his absence, wrote you letters, ⁷ ^{2:3} which if you look into it diligently, you will be able to be built up in the faith which you have received; for this faith is the mother of us all. Hope follows after it, and this love goes before it: love toward God, love toward the Messiah, and love toward our neighbor. ^{2:4} For if any man is occupied with these, he has fulfilled the commandment of righteousness, for he who has love is far from all sin.

1 Ephesians 2:8

2 Matthew 7:1

3 Matthew 6:12,14; Luke 6:37

4 Luke 6:36

5 Matthew 7:2, Luke 6:38

6 Matthew 5:3,10; Luke 6:20

7 Specifically, Paul’s Letter to the Philippians; generically, any one of Paul’s letters.

^{2:5} However, *“The love of money is the beginning of all troubles.”* ⁸ Knowing that *“we brought nothing into the world, nor can we carry anything out from it,”* ⁹ let us arm ourselves with the armor of righteousness, ¹⁰ ^{2:6} and let us teach ourselves first to walk in the commandment of the LORD. Let us then teach our wives also to walk in the faith which has been given to them and in love and in purity, cherishing their own husbands in all truth, and loving all men equally in all chastity, and in training their children in the training of the fear of God.

^{2:7} Our widows must be discreet concerning the faith of the LORD, making intercession without ceasing for all men, abstaining from false accusations, evil speaking, false witness, love of money, and every evil thing, knowing that they are the alter of God; ^{2:8} for all sacrifices are carefully inspected, and nothing escapes Him from either their thoughts, their intents, or any of the secret things of their hearts.

^{2:9} Knowing then that *“God is not mocked,”* ¹¹ we ought to walk worthily of His commandment and His glory. Do these things like this.

^{2:10} Servants ¹² should be blameless in the presence of His righteousness; they should be Servants of God, and of the Messiah, and not of men; not false accusers, not double-tongued, not lovers of money, temperate in all things, compassionate, diligent, walking according to the truth of the Lord who became a Servant of all. ^{2:11} For if we are well pleasing to Him in this present world, we will receive the future world also, according to His promise us to raise us from the dead. If we conduct ourselves worthily of Him we will also reign with Him, if we indeed have faith.

^{2:12} In like manner, the younger men must be blameless in all things, caring for purity before everything and curbing themselves from every evil. For it is a good thing to refrain from the lusts of this world. Every lust wages war against the Spirit, and neither fornicators, nor the effeminate, nor homosexuals ¹³ will inherit the kingdom of God, nor those who do such foolish things. ^{2:13} It is right to abstain from all these things, submitting yourselves to the elders and servants ¹⁴ as to God and the Messiah.

^{2:14} The virgins must walk in a blameless and pure conscience.

^{2:15} The elders must be compassionate, merciful towards all men, turning back the sheep that have gone astray, visiting all the ill, and not neglecting a widow, an orphan, or a poor man; but always providing for that which is honorable in the sight of God and of men: ^{2:16} abstaining from all anger, showing partiality, unrighteous judgment, being far from all love of money, ^{2:17} not quick to believe anything against any man, not hasty in judgment, knowing that we all are debtors of sin.

^{2:18} If we beseech the LORD that He would forgive us, we also ought to forgive. We are before the eyes of the LORD our God; we must all stand at the judgment seat of the Messiah, and each man must give an account for himself. ^{2:19} Let us therefore serve Him with fear and all reverence, as He gave us the Commandments, the Apostles who preached the Besorah to us, and the Prophets who proclaimed beforehand the coming of our Lord. ^{2:20} Like them, let us be zealous for that which is good, abstaining from offenses, keeping far from the false brethren and from those who bear the name of the LORD in hypocrisy, who lead foolish men astray.

Chapter Three

^{3:1} Everyone who will not confess that Yeshua the Messiah has come in the flesh manifests the false Messiah. Whoever will not confess the testimony of the Cross is of the devil. ^{3:2} Whoever perverts the Words of the LORD to his own lusts, and says that there is neither resurrection nor judgment, is the firstborn of the Adversary. ^{3:3} Let us forsake the vain deeds of the many and their false teachings, and turn to the Word which was delivered to us from the beginning: ^{3:4} being sober to prayer, and constant in fasting; beseeching the all-seeing God with supplications, so that we are not brought into temptation. As the Lord said, *“The Spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak.”* ¹⁵

8 I Timothy 6:10

9 I Timothy 6:7

10 Ephesians 6:11

11 Galatians 6:7

12 Greek “diakonos”, Generally rendered as “deacons” in other translations.

13 Literally, “male-bed”, or a man who lays with other men. More figuratively translated, “defilers of themselves with men.” See Leviticus 18:22, 20:13.

