

Polycarp & the Immortality of the Soul

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There are many Old Testament Scriptures which flatly deny immortality of the soul and a conscious intermediate state of the dead.¹ Alleged evidence in the New Testament in support of this doctrine is scant, and the few alleged proof-texts take on a meaning consistent with the Old Testament when interpreted within their contexts and the underlying foundational assumptions established in the Old Testament.²

Yet, to buttress their position, modern defenders of the Platonic-Christian doctrine of the immortality of the soul have sought to prove that earliest Christian writers, those taught personally by the Apostles,³ held their view. Polycarp is often chosen as their chief witness. The following quote is alleged to show that Polycarp himself believed both in the immortality of the soul and that the dead saints are in heaven.

“I exhort you all, therefore, to yield obedience to the word of righteousness, and to exercise all patience, such as ye have seen [set] before your eyes, not only in the case of the blessed Ignatius, and Zosimus, and Rufus, but also in others among yourselves, and in Paul himself, and the rest of the apostles. [This do] in the assurance that all these have not run in vain, but in faith and righteousness, and that they are [now] in their due place in the presence of the Lord, with whom also they suffered. For they loved not this present world, but Him who died for us, and for our sakes was raised again by God from the dead.”⁴

The underlined part above reads as following in the Greek text:

καὶ ὅτι εἰς τὸν ὀφειλόμενον αὐτοῖς τόπον εἰσὶ παρὰ τῷ κυρίῳ ᾧ καὶ συνέπαθον

Literally: “and that unto the deserved place of them are, alongside the Master, with whom they also together-suffered.”

Unfortunately, the English translators added the word “now” which is not in the Greek text. Also, when the preposition “παρὰ” takes an object in the dative case, as it does

¹ See article: Are the Dead Conscious?

<http://www.4windsfellowships.net/articles/Conscious.pdf>

² See article: Did the Dying Thief Accompany Jesus to Paradise?

http://www.4windsfellowships.net/articles/Thief_Paradise.pdf

³ The writers known to have personal contact with and instruction by the apostles were: Clement of Rome (with Paul); Papius, Ignatius, and Polycarp (with John).

⁴ Polycarp, Epistle to the Philippians, ch. ix, from Roberts & Donaldson, Anti Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1.

here (τῷ κυρίῳ “the Lord”), it means “beside” or “alongside,” not “in the presence of.” Both of these subtle changes from what the Greek actually says are driven by translator bias. The correct sense is that the martyrs, by finishing their course successfully, **have attained the place of honor alongside their Master, Jesus Christ.** There is nothing in this quote that suggests that Polycarp thought the martyrs were in the immediate presence of God in heaven.

The early Christians used to build a small shrine for each martyr, and deposit the bones of the martyrs in them, as they did with Polycarp’s remains also. Christians then made pilgrimages to visit these shrines for encouragement and strength, particularly on the anniversary of their martyrdom. This began in apostolic times, and continued until Constantine when the Roman persecutions of Christians ended. The statement above reflects the attitude of veneration and honor that the earliest Christians had for the martyrs, nothing more.

Polycarp’s own Martyrdom

Those bent on turning the early Christians into Platonists also quote another document written by the assembly at Smyrna announcing Polycarp’s own martyrdom. It was written for the other six assemblies among the seven of Asia Minor to which the book of Revelation was addressed. The following quote is also alleged to support the idea that the Smyrna assembly believed Polycarp himself was in heaven.

*“But when the adversary of the race of the righteous, the envious, malicious, and wicked one, perceived the impressive nature of his martyrdom, and [considered] the blameless life he had led from the beginning, and **how he was now crowned with the wreath of immortality, having beyond dispute received his reward,** he did his utmost that not the least memorial of him should be taken away by us, although many desired to do this, and to become possessors of his holy flesh. ...*

*“He was not merely an illustrious teacher, but also a pre-eminent martyr, whose martyrdom all desire to imitate, as having been altogether consistent with the Gospel of Christ. For, having through patience overcome the unjust governor, and **thus acquired the crown of immortality, he now, with the apostles and all the righteous [in heaven], rejoicingly glorifies God,** even the Father, and blesses our Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of our souls, the Governor of our bodies, and the Shepherd of the Catholic Church throughout the world.”⁵*

This passage is alleged to prove that the Smyrna assembly believed the following:

⁵ Martyrdom of Polycarp, xvii-xix, Roberts & Donaldson, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. I, pp. 42-43

- Polycarp had already received his reward, the crown of life.
- Polycarp was in heaven along with the apostles and righteous.
- Polycarp was currently participating in conscious worship of God.

The inference is that if the Smyrna assembly believed this, so did Polycarp their pastor, and so also did John, Polycarp's mentor.

