

IGNATIUS AND THE "LORD'S DAY"

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Ignatius of Antioch is frequently cited as an early witness for Christian observance of Sunday because of his alleged use of the term "Lord's day" in his letter to the Magnesians. His testimony is considered particularly valuable inasmuch as his letters are thought to have been written not later than A.D. 117. Use of the term "Lord's day" by him would therefore very likely constitute the earliest example of it after Rev 1: 10.

The pertinent reference from the Magnesian letter as quoted in one recent polemical work of some substance is as follows:

If, then, those who walk in the ancient practices attain to newness of hope, no longer observing the Sabbath, but fashioning their lives after the Lord's Day on which our life also arose in Him, that we may be found disciples of Jesus Christ, our only teacher.¹

This quotation, as rendered here and as frequently similarly rendered by other writers, is obviously only fragmentary; but it nevertheless appears to establish the early Christian usage of the term "Lord's day." Whether in reality it does so, however, depends on its authenticity and accuracy.

Regarding authenticity, Fritz Guy in an article in *AUSS* in 1964, has reviewed the evidence pertaining to the Magnesian epistle, and concludes that "there is at present no adequate reason to deny the general authenticity of the letter of Ignatius to the Magnesians on the basis of historical or literary criticism."² In dealing with the matter of accuracy—our main concern in the present study—, a first step in

¹ Walter R. Martin, *The Truth about Seventh-day Adventism* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1960), p. 152.

² Fritz Guy, "'The Lord's Day' in the Letter of Ignatius to the Magnesians," *AUSS*, II (1964), 6.

manuscripts, whereas the *b* form is used by Lightfoot,⁶ who explains his omission of ζωήν on the grounds that it was an insertion. In this he has some support from several previous editors, including Cotelerius in 1724. The *c* form is that of the Latin manuscripts and appears in Ussher's 1642 edition,⁷ whereas the *d* form appears in his 1647 edition. This difference deserves some attention.

The principal question at issue in this study is whether or not the expression "Lord's day" can be found in these phrases. The answer may seem to be simple—translate them literally:

- a. living according to the Lord's life (from the Greek);
- b. living according to the Lord's (the same, with *life* edited out);
- c. living according to the Lord's (Ussher's earlier edition);
- d. living according to the Lord's life *or* living a life according to the Lord's day (Ussher's later edition).

Between *c* and *d* Ussher consulted the Greek recension published by Vossius in 1646 and changed the wording. This change appears to involve more than a simple step toward textual accuracy. By Ussher's time the modifier *Lord's*, especially in the Latin—*dominicum*—was commonly used to

⁶ J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Part II (London, 1889), Vol. II, 129.

⁷ Guy questions my use of this date in my book *The Protestant Dilemma*, a paperback prepared for the general reader, and rightly so, since at the time of writing I knew only of the inclusion of Ussher's Latin edition of the "middle recension" of Ignatius' letters within a composite book, following its own title-page dated 1642. Ahead of this portion of the book is other material with its own title-page dated 1644. My mistake was to use the word *published* in connection with the date 1642. I should have used, and I do here use, the word *edition*, because the edition was indeed edited and printed in 1642, but gathered and published with other materials in 1644. I am indebted to Cyril Richardson for calling my attention to the fascinating story of this printing as related in Falconer Madan, *Oxford Books* (Oxford, 1912), II, 363, 364, 382, 383.

mean *Lord's day*, or the first day of the week. It cannot be here asserted that the same was true in the writing of Ignatius, for to do so would be to assume what is to be proved. In fact, are we even absolutely sure that Ussher, in 1642, wanted his Latin version to mean "Lord's day"? The text as he then gave it, "Dominicam viventes . . .," could by the rule of ellipsis mean "Lord's [*life*], in which also our *life* sprang up" (*italics mine*). The reader of the earlier Ussher wording had a choice. But in the later wording Ussher left no choice, unless we allow for the use of the cognate accusative, "living a life according to the Lord's day," as explained by Guy.⁸

As Guy goes on to comment, "the cognate-accusative construction does not appear anywhere else in the Ignatian letters."⁹ In view of this, is it not possible that Ussher, by inserting *vitam*, intended to prefer "Lord's life" to "Lord's day"?

