

Early Christological Faith: An Ignatian Formula

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*Some of the most ferocious debates about the faith of early Christians center around the presumption that second and third century theologians held views which were not conceived by the apostles, thereby showing an early distortion of Christianity (usually in the direction of modern orthodoxy). In the article below, William Marshner takes up an important Christological text in Ignatius of Antioch, a text which is often taken to anticipate, in contradistinction to New Testament faith, the two-natures-in-one-person Christology of the Council of Chalcedon. Marshner argues, however, that a close analysis of the Greek reveals the Ignatian text to have close affinities to pre-Pauline formulae which address a question different from that settled at Chalcedon—namely, whether the man born of Mary and the glorious Being who appeared to the apostles after Easter were one and the same Jesus. Marshner argues that this question of identity through diverse stages, once settled in the affirmative, led naturally to the two-natures controversy. The Ignatian text, when placed alongside the pre-Pauline material in the New Testament, allows us to reconstruct the pre-history of the manner of speaking known as the *communicatio idiomatum*. Thus an alleged break in thought between the earliest kerygma and later orthodoxy is shown not to exist, without however forcing the Chalcedonic perspective onto the pre-Pauline texts, and another case of homogeneous development is revealed.*

Ignatius' Epistle to the Ephesians, vii, 2, contains the following celebrated passage:

There is only one physician, of flesh and of spirit, generate and ingenerate, God in man, true Life in death, Son of Mary and Son of God, first passible and then impassible, Jesus Christ our Lord.

The translation is Lightfoot's and is something less than literal.¹ Indeed, it could be charged with disguising an important feature of the Greek.

To appreciate that feature, one must note the structure of the text. We have an introductory formula (*heis iatros estin*), a concluding formula (*Iēsous Christos ho kurios hēmōn*), and between them a series of six dystichs which serve to bring out contrasting aspects of the one Christ. Within each dystich, the order of thought is invariably the same, so that the terms fall into two neat columns without chiasmus. Thus:

(A)	sarkikos te	kai pneumatikos
(B)	gennētos	kai agennētos
(C)	en sarki	genomenos theos
(D)	en thanatōi	zōē alēthinē
(E)	kai ek Marias	kai ek theou
(F)	prōton pathētos	kai tote apathēs

(A)	both fleshly	and spiritual
(B)	born	and not born
(C)	in the flesh	become God
(D)	in death	true life
(E)	both from Mary	and from God
(F)	first passible	and then impassible

What Lightfoot's English fails to convey, of course, is the force of *genomenos* in the third dystich and the consistency in order of thought between the third and fourth dystichs and all the others.

The thesis of this paper is that the Ignatian text, once laid out in this way, reveals key features in common with the most primitive Christological formulas preserved in the New Testament. Thus a case can be made that, far from being an “advanced” statement reflecting the developments of post-apostolic times, the text reflects (perhaps even quotes) pre-Pauline material. Such a thesis has important theological implications for New Testament exegesis itself, as I shall observe at the conclusion.

The reason for entertaining this view becomes clear as soon as one abstains from reading the

dystichs in the light of the Chalcedonian two-natures/one-person schema and instead assumes a duality of stages, pre- and post-resurrectional, undergone by the one person. The pre-resurrection Jesus is, then, flesh like us (dystichs A,C), born of Mary (B,E), subject to suffering (F) and death (D). But the risen Christ is spiritual (A), birthless (B), “become” God (C), true Life (D), Son of God (E), and beyond suffering (F).

Two natures or two stages? That is the question. And it is not a question about Ignatius' own Christology, of course, but about the history of these dystichs.

R. Bultmann has noted accurately that certain of the *earliest* preserved forms of the Christian preaching speak as though the beginning of Jesus' Lordship dated not from eternity nor from His birth or baptism but precisely from His resurrection.² The main exhibits are these:

Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God hath made (**epoiēsen**) him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom ye crucified – Acts 2:36

...who was constituted (**horisthentos**) the Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness **by the resurrection** of the dead – Romans 1:4

Therefore also God highly exalted (**huperupsōsen**) Him and gave Him the name [sc. **kurios christos**] which is above every name – Phil. 2:9

There is no doubt that each of these texts presents material older than the books in which they are contained. Luke reports what Peter preached 35 to 50 years earlier, depending on where one dates the Acts. Paul is thought to be drawing an older, hymnic material in both passages.³

Moreover, there is no doubt that the earliest preaching, shaped by the effort to proclaim Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecies, depended heavily on how certain OT texts were understood and applied. It is now widely believed that the early preachers had in hand more-or-less fixed collections of *testimonia*, i.e. OT verses understood to prophesy one or another aspect of Christ's life.⁴ Needless to say, one of the more important of these *testimonia* was Psalm 2:7, “Thou art my son, this day I have begotten thee.” Oddly enough, the early kerygma tended to use this text, not in reference to the pre-existence, nor to the nativity, but to the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus. The *locus classicus* is Acts 13:33.

Now, there is little doubt that Bultmann has overstressed this point,⁵ since Psalm 2:7 is also put to other uses (see especially Mt. 3:17 and Hebrews 1:5). The only point to be emphasized here is that, from the later Christological point of view, it is surprising that Psalm 2 should ever have been applied to the resurrection at all.

It is not suggested that one ought to see in these old formulations a kind of resurrectional adoptionism, as though the first Christians really believed that Jesus had not been God but then became God in and through the Resurrection. After all, the *en morphēi theou* (being in the form of God) of Philippians 2:6 was also part of the pre-Pauline hymn. Rather, we are dealing with an early mode of expressing the faith which had a point of its own to make, as we shall see, but which also, perhaps just because it was open to misinterpretation, was soon replaced by more adequate expressions.

With this background in mind, each of the Ignatian dystichs becomes highly interesting. Several correspond precisely to the old formula cited by Paul in Romans 1:3-4. A. Grillmeier, indeed, interprets the first dystich as “without doubt an allusion” to the Romans passage,⁶ which may be schematized as follows:

(a)		v.3 peri tou huiou autou
(b)	tou genomenou	v.4 tou horisthentos
(c)	ek spermatis Daid	huiou theou en dunamei
(d)	kata sarka	kata pneuma hagiōsunēs
		eks anastaseōs nekrōn
(a)		Iēsou Christou tou Kuriou hēmōn

(a)		concerning His Son
(b)	who was born	who was constituted
(c)	of the seed of David	Son of God in power
(d)	according to the flesh	according to the spirit of holiness
		by the resurrection of the dead
(a)		Jesus Christ our Lord

Here, as in Ignatius, we have an introductory and a concluding formula (the latter identical) and between them a body of material which can be arranged in parallel columns, with corresponding elements in

each column, such that the first column describes the earthly Jesus and the second, the glorified. Heinrich Zimmerli's patient analysis concludes that it was just this parallel material (lines b,c,d) which was pre-Pauline.⁷

Now before exhibiting the near-identity in theme between the Ignatian antitheses and those of the Romans text, it is necessary to vindicate the latter's integrity against Bultmann's proposed surgery. Bultmann thinks that the underlying fragment consisted solely of: *ho genomenos ek spermotos David, ho horistheis huios theou eks anastuseōs nekrōn* (who was born of the seed of David, who was designated son of God by the resurrection of the dead); thus he takes both *kata*-phrases and the *en dunamei* as Paul's interpretative additions.⁸ That *en dunamei* is Paul's addition, most scholars will agree: for Paul Jesus is already Son of God (*huios theou*), but via the resurrection He becomes manifest as such "in power." However, the two *kata*-phrases are surely pre-Pauline, as becomes clear on two grounds.

First of all, in Paul's *personal* usage, the antithesis *sarx-pneuma* (flesh-spirit) points up the distinction between sinful man and his attitude, on the one hand, and the Holy God and His conduct, on the other.⁹ Such is obviously not the sense of the antithesis here. Secondly, the *sarx-pneuma* scheme occurs elsewhere in pre-Pauline Christological formulae and with identically the same sense as found in Romans 1:3-4. The two prime examples of this old scheme are I Peter 3:18 and I Timothy 3:16, where Paul (or whoever wrote the Pastorals) is quoting a pre-existing hymn.

The text in I Peter says that Christ was "put to death in the flesh but quickened in the spirit" (*thanatōtheis men sarki, zōopoiētheis de pneumatī*).¹⁰ What is in question, obviously, is the death and resurrection. As *sarkikos*, Christ is put to death, but as *pneumatikos* He is vivified and life-giving. The identical thought appears in Ignatius' fourth dystich. There is even an important trace of this resurrectional sense of *pneuma* in Paul himself. Precisely in his theology of the resurrection (I Corinthians 15:20ff.), Paul tells us that the first Adam became a living soul, whereas the last Adam became a life-giving *pneuma* (verse 45).