Unfortunately, those in the habit of "proof-texting"⁶ the New Testament Scriptures in order to support their preconceived notions likewise "proof-text" the early Christian writings, many times without regard for literary and historical context. Many are also ignorant of the scholarly research into sources and known corruption of these documents by later Roman Catholic editors, which is the case with this passage. Those who use this passage to support immortality of the soul, a conscious intermediate state of the dead, and a heavenly destiny, should have first read the scholarly introduction to this work which states plainly: *"That this Epistle has been interpolated can hardly be doubted, when we compare it with the unvarnished specimen, in Eusebius."*⁷

Few ancient Christian writings have escaped the revisionist pen of Roman Christianity. Ever since the alleged conversion of the emperor Constantine, and the emergence of the state-church with its official dogmas and creeds, a concerted effort was made by Rome to revise earlier Christian writers, particularly those close to the apostles, to bring them into conformity with the officially sanctioned dogmas of Rome. Among the later doctrines imposed on earlier writers by revising their works were:⁸

- The doctrine of the Trinity
- Immortality of the Soul
- The heavenly destiny of the righteous

The Martyrdom of Polycarp is one among many examples of later Roman revisionism of earlier documents. Fortunately, the original version of the Martyrdom of Polycarp has been preserved in Eusebius' History of the Christian Church,⁹ written about the time of Constantine. The revised version has unbelievable phenomenon alleged to have

⁶ "Proof-texting" is mining short quotes which lend themselves to one's pre-conceived beliefs. It is agenda-driven rather than being a tool of honest inquiry and thorough investigation.

⁷ Introduction to the Martyrdom of Polycarp, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. I, p. 37, Roberts & Donaldson editors, Hendrickson Publishers, 1994

⁸ See Tim Warner, The Time of the End, ch. 6

⁹ Eusebius, History of the Christian Church, Bk. IV, ch. xv, Nicene & Post Nicene Fathers, Series 2, Vol. I, p. 316

accompanied Polycarp's martyrdom which are missing from the original version quoted by Eusebius.

Below are the relevant portions of both versions side-by-side for comparisons.

Embellished Version	Original Version
<p>But when the adversary of the race of the righteous, the envious, malicious, and wicked one, perceived the impressive nature of his martyrdom, and [considered] the blameless life he had led from the beginning, and how he was now crowned with the wreath of immortality, having beyond dispute received his reward, he did his utmost that not the least memorial of him should be taken away by us, although many desired to do this, and to become possessors of his holy flesh. For this end he suggested it to Nicetes, the father of Herod and brother of Alce, to go and entreat the governor not to give up his body to be buried, "lest," said he, "forsaking Him that was crucified, they begin to worship this one." This he said at the suggestion and urgent persuasion of the Jews, who also watched us, as we sought to take him out of the fire, being ignorant of this, that it is neither possible for us ever to forsake Christ, who suffered for the salvation of such as shall be saved throughout the whole world (the blameless one for sinners), nor to worship any other. For Him indeed, as being the Son of God, we adore; but the martyrs, as disciples and followers of the Lord, we worthily love on account of their extraordinary affection towards their own King and Master, of whom may we also be made companions and fellow-disciples!</p>	<p>But the jealous and envious Evil One, the adversary of the race of the righteous, when he saw the greatness of his martyrdom, and his blameless life from the beginning, and when he saw him crowned with the crown of immortality and bearing off an incontestable prize, took care that not even his body should be taken away by us, although many desired to do it and to have communion with his holy flesh. Accordingly certain ones secretly suggested to Nicetes, the father of Herod and brother of Alce, that he should plead with the magistrate not to give up his body, 'lest,' it was said, 'they should abandon the crucified One and begin to worship this man.' They said these things at the suggestion and impulse of the Jews, who also watched as we were about to take it from the fire, not knowing that we shall never be able either to forsake Christ, who suffered for the salvation of the whole world of those that are saved, or to worship any other. For we worship him who is the Son of God, but the martyrs, as disciples and imitators of the Lord, we love as they deserve on account of their matchless affection for their own king and teacher. May we also be made partakers and fellow-disciples with them. The centurion, therefore, when he saw the contentiousness exhibited by the Jews, placed him in the midst and burned him,</p>

The centurion then, seeing the strife excited by the Jews, placed the body in the midst of the fire, and consumed it. Accordingly, we afterwards took up his bones, as being more precious than the most exquisite jewels, and more purified than gold, and deposited them in a fitting place, whither, being gathered together, as opportunity is allowed us, with joy and rejoicing, the Lord shall grant us to celebrate the anniversary of his martyrdom, both in memory of those who have already finished their course, and for the exercising and preparation of those yet to walk in their steps. This, then, is the account of the blessed Polycarp, who, being the twelfth that was martyred in Smyrna (reckoning those also of Philadelphia), yet occupies a place of his own in the memory of all men, insomuch that he is everywhere spoken of by the heathen themselves.

He was not merely an illustrious teacher, but also a pre-eminent martyr, whose martyrdom all desire to imitate, as having been altogether consistent with the Gospel of Christ. For, having through patience overcome the unjust governor, and thus acquired the crown of immortality, he now, with the apostles and all the righteous [in heaven], rejoicingly glorifies God, even the Father, and blesses our Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of our souls, the Governor of our bodies, and the Shepherd of the Catholic Church throughout the world.¹⁰

as was their custom. And so we afterwards gathered up his bones, which were more valuable than precious stones and more to be esteemed than gold, and laid them in a suitable place. There the Lord will permit us to come together as we are able, in gladness and joy to celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom, for the commemoration of those who have already fought and for the training and preparation of those who shall hereafter do the same. Such are the events that befell the blessed Polycarp, who suffered martyrdom in Smyrna with the eleven from Philadelphia. This one man is remembered more than the others by all, so that even by the heathen he is talked about in every place.”

¹⁰ Martyrdom of Polycarp, xvii-xix, Roberts & Donaldson, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. I, pp. 42-43

The embellished version states that Satan observed *“how he was now crowned with the wreath of immortality, having beyond dispute received his reward.”* That is, Satan allegedly had observed that Polycarp had already received the “Crown of Life” promised to the assembly at Smyrna by Jesus if they remained faithful unto death. *“Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and **I will give you the crown of life.**”*¹¹ Yet it was the Roman Catholic editor of the Martyrdom of Polycarp that believed this, not the assembly at Smyrna that wrote the original document.

The original document states, *“and when he saw him crowned with the crown of immortality and bearing off an incontestable prize.”* Here, it is clear what Satan actually observed. It was not Polycarp in heaven receiving a crown. It was Polycarp’s finishing his race in victory on earth. Satan seeing that Polycarp was *“crowned with the crown of immortality”* was an observation based on the promise Jesus made to him. Satan saw that Polycarp was *“faithful unto death,”* which made his crowning an absolute certainty. This is shown by the next clause. Satan saw him *“bearing off an incontestable prize”* – in his departure in death. The participle translated, *“bearing off,”* means *“carrying away.”* It is in the present tense, and indicates continuous action. This refers to the manner of Polycarp’s death, placing him beyond Satan’s reach. It is therefore certain that the original epistle did not state or imply that Satan could see into heaven and observe Polycarp’s reward, but rather Satan was observing what everyone else was observing, Polycarp’s victorious death, and judging it against Jesus’ promise to him and the assembly that he led faithfully.

The last part of the quote was clearly a later appendage to this work.

“He was not merely an illustrious teacher, but also a pre-eminent martyr, whose martyrdom all desire to imitate, as having been altogether consistent with the Gospel of Christ. For, having through patience overcome the unjust governor, and thus acquired the crown of immortality, he now, with the apostles and all the righteous [in heaven], rejoicingly glorifies God, even the Father, and blesses our Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of our souls, the Governor of our bodies, and the Shepherd of the Catholic Church throughout the world.”

This is not included in Eusebius’ reproduction of the unvarnished original. It reflects later Roman Catholic blending of Platonism with Christianity. This Christianity version

¹¹ In Rev. 2:10

2.0 finally overcame apostolic Christianity of the earliest witnesses and martyrs due greatly to the influence of the emperor Constantine.

The writer of the embellished version included the following footnote that was contained in the copy he had before him and was working from. *“These things Caius transcribed from the copy of Irenaeus (who was a disciple of Polycarp), having himself been intimate with Irenaeus. And I Socrates transcribed them at Corinth from the copy of Caius. Grace be with you all.”*¹² It seems that since Irenaeus was from Smyrna, he had a copy of the Martyrdom of Polycarp in his own library. Caius, who knew Irenaeus, made a copy of his own from Irenaeus’ copy at Lyons, Gaul, where Irenaeus was pastor. He apparently brought his copy to Corinth, where Socrates made the copy.

Pionius, the writer of the embellished version, had a copy of Socrates’ copy. Caius and Socrates likely made faithful copies. However, the same cannot be said of our current author, Pionius, judging from his own statement at the end of this document admitting his interpolation and its alleged source.

*“And I again, Pionius, wrote them from the previously written copy, having carefully searched into them, and the blessed Polycarp having manifested them to me through a revelation, even as I shall show in what follows. I have collected these things, when they had almost faded away through the lapse of time, that the Lord Jesus Christ may also gather me along with His elect into His heavenly kingdom, to whom, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”*¹³

Pionius, the author of the embellished version, had as his hope the “heavenly kingdom” envisioned by Platonic Christianity. He also blended in his own “revelations” allegedly from Polycarp in heaven. Thus, the embellished version was a blending of the historical record with the necromancy of the Roman Catholic editor, as he was communicating with the dead. This is not surprising, however, in light of Rome’s teachings and practices of “prayers to the saints” (especially prayers to martyrs) which depend on a belief in the immortality of the soul and a conscious intermediate state of the dead.

These two documents, the former written by Polycarp himself, and the latter written by the assembly concerning Polycarp’s martyrdom, should serve to caution those who seek to mine the early Christian documents for “proof-texts.” All is not as it seems, either in the reliability of the underlying documents or in the unbiased translation of those documents.

¹² Martyrdom of Polycarp, xxii, Roberts & Donaldson, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. I, pp. 43

¹³ Martyrdom of Polycarp, xxii, Roberts & Donaldson, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. I, pp. 43-44