We now turn attention to the overall meaning of the eighth and ninth chapters of the Magnesian letter which appear below in the Lake translation.

VIII

1. Be not led astray by strange doctrines or by old fables which are profitless. For if we are living until now according to Judaism, we confess that we have not received grace. 2. For the divine prophets lived according to Jesus Christ. Therefore they were also persecuted, being inspired by His grace, to convince the disobedient that there is one God, who manifested himself through Jesus Christ his son, who is his Word proceeding from silence, who in all respects was well-pleasing to him that sent him.

⁸ Guy, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-12. Guy's elucidation of this pertinent theory goes beyond his predecessors. However, in relationship to the case in point, we may state that the "cognate accusative" argument may be valid in explaining an *existing* wording (such as *a*, above), but it can hardly be used to explain the *insertion* of ζώην. That is, finding a manuscript with κυριακήν ζῶντες, which could be read "living according to the Lord's day," who would want to introduce the cognate-accusative ζώην? Such an insertion would more nearly be cognate "confusative."

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

IX

1. If then they who walked in ancient customs came to a new hope, no longer living for the Sabbath, but for the Lord's Day, on which also our life sprang up through him and his death,—though some deny him,—and by this mystery we received faith, and for this reason also we suffer, that we may be found disciples of Jesus Christ our only teacher; 2. if these things be so, how then shall we be able to live without him of whom even the prophets were disciples in the Spirit and to whom they looked forward as their teacher? And for this reason he whom they waited for in righteousness, when he came raised them from the dead. ¹⁰

There is a contrast in the foregoing passage between Judaizing and living "according to Jesus Christ," with the "ancient prophets" setting the example by "no longer sabbatizing" and by "living according to the Lord's life" or "living a life according to the Lord's day." If the reading "Lord's life" is accepted as the correct translation of the disputed passage, the contrast is clear. The prophets did not, of course, cease to observe the Sabbath, but by faith looked forward to the coming Lord and lived the way He would live. Their experience was an example to the Magnesians Christians. In order to avoid an absurdity, the word *sabbatizing* must not mean "sabbath observance," but rather the keeping of the Sabbath in a certain manner—Judaizing. The long recension of the letter reads as follows:

Let us therefore no longer keep the Sabbath after the Jewish manner, and rejoice in days of idleness; for "he that does not work, let him not eat." For say the holy oracles, "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat thy bread." But let every one of you keep the Sabbath after a spiritual manner, rejoicing in meditation on the law, not in relaxation of the body, admiring the workmanship of God, and not eating things prepared the day before, nor using lukewarm drinks, and walking within a prescribed space, nor finding delight in dancing and plaudits which have no sense in them. ¹¹

¹⁰ Kirsopp Lake, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers* (New York, 1919), I, 205, 207.

¹¹ *ANF*, I, 62, 63.

Lest our interpretation seem strained, we may recall that there is dual use of the word *sabbatarian* in recent times. It may mean a person who keeps the seventh day of the week, or it may mean a person who keeps Sunday in a strict "Sabbath-like" way.

A further significant comment from the early period may be found in the Gospel of Thomas, Logion 32, σαββατίσατε τὸν σάββατον. Occurring with an admonition to fast, the expression implies that even in Sabbath observance there may be a sabbatizing or Judaizing requirement (presumably observances of the kind referred to in the above quotation from the long recension of Magnesians 9). In any event, it is almost certain, if we are to avoid absurdity in our treatment of Magnesians 9, that *sabbatizing* is equivalent to the general idea of Judaizing, a practice which could be avoided even while keeping the Sabbath. This is the only feasible explanation inasmuch as it is the Sabbath-keeping Old Testament prophets who are described as "no longer sabbatizing." To interpret the next words of the same passage in such a way as to make the Old Testament prophets keep Sunday is, of course, equally absurd!

Some comparative passages will help further to clarify Ignatius' meaning. In Magnesians 8 Ignatius contrasts "living . . . according to Judaism" with living "according to Jesus Christ." The expression "live according to God" is found in Ephesians 8, and "living according to Jesus Christ" in Philadelphians 3. Not only is the "according to" construction used elsewhere by Ignatius in speaking of a way of life, but the contrast between Judaism and the Christian life is likewise presented elsewhere (*e.g.*, in Philadelphians 6). It seems entirely normal, then, to find "living according to the Lord's life" in Magnesians 9 as a parallel to living "according to Jesus Christ" in chapter 8. These expressions are in antithesis to "sabbatizing" and living "according to Judaism."

Other uses of "sabbatize" and "Lord's . . ." are lacking in the Ignatian letters. The reader is therefore left to his own

judgment as to whether to accept the insertion of *day* after *Lord's*. The shortening of "Lord's day" to "Lord's" would normally come after considerable usage of the term "Lord's day." To assume such habitual usage in this early context would seem to be going a long step beyond what the evidence warrants. It therefore appears that though the argument is not conclusive, the weight is indeed on the side of "Lord's life."

Lightfoot, in his edition of the Greek text of the Ignatian letters, omits *life* after "Lord's," stating that its "insertion" is "condemned alike by the preponderance of authorities and by the words following. . . ." ¹² He does not explain the "words following," leaving us to suppose that he refers to "on [or *in*] which also our life sprang up through him and his death." In this clause the emphasis naturally falls on "our life" which echoes "the Lord's life." Thus the "words following" support the original use of *life*. It is interesting to observe that Lightfoot misses or perhaps rejects the suggestion of Pearson and Smith that *life* can be retained if associated with *living* (compare Guy's "cognate accusative").

Lightfoot goes on to state that *day* must be inserted after *Lord's*, on the basis of contemporary writings which use a similar phraseology. His significantly dated examples follow:

1. The *Doctrina Apostolorum*, chapter 14. Lightfoot's note is worth quoting in part:

If so [that Rev 1: 10 refers to the day of judgment], the passage before us [*Magnesians* 9] is the earliest example of its occurrence in this sense [to mean Lord's Day], except perhaps *Doct. Apost.* 14, where the expression is κυριακή κυρίου [actually κατὰ κυριακὴν δὲ κυρίου]. ¹³

The significant words, "Lord's of the Lord" are a unique expression which baffles translators. Lightfoot is here assuming that "Lord's day" is the proper wording for *Magnesians* 9 and is willing to admit that there is no prior or contemporary

¹² Lightfoot, *op. cit.*, II, 130.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

use of κυριακὴν to mean "Lord's day," except the passage in the *Doctrina*. The *Doctrina* is an early writing of unknown date, which was combined with other fragments, including the *Didache*, to form the 4th-century *Apostolic Constitutions*. The expression "Lord's of the Lord" occurs in *Didache* 14 in Goodspeed's translation where it is rendered, "On the Lord's own day."¹⁴

This passage is poor support for Lightfoot's rendering of the disputed phrase, because of the obscure dating and meaning of "Lord's of the Lord." The earlier the date assigned to it, the less the likelihood that we have an example of "Lord's" meaning "Lord's day" or the first day of the week. Note also Lightfoot's further comment:

The day is commonly called μία [τῶν] σαββάτων in the New Testament. As late as the year 57 this designation occurs in S. Paul (1 Cor. xvi, 2), where we should certainly have expected κυριακὴ if the word had then been commonly in use.¹⁵

As far as Lightfoot's argument is concerned, the support of Rev 1:10, used by many "authorities," is cancelled since he considers this Bible text to refer to the day of judgment.¹⁶

2. The title of Melito's lost work (A.D. 140) as listed by Eusebius,¹⁷ who simply refers to "a discourse about the Lord's" with no available indication of what the treatise is about. We do not know whether Eusebius is using an actual title or citing the subject of the discourse in his own words. That is, an original title of "About the First Day of the Week" could become in Eusebius "About the Lord's [Day]." This piece of evidence, then, can establish the use of "Lord's day" no earlier than the time of Eusebius.