14 Greek “diakonos”, here and below. Generally rendered as “deacons” in other translations.

15 Matthew 26:41

^{3:5} Without ceasing, let us hold fast by our hope and by the earnest of our righteousness, which is Yeshua the Messiah. He took up our sins in His own body upon the tree; He committed no sin, nor was deceit found in his mouth; but He endured all things for our sakes, that we might live in Him. ^{3:6} Let us become imitators of His endurance. If we should suffer for His name's sake, let it be to the glory of Him; for He gave us this example in His own person, and we believed this.

^{3:7} I exhort you to be obedient to the Word of righteousness, and to practice endurance, which you saw with your own eyes in the examples of the blessed Ignatius, Zosimus, Rufus, and others from among yourselves, and Paul, and the rest of the Apostles. ^{3:8} Being persuaded of these things, they did not run in vain, but ran in faith and righteousness. They are now in their due place, in the presence of the Lord, with whom they suffered. ^{3:9} For they did not love the present world, but instead they loved He who died for our sakes and was raised by God for us. ^{3:10} Stand fast in these things, and follow the example of the Lord, being firm in the faith and immovable, in love of the brotherhood, kindly affectionate to one to another, partners with the truth, being kind towards one another in the gentleness of the the LORD, despising no man.

^{3:11} When you are able to do good, do not decline to do it, for mercy delivers from death. ^{3:12} Be subject one to another, having your conversations blameless among the nations, that you may be praised by your good works, and that the LORD may not be blasphemed in you. Woe to him through whom the name of the LORD is blasphemed! ^{3:13} Teach all men sobriety, in which you yourselves also walk.

Chapter Four

^{4:1} I was exceedingly grieved for Valens, who in times past was an elder among you, because he became ignorant of the office which was given to him. I warn you to refrain from covetousness, and to be pure and truthful. ^{4:2} In fact, refrain from all evil; for if a man cannot govern himself in these things, how can he impress them upon others? ^{4:3} If a man does not refrain from covetousness, he will be defiled by idolatry, and will be judged like the nations, ^{4:4} who do not know the judgment of the LORD. Do we not know that the saints will judge the world, as Paul taught? ¹⁶ ^{4:5} I have neither heard nor perceived of any such thing from you, among whom the blessed Paul labored, and who are named in the beginning of his letters; ^{4:6} for he boasted in you above all the other Assemblies, as if you alone at that time knew God; for we did not yet know Him. I am therefore exceedingly grieved for both Valens and his wife, to whom may the LORD grant true repentance.

^{4:7} Be moderate on this occasion, and do not hold them as enemies, but restore them as frail and erring members, that you may save your whole body; for in so doing, you edify one another. ^{4:8} Now I trust that you are well trained in the Holy Scriptures, and that nothing is hidden from you. But to myself this is not granted. Only, as it is said in these Scriptures, *"Be angry and do not sin."* ¹⁷ And, *"Do not let the sun set on your wrath."* ¹⁸ ^{4:9} Blessed is he who remembers this; I trust that this is in you.

^{4:10} Now may the God and Father of our Lord, Yeshua the Messiah, the eternal High Priest Himself, the Son of God, build you up in faith and truth, in all gentleness, in all avoidance of wrath, in patience and in long suffering, in patient endurance, and in purity. ^{4:11} May He grant to you a lot and portion among His saints, and to us with you, and to all who are under heaven, who will believe on Yeshua the Messiah, and on His Father the LORD our God, who raised him from the dead.

^{4:12} Pray for all the saints. Pray also for kings, powers, and princes; pray also for those who persecute and hate you, and for the enemies of the cross, that your fruit may be manifest among all men, that you may be perfect in Him.

16 1 Corinthians 6:2.

17 Psalm 4:4, quoted by Paul in Ephesians 4:26.

18 Ephesians 4:26.

^{4:13} Both you and Ignatius have written to me, asking that anyone traveling to Syria would carry with them the letters from you. I will do this if a good opportunity presents itself. Either I will go personally, or I will send someone, to be an ambassador on your behalf. ^{4:14} As you requested, we have attached to this letter the letters that Ignatius had sent to us, ¹⁹ as well as the rest of his letters also. ^{4:15} You will be able to gain great advantage from them, for they are made up of faith, endurance, and every kind of edification pertaining to our Lord. ^{4:16} Concerning Ignatius himself, and those who were with him, if you know anything more, please share it with us.

^{4:17} I write these things to you by Crescens, whom I commended to you recently and now commend to you again. ^{4:18} He has walked blamelessly with us, and I believe also with you in like manner. ^{4:19} You will have his sister commended when she comes to you. ^{4:20} Farewell in the name of the Lord, Yeshua the Messiah; in grace, to you and yours. Amen.

¹⁹ Ignatius of Antioch had written a letter personally to Polycarp, as well as one to the Assembly at Smyrna. Only the letter written to Polycarp will be discussed in this work.