That an old hymn is being quoted in I Timothy 3:16 has been recognized for almost a hundred years.¹¹ The structure consists of three dystichs, chiasmically arranged:

hos	ephanerōthē en sarki ōphthē aggelois episteuthē en kosmōi		edikaiōthē en pneumatī ekeruchthē en ethnesin anelēmphthē en doksēi
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manifested in flesh
seen by angels
believed-in in the world

justified in spirit
preached among the peoples
taken up in glory

The hymn concerns the Risen Christ, who is considered under two aspects. *Vis-à-vis this world (sarkikos)*, He appeared, was preached, was believed in. *Vis-à-vis the heavenly realm (pneumatikos)*, He was justified, seen by angels, taken up in glory. Here again, Christ is *en sarki* insofar as He is considered as having *our* kind of flesh, hence having really lived in our world; He is *en pneumatī* insofar as He has risen bodily and acquired for His body a spiritual or heavenly mode of being.

Quite apart from establishing that the *sarx-pneuma* antithesis is older than Paul, hence native to the fragment quoted in Romans 1:3-4, this hymn in I Timothy provides a bridge between the Ignatian text and the Romans text. We may note first that all three texts exhibit a feature known to characterize the oldest Christian formulae: the very un-Greek absence of definite articles.¹² All three exhibit the parallelism typical of Semitic expression. And all three exemplify a structuring of Christological materials in terms of the organizing duality, *sarx-pneuma*. But whereas the Romans text, close in content to the Ignatian, lays out the sarkic elements first, then the pneumatic, the I Timothy hymn resembles Ignatius' text formally, by arranging the elements *in pairs*, antithetically. Thus the hymn allows us to see that a variety of literary forms existed with which to express the so-called "*sarx-pneuma* Christology" and thereby allows us to see that the Ignatian form *could be* as old as Romans 1:3-4.

With this possibility in mind, let us look more carefully at the content-similarity between Ignatius' dystichs and the material in Romans 1. It may be exhibited as follows:

(A) sarkikos to kai pneumatikos	=	(d) kata sarka / kata pneuma hagiōsunēs
(B) gennetos kai agennetos	=	(b) genomenou / horisthentos
(E) kai ek Marias kai ek theou	=	(c) ek spermatos David /

Nor is this all. The third Ignatian element (*en sarki genomenos theos*) unites parts of (d) and (c), while the fourth element (*en thanatōi zōē alēthinē*) strikes the same note as *eks anastaseōs nekrōn*. Thus the only element in the Ignatian text which has no counterpart in the pre-Pauline credal or hymn-fragment is the last: *prōton pathētos kai tote apathēs*.¹³ Does this fact argue that the element is late, secondary, or specifically “hellenistic” in concern?

Quite the contrary. The *pathētos/apathēs* antithesis is the one Ignatian element which absolutely cannot be interpreted in a two-natures sense. Moreover, it is obviously at home in the problematic of the *sarx-pneuma* “Christology.” I put this expression in quotation marks because, if the term ‘Christology’ refers to the problematic definitively settled at Chalcedon, then the *sarx-pneuma* scheme is not a Christology at all. Chalcedon’s question was: how can Jesus be both God and man? The primitive preaching had a different and prior question: how can Jesus be both the man who dies and the glorious being who rose again? The *sarx-pneuma* scheme is an answer to *that* question, not a crude answer to Chalcedon’s question. The *sarx-pneuma* scheme is old precisely because an answer to *its* question was demanded already by the earliest kerygma we have: God has made Lord and Christ of *this* Jesus whom ye crucified (Acts 2:36). How is this possible? The man born of Mary died, as everyone knows. Was he born all over again? If not, how does he come to have flesh? On the other hand, if it is the same Jesus who rose, why did he look so different that some were slow to recognize him? Why is his body now invulnerable? Thus the *pathētos/apathēs* antithesis is fully within the scope of this early formulation.

The real problem is with *gennētos/agennētos*. If any of Ignatius’ dystichs seem not to fit the *sarx-pneuma*, pre- and post-resurrection scheme, but to require a two-natures understanding, it is this one. To be sure, if dystich (B) is not old but was composed by Ignatius, it is clear that *agennētos* must designate the uncreatedness of the divine nature (as distinct from the unoriginateness proper to the Father).¹⁴ But if the dystich is old and not intrusive, *agennētos* can be assigned a meaning in harmony with the *sarx-pneuma* perspective. Namely, Jesus’s entry into the glorified state is not a second birth. He is “constituted” Son of God in power, not born again, hence He is still the same person. Does not even John tell us that those who become children of God through receiving Christ are not born “of blood nor of the will of the flesh” and hence are not in the proper sense “born” at all?

In sum: the argument of this paper is that Lightfoot’s translation may indeed convey the way Ignatius himself would have understood Eph. vii, 2, but the text itself reveals strong parallels with very old *sarx-pneuma* formulations, so much so that the text itself may be pre-Pauline, and that nothing in any of the six dystichs positively precludes this possibility.

If the argument is accepted, it seems to me to have interesting implications for NT exegesis. It shows that a language of two stages could be used by persons who held, implicitly or explicitly, a doctrine of two natures; and that the language of two stages could come to be read, gradually, in a two-natures sense without conscious forcing. Form-critically speaking, such a possibility was already given as soon as sarkic and pneumatic elements were arranged in parallel dystichs rather than successively. This change is pre-Pauline and can be seen in the contrast between the text underlying Romans 1:3-4 and the text underlying I Timothy 3:16. For as soon as the elements appear in parallel, the possibility is given of reading them as simultaneous, complementary truths, whereupon they subserve a two-natures understanding and provide the remote literary background to the *communicatio idiomatum*. Conceptually speaking, such a transition was possible because, if my thesis is correct, the *sarx-pneuma* stages and the two natures were not rival Christologies; they were not even answers to the same question. The duality of stages answered a prior question: was it one and the same Jesus whom the Jews crucified and whom God raised in power? Only after this question had been answered unequivocally in the affirmative could the further problem of the mysterious nature of this Jesus, able both to lay down his life and to take it up again, come into view and find resolution in the classical line of thinking which led to Chalcedon. The early *sarx-pneuma* formulas of the NT, therefore, not only do not contradict classical Christology; they even prepare the way for it and demand it.

NOTES:

¹J.B. Lightfoot, **The Apostolic Fathers**, ed. J.R. Harmer (reprint: Grand Rapids, 1976), p.65.

²R. Bultmann, **Theology of the New Testament I** (1952), p.26.

³The literature on this point is enormous. See, for example, E. Lohmeyer, **Kyrios Jesus. Untersuchung zu Phil. 2, 5-11** (Darmstadt, 1961); M.E. Boismard, “Constitue fils de Dieu (Rom. 1, 4)” **Revue Biblique** 60 (1953), 1-17.

⁴For a good recent discussion of the **testimonia**, see the Anchor Bible volume on **Hebrews**, prepared by George Wesley Buchanan (1972). Buchanan thinks that a string of **testimonia**, grouped under the word-heading ‘**huios**’ (son), has been employed in Hebrews 1.

⁵For a critique of Bultmann, see Reginald H. Fuller, **The Mission and Achievement of Jesus** (London: SCM) 1954, pp.80ff.

⁶Aloys Grillmeier, S.J., **Christ in Christian Tradition**, trans. J.S. Bowden (N.Y.: Sheed & Ward) 1965, pp.105ff., 16-19.

⁷H. Zimmerli, **Neutestamentliche Methodenlehre** (Stuttgart, 1965); Spanish tr. G. Bravo, S.J. (Madrid: BAC)

1969, pp.206-218, especially p.210. There is no need to detail here the wealth of literary and form-critical argumentation by which Zimmerli shows the non-Pauline character of this fragment.

⁸R. Bultmann, **op. cit.**, p.52.

⁹E. Schweitzer, "Rom. 1, 3f. und der Gegensatz von Fleisch und Geist vor und bei Paulus," **Evangelische Theologie** 15 (1935) p.564.

¹⁰The author of I Peter, too, is citing a credal or hymnic formula. Cf. Bultmann, "Bekenntnis und Liedfragmente im I. Petrusbrief" **Coniectanea Neotestamentica** 2 (1947) 1-14; V.H. Neufeld, **The Earliest Christian Confessions** (Leiden, 1963), pp.144ff.

¹¹A thorough exegesis is in Zimmerli, **op. cit.**, pp.219-232.

¹²**Ibid**, pp.213, 226.

¹³Even this may have had a counterpart if the words **en dunamei** are original to the Romans text, and corresponded to a now lost phrase, "in weakness," after **ek spermatos Daud**. The theological motive invoked to explain Paul's **addition** of "in power" would also explain his **omission** of "in weakness."

¹⁴See P.The. Camelot, **Ignace d'Antioche, Polycarpe de Smyrne, Lettres...**4th ed. (Paris: Ed. du Cerf) 1969, p.28 n.1.