

THE ESCHATOLOGY OF IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH: CHRISTOCENTRIC AND HISTORICAL

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A local educational television station recently presented a panel discussion on the question, "Can one have Christianity without Christ?" One who has kept current in his theological reading will not be surprised to learn that every member of the panel except one tried very hard to justify an affirmative answer. As Carl F. H. Henry has noted, "The central problem of New Testament studies today is to delineate Jesus of Nazareth without dissolving Him as the Bultmannians did, without demeaning Him as many dialectical theologians did, and without reconstructing Him as nineteenth-century historicism did, so that it becomes clear why and how He is decisive for Christian faith."¹ The past two years of this journal have seen more articles on the historiography of the Scriptures or the Christian faith than any other topic.² Clearly history is a live issue among theologians (and philosophers as well) who are alive to the thought patterns of recent decades:

It may be stated without dispute that our own eschatological interests and historical issues were, at least in principle and in some form, already "old hat" many centuries ago.³ The very meaning and significance of time have often demanded general attention in the face of national or international crises.⁴ The same issues pound at the consciousness of individual men when they are forced—by the death by a close relative, or on the heels of financial disaster—to stare straight at the limits of personal existence. In this paper, we will consider the thoughts of one such man, an early post-apostolic Christian. His deepest concerns were expressed in seven letters, written on the road to martyrdom.

According to Eusebius, Ignatius was second bishop of Antioch after

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1. Carl F. H. Henry, editor, *Jesus of Nazareth: Saviour and Lord* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1966), p. 16.
2. See Edwin Yamauchi, "The Gnostics and History," XIV (Winter 1971), pp. 29-40; Ismael E. Amaya, "The Bible and God's Revelation in History," XIV (Spring 1971), pp. 65-74; Merrill C. Tenney, "The Bible and History," XIV (Spring 1971), pp. 75-80; Arnold D. Ehlert, "Early Periodization of Redemptive History," XIV (Spring 1971), pp. 95-102; Harold Hosch, "The Concept of Prophetic Time in the Book of Joel," XV (Winter 1972), 31-38.
3. For an excellent illustration of this, see the article already cited by Yamauchi. Much of the commonly known apocryphal and pseudepigraphal literature of the century before and after Christ bears witness to the same fact.
4. For example, Augustine's *City of God*, the proliferation of eschatological sects following the upheavals of the mid-nineteenth century, and the increase of interest in such topics since the World Wars of this century.

Peter. Condemned to death for being a Christian, he was led by ten soldiers from Antioch, via Asia Minor and Macedonia, to Rome. At the end of his journey waited an almost-certain death. At Smyrna, Ignatius was welcomed by the local church, with its bishop Polycarp, and by delegates of three other churches not on his route. From Smyrna he wrote four letters: to the Ephesians, the Magnesians, the Trallians and to the church at Rome. Moving on to Troas, Ignatius heard that the Antioch persecution had ceased. From Troas, he wrote three more letters, to churches at Smyrna and Philadelphia and a personal note to Polycarp.⁵ He finally arrived at Rome where he died as a martyr, perhaps in A.D. 116, though scholars differ in judgment as to date.

Grant suggests that Ignatius personifies "the mystical piety of Eastern Orthodoxy" in contrast to Clement, for example, who "reflects the *gravitas* which was to mark the attitude of Roman Christianity."⁶ Yet we would not fairly call Ignatius a mystic. Some have sharply criticized him for the way he views imminent death. Part of what he says "jars upon our taste," notes Lawson, "but he is not morbid or unbalanced any more than is the bizarre book of the Revelation, which speaks from the same condition. He is simply a man waiting to be thrown to the lions, who fortifies his resolution by the only method possible to a man in that strange condition."⁷ Perhaps only in Second Corinthians does the Apostle Paul reveal so much of his inner feelings as Ignatius does in these epistles.

Ignatius writes to encourage and admonish believers, not specifically to combat heresy. Yet his letters clearly evidence deep concern about false teaching, both Judaistic and docetic. He is pointedly distressed by disunity to which false doctrine has led, and by an apparently related disregard for the rising institution of monepiscopacy. Richardson argues that the Jewish and the docetic elements were unrelated, though some have tried to link the two.⁸ Corwin, for example, seeks a tie in focusing on their respective attitudes toward history; though they stood in contrast to each other, both stood also in contrast to Ignatius on this point. According to Corwin, the docetists "denied or ignored" history; Essene-Christians "foreshortened history by resisting the genuinely new that could enter it."⁹ Ignatius' own posture was strongly eschatological, and his eschatology was both Christocentric and grounded in history. As our title indicates, these three points will be our chief concerns here.

5. These seven letters are here presumed to be the authentic Ignatian corpus. A longer recension has been found, as has a shorter text, but that lies beyond our present interests. All quotations here from the letters are my translation, based on the Greek text of Karl Bihlmeyer (*Die Apostolischen Vater*, J. C. B. Mohr, Paul Siebeck, Tübingen).
6. Robert M. Grant, *The Apostolic Fathers: An Introduction* (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1964), p. 49.
7. John Lawson, *A Theological and Historical Introduction to the Apostolic Fathers* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1961), p. 102.
8. Cyril Charles Richardson, *The Christianity of Ignatius of Antioch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935), p. 52.
9. Virginia Corwin, *St. Ignatius and Christianity in Antioch* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), pp. 103-104.

For Ignatius, history is the arena in which God works. He holds to a doctrine of foreordination: what happens to and for God's people is according to His will and was known in advance by God. The Ephesian church is "predestined from eternity for constant glory forever, unchangeably united and chosen by true suffering" (Eph., preface). The Romans belong to the "church beloved and enlightened in the will of Him who willed all things that are, according to the faith and love of Jesus Christ" (Rom., preface). Ignatius himself is "sailing at once from Troas to Neapolis as God's will ordains" (Poly. 8:1). Polycarp's life is in the plan and will of God, so that he may know that "the occasion demands a man like you, as steersman do winds and as a storm-tossed man does a harbor" (Poly 2:3).

God's ordained will is particularly carried out in Jesus Christ, and in Him it is now revealed. Ignatius promises that, if given opportunity, he will explain "the divine plan with reference to the new man, Jesus Christ, in His faith and in His love, in His suffering and resurrection" (Eph. 20:1). Because God planned the work of Christ in advance, He could foretell it by His prophets. So "the prophets . . . also announced the gospel and hoped in Christ and eagerly anticipated Him, in whom also they put their confidence and were saved" (Phld. 5:2). God was certainly working during past centuries, but

the gospel has something distinctive, the appearing [*parousia*] of the Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ, His suffering and His resurrection. For the beloved prophets made announcements of Him but the gospel is the completion of immortality" (Phld. 9:2).

THE HISTORICAL PERSON OF CHRIST

The work of Christ necessarily involves His person. Ignatius sometimes speaks of Christ in a way that borders on Sabellianism and patripassianism. At other times he clearly distinguishes between the Father and the Son. On the one hand, "the Lord did nothing apart from [the knowledge and consent of] the Father, being united with Him" (Mag. 7:1). Jesus Christ is "mingled" with the Father (Eph. 5:1). He is "the mind of the Father" (Eph. 3:2). He is "our God" (Eph., preface; 15:3; 17:2; Smyrn. 1:1). Ignatius even speaks of "the blood of God" (Eph. 1:1). On the other hand, Jesus "proceeded from . . . and has gone to" one Father (Mag. 7:2). "There is one God, who manifested Himself through Jesus Christ His Son, who is His Logos that proceeded from silence, who in all things well pleased the One who sent Him" (Mag. 8:2). Though "our Savior Jesus Christ . . . suffered for our sins," it was "the Father in His kindness who raised Him" (Smyrn. 7:1).

The dual nature of Christ is integrally bound up with the Incarnation. And Jesus' incarnation, as well as His baptism, death and resurrection, must be regarded as real historical event. For Ignatius, it was no suprahistorical event, woven of the color of myth or built on the cloudy heights of metaphysical speculation. . . . It was sober history, an event which happened here in this world. In making this

affirmation, Ignatius is opposing not only his enemies but even his friends, for both the *Odes* [of Solomon] and the Fourth Gospel show themselves unguarded at this point.¹⁰

To the Smyrneans, Ignatius writes: "I give glory to Jesus Christ because you stand firm in confidence regarding our Lord, that He was truly of the line of David according to the flesh, Son of God according to the will and power of God, truly born of a virgin; . . . truly nailed for us in the flesh under Pontius Pilate and Herod Tetrarch" (Smyrn. 1:1-2). He urges the Magnesians to "stand firm in confidence with reference to the birth and the suffering and the resurrection which happened during the time of the rule of Pontius Pilate, accomplished truly and certainly by Jesus Christ our hope, from which may none of you ever be turned aside" (Mag. 11:1). Ignatius insists that Christ is "one physician, made both of flesh and of spirit, born and unborn, God become man, true life in death, both from Mