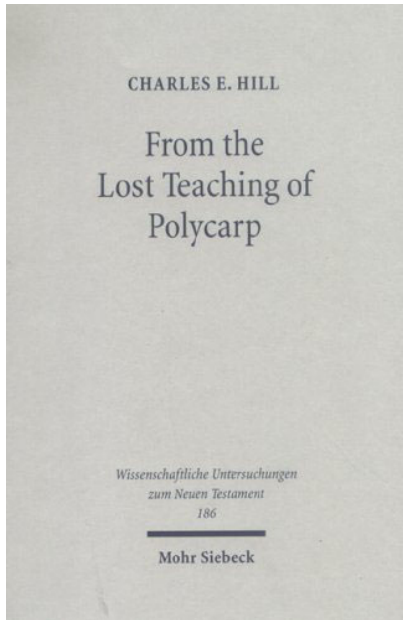


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Hill, Charles E.

From the Lost Teaching of Polycarp: Identifying Irenaeus' Apostolic Presbyter and the Author of Ad Diognetum

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It seems as though I have encountered a number of reports recently that declare a crisis in academic publishing. The source of the problem, and the chief victim of it, is often thought to be the academic monograph. Academic publishers are finding it increasingly difficult to subsidize the publication of tightly focused books on single subjects that are of interest only to specialists within a narrow field. I do not doubt the veracity of these reports, and so it is with some relief, and a great deal of pleasure, that I find Charles Hill's *From the Lost Teaching of Polycarp*. This book is an academic monograph in the strictest sense of the term. Hill is not attempting to make sweeping claims about the development of second-century theology. Instead, he is investigating a very specific question—Can we find Polycarp of Smyrna in two second-century texts?—by means of a careful analysis of the relevant texts. The result is a fine example of a traditional academic monograph, one that could be of interest to a number of different kinds of scholars despite its narrow focus.

The book is divided into two parts, and since, as the author admits, the arguments in each section function independently of the other, I will treat them separately. The first section attempts to identify Polycarp as the “Presbyter” in Irenaeus's *Against Heresies* 4.27–32. Hill walks through the arguments for this identification very carefully, beginning in

chapter 1 with an examination of the passage's textual history. The text of *Against Heresies* is confused in any case, since we do not have reliable access to the original Greek, but Hill uses a literal Armenian translation to ascertain that in 4.27–32 Irenaeus is reporting on the teaching of a single presbyter with apostolic connections, not presbyters, plural, as the Latin seems to indicate. The question, then, is: Who is this apostolic presbyter? The obvious answer is Polycarp, since this is how Irenaeus talks about Polycarp in other places, and this is the answer Hill wants to pursue as well.

The evidence for Polycarp, which Hill unfolds over the next two chapters, rests largely on correspondences between the teaching of the Presbyter in *Against Heresies* 4 and other confirmed teachings of Polycarp. Some of this evidence is circumstantial but suggestive. For example, Irenaeus appears to have a personal connection with the Presbyter that is similar to the relationship he has with Polycarp. Also, the Presbyter's teaching in this section concerns Marcion, and in another place Irenaeus reports that Polycarp had a personal encounter with Marcion. It is, in fact, this Marcion connection that yields what may be the strongest piece of evidence in favor of Polycarp as the Presbyter. In his *Letter to Florinus*, Irenaeus addresses a problem that corresponds closely to the one he addresses in the *Against Heresies* section. This correspondence is significant because the *Letter to Florinus* also contains Irenaeus' most well-known description of Polycarp, including Irenaeus's claim that he could remember many of Polycarp's actual words. The fact that in *Against Heresies* 4. 27–32 Irenaeus reproduces a respected teacher's teaching about Marcion in ways that are virtually identical to what he says about both Marcion and Polycarp in the *Letter to Florinus* would seem to confirm the identity of Polycarp as the Presbyter.

Hill follows his discussion of the evidence for Polycarp with a chapter that examines the specific teaching of the Presbyter. This involves identifying and commenting on all of the fragments in *Against Heresies* 4.27–32 where Irenaeus appears to reproduce the teachings of his Presbyter. This chapter does not contribute much to Hill's argument, but it will become more important as Hill's thesis gains acceptance, since it provides, in one place, the Latin, Greek retroversion, and English translation of (and commentary on) Polycarp's actual teaching. Chapter 3, then, concludes the first part of this book by drawing some implications of this identification for our understanding of second-century Christian thought and history. Hill believes that we do learn some things about Irenaeus and Marcion when we identify the Presbyter as Polycarp, but the most important implications concern our knowledge of Polycarp himself. Hill is fairly expansive in the range of conclusions he draws on the basis of limited evidence, but I found his conclusions largely compelling. Of special interest is what this might say about the development of Christian exegesis. As Hill points out, Irenaeus is often identified as the first true Christian exegete,

but as these fragments indicate, Polycarp may have played an important role in training Irenaeus in exegetical method.

I am willing to regard as settled the identification of the Presbyter in *Against Heresies* 4.27–32 as Polycarp. The connection with the *Letter to Florinus* seems especially strong, and as a whole Hill's argument is so amply documented and closely reasoned that the case is very strong. Less certain, by Hill's own admission, is the argument of the book's second part, the identification of Polycarp as the author of a second-century document known as the *Epistle to Diognetus*.

As with the first part, Hill's case relies heavily on correspondences between the *Epistle* and known works by Polycarp. Before turning to this evidence, however, Hill has first to make several points about the character of the *Epistle* itself. The first point is that what we call an epistle actually has the form and character of an oral address. The second is that the work as we have it is a unity, which means that chapters 11–12, which some scholars regard as later additions, belong to the same author and overall purpose of the entire letter.

These arguments about the form and structure of the letter become important when Hill turns, in chapter 5, to the evidence that Polycarp might have written the *Epistle to Diognetus*. That the "epistle" is actually an oral discourse is significant because there is evidence from the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* that Polycarp delivered a similar kind of speech before the proconsul of Smyrna prior to his martyrdom. Intriguingly, Hill can find a number of similarities between the *Epistle* and Polycarp's speech in the martyrdom account. In both, for example, the speaker addresses a benevolent civil ruler in order to offer a defense of and instruction in Christianity. (The literary parallels seem stronger when laid out in the Greek!) The unity of the *Epistle* is important because in the disputed chapters the author claims to be a "disciple of the apostles." Polycarp comes immediately to mind here, especially since the *Epistle* author's use of John and certain forms of antiheretical argument mirrors what we already know about Polycarp from Irenaeus.

Hill then turns to a number of literary parallels between the words of Polycarp in the *Martyrdom* and specific passages in the *Epistle*. The number of these parallels is suggestive, and they provide the most compelling evidence for Polycarp as the epistle's author, but this is probably the place where the argument as a whole is the weakest, because it depends on the historicity of the *Martyrdom*. It is possible, of course, that the *Martyrdom* does more or less accurately record Polycarp's actual words, but it is just as possible (as Hill acknowledges in the first part of the book) that the *Martyrdom* offers a stylized, genre account of Polycarp's death, with no bearing on what Polycarp said or did. For this reason, I think we must regard the parallels Hill adduces to be extremely

interesting but no more than that, and this section of the work would have benefited from a discussion of the *Martyrdom's* historicity.

While this may say as much about my own predilections as it does about the book itself, I still found this book refreshing. I enjoyed following a tightly reasoned, well-documented, close reading of a few specific texts. This is how I was trained to do scholarship, and it is always a pleasure to see one's own craft so expertly employed. I do not know what this means for the future of academic monographs, but I hope that it bodes well. This kind of monograph is the lifeblood of scholarship, not least because the more synthetic, expansive scholarly works depend on these kinds of close readings. I commend Mohr Siebeck for their support of this text.