¹⁴ Edgar J. Goodspeed, *The Apostolic Fathers* (New York, 1950), p. 17.

¹⁵ Lightfoot, *op. cit.*, II, 129.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* See the quotation referred to in n. 13, p. 52.

¹⁷ Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.*, iv. 26. 2. The date should perhaps be somewhat later.

3. A letter written by Dionysius of Corinth (A.D. 170). The fragment of the letter is found only in Eusebius.¹⁸ The significant words are "today we have passed the Lord's holy day" on which Dionysius said he read a certain letter. There are two hazards in this piece of evidence: Did Eusebius quote *verbatim* or did he substitute terms according to the usage of his own time? If he quoted *verbatim*, does the expression "Lord's *holy* day," used thus early and uniquely, really signify Sunday? It could refer to the Sabbath, which had traditionally been called holy, since nothing is said about which day of the week is referred to. The designation of Sunday as "holy" certainly came later, but cannot be proved for A.D. 170. At best this "evidence" comes some 50 or 60 years after the writing of Ignatius.

It is interesting to note, in passing, that in Lightfoot's extensive footnote on Magnesians 9 he includes also a brief homily on the spiritual significance of the Lord's Day. He uses the disputed phrase as his text.¹⁹ This fact, taken with his debatable references to Melito and Dionysius, makes it hardly surprising that he places himself among those editors who omit "life" from the Greek rather than those who retain it with notes that it might be an insertion. Guy lists, among the former, Funk (1881), Hilgenfeld (1902), Bihlmeyer (1924), and Camelot (2d ed., 1951), only the first of whom preceded Lightfoot; and he lists, among the latter, Pearson and Smith (1709), Hefele (1847), and Cureton (1849), all of whom preceded Lightfoot. Guy might also have included Cotelerius and Jacobson as preceding Lightfoot, and he does mention Migne as a later editor among those who retain "life."²⁰

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, iv. 23. 9-11.

¹⁹ Lightfoot, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

²⁰ Guy, *op. cit.*, p. 9, n. 26, and p. 10, n. 29. Guy mentions Migne as the single exception to the practice of the last hundred years in that he included the word *life*. It is my contention that Migne is the better editor. He supports the "Lord's day" position but employs good scholarly practice.

Guy mentions theological bias as a factor in weighing the reliability of various manuscripts.²¹ On the basis of this principle, the datings just referred to seem to have more significance than he assigns to them. Why, for example, should Lake in 1912, having available all of the material reviewed here and in Guy's study, follow Lightfoot instead of Migne, and omit Lightfoot's editorial comments to boot, as though to settle the "insertion" question forever by simply ignoring it?²²

The following English translations give evidence, perhaps, of theological bias, but certainly of the "follow-the-leader" syndrome which too often affects editors and historians in all fields of scholarship:

Lightfoot, re-edited by Harmes: "... no longer observing sabbaths but fashioning their lives after the Lord's day . . ." ²³

Roberts and Donaldson: "... no longer observing the Sabbath, but living in the observance of the Lord's Day . . ." ²⁴

Lake: "... no longer living for the Sabbath, but for the Lord's day . . ." ²⁵

Kleist: "... and if these no longer observe the Sabbath, but regulate their calendar by the Lord's Day . . ." ²⁶

Goodspeed: "... no longer keeping the sabbath but observing the Lord's Day . . ." ²⁷

Richardson: "They ceased to keep the Sabbath and lived by the Lord's day . . ." ²⁸

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²² See Lake's Greek text in Lake, *op. cit.*, I, 204.

²³ Lightfoot, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers*, as re-edited by J. R. Harmes (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1956), p. 71.

²⁴ *ANF*, I, 62.

²⁵ Lake, *op. cit.*, I, 205.

²⁶ James Kleist, *The Epistles of St. Clement of Rome and St. Ignatius of Antioch* (Westminster, Md., 1946), p. 72.

²⁷ Goodspeed, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

²⁸ Cyril C. Richardson, ed., *Early Christian Fathers* (Philadelphia, 1953), p. 96.

Grant: “. . . no longer keeping the Sabbath [cf. Isa. 1:13] but living in accordance with the Lord’s [day; cf. Rev. 1:10] . . .”²⁹

All of these translations state the absurdity that the prophets stopped keeping the Sabbath, and some of them likewise make the prophets observe “the Lord’s day.” Surely these translators are following the wrong authorities. To balance the score of authorities, we note the following comments, published in the last century and available to these editors.

1. Baden Powell in Kitto’s *Encyclopedia of Religious Literature*:

We must here notice one other passage of earlier date than any of these, which has often been referred to as bearing on the subject of the Lord’s day, though it certainly *contains* no mention of it. It occurs in the epistle of Ignatius to the Magnesians (about A.D. 100). The whole passage is confessedly obscure, and the text may be corrupt. . . .

The passage is as follows:—“Εἰ οὖν οἱ ἐν παλαιοῖς πράγμασιν ἀναστραφέντες εἰς καινότητα ἐλπίδος ἦλθον—μηκέτι σαββατίζοντες, ἀλλὰ κατὰ κυριακὴν ζωὴν ζῶντες—(ἐν ἧ καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἡμῶν ἀνέτειλεν δι’ αὐτοῦ, καὶ τοῦ θανάτου αὐτοῦ . . .”

Now many commentators assume (on what ground does not appear), that after *κυριακὴν* the word *ἡμέραν* is to be understood. On this hypothesis they endeavour to make the rest of the sentence accord with a reference to the observance of the Lord’s day, by further supposing ἐν ἧ to refer to *ἡμέρα* understood, and the whole to be put in contrast with *σαββατίζοντες* in the former clause. . . .

Let us now look at the passage simply as it stands. The defect of the sentence is the want of a substantive to which αὐτοῦ can refer. This defect, so far from being remedied, is rendered still more glaring by the introduction of *ἡμέρα*. Now if we take *κυριακὴν ζωὴν* as simply “the life of the Lord,” having a more personal meaning, it certainly goes nearer to supplying the substantive to αὐτοῦ. Again, ἐν ἧ may well refer to *ζωή*, and *κυριακὴν ζωὴν*, meaning our Lord’s *life*, as emphatically including his *resurrection* (as in Rom. v. 10, &c.), presents precisely the same analogy to the spiritual life of the Christian as is conveyed both in Rom. v.; Coloss. iii. 3, 4, and many other passages. Thus upon the whole the meaning might be given thus:—

²⁹ Robert M. Grant, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers*, Vol. IV: *Ignatius of Antioch* (Camden, N.J., 1966), p. 63.

"If those who lived under the old dispensation have come to the newness of hope, no longer keeping Sabbaths, but living according to our Lord's life (in which, as it were, our life has risen again, through him, and his death [which some deny] . . . how shall we be able to live without him?" . . .

In this way (allowing for the involved style of the whole) the meaning seems to us simple, consistent, and grammatical, without any gratuitous introduction of words understood; and this view has been followed by many, though it is a subject on which considerable controversy has existed. On this view the passage does not refer at all to the Lord's day; but even on the opposite supposition it cannot be regarded as affording any positive evidence to the early use of the term "Lord's day" (for which it is often cited), since the material word ἡμέρα is purely conjectural.³⁰

In modern grammatical terms Baden Powell finds no suitable antecedent for αὐτοῦ. The person referred to is obviously the Lord, but the word occurs here only as a modifier, not as a substantive. But to make "Lord's day" the antecedent of αὐτοῦ is unsatisfactory; whereas "Lord's life" is clear in meaning if not consistent grammatically.

2. Sir William Domville, *The Sabbath* (a single paragraph is taken from a chapter devoted to the subject, a chapter which delineates the probable circumstance by which the word *day* came into the translations):

On the other hand, if our theological theorists would but allow Ignatius to be his own interpreter, and the words which he uses to bear their natural and literal signification, how perfectly would his phrase of "living according to the Lord's life" agree with the whole tenor of the context! For the context shows that Ignatius, instead of intending to contrast the Sabbath day with the Lord's day, is throughout contrasting a Jewish life with a Christian life; a life spent in observing Sabbaths and ceremonies, with a life spent "according to the rules of Christianity." This last-quoted expression, and other expressions found in the above extracts from the epistle, are in a very striking manner confirmatory of the construction here given to the passage under consideration, and as such can hardly have escaped the notice of the reader. Thus, "living according to the Lord's life, in which also our life is sprung up." Why "also" our life, unless the Lord's life had been previously mentioned? Still more remarkable is the language of a preceding

³⁰ Baden Powell, "Lord's Day," in Kitto, *Cyclopedia of Biblical Literature* (New York, 1853).

sentence, "for even the most holy prophets lived according to Christ Jesus." What is this but saying in other words living "according to the Lord's life"? that is, according to the pattern He set us, or, as Ignatius expresses it, "according to the rules of Christianity."³¹

3. James A. Hessey in his Bampton Lectures at Oxford in 1860:

Ignatius, the disciple of St. John, is the first writer whom I shall quote. Here is a passage from his Epistle to the Magnesians, containing, as you will observe, a contrast between Judaism and Christianity, and, as an exemplification of it, an opposition between Sabbatizing and living the life of the Lord, κυριακὴν ζώην. I do not think it necessary to reject, with Cotelerius, the word ζώην.³²

These three authors were Sunday advocates, but they saw the weakness of the "Lord's-day" arguments from Ignatius.

In summary, the arguments for leaving Magnesians 9 precisely as it is in the Greek manuscripts are these: (1) The reading of the manuscript makes entirely good sense and is grammatically understandable. (2) There is but one difficulty—the word *sabbatize*—which has a reasonable explanation. (3) To omit *life* and introduce *day* retains the difficulty of *sabbatize*, and at the same time duplicates that difficulty. That is, to center the Christian way of life on the keeping of Sunday, forces *sabbatize* to mean strictly the keeping of the Sabbath, and we have the double absurdity of "divine prophets" forsaking the Sabbath and observing Sunday. (4) Viewed in this setting, the forcing of "Lord's day" into the text appears as a purely artificial device to support the idea of an early use of the term.

It should be remembered that the problem is not that of deciding which of two equally authentic wordings is preferable, nor that of discovering which of two words should be used to fill an ellipsis. Rather it is the question of what justification there can be for removing a reasonable word from a prior, generally accepted manuscript and supplying another

³¹ William Domville, *The Sabbath* (London, 1849), pp. 249, 250.

³² James A. Hessey, *Sunday* (New York, 1880), p. 41.

word in its place. Certainly the "confused obscurity" of the passage and "involved style of the whole," as Baden Powell phrases it, forbids the glib acceptance of the traditional "Lord's day" interpretation of many writers on the subject. In view of the evidence, a defensible English version of this controversial passage would consist of a sincere literal translation from the Greek, with a footnote, somewhat as follows. *Translation*: . . . no longer sabbatizing but living according to the Lord's life * in which also our life sprang up . . .

Footnote: *A literal rendering of the best Greek manuscript. Some Latin versions of the epistle to the Magnesians omit the word *life*, and since the word *dominicum* later came to mean "Lord's day," some English translators render the passage "living according to the Lord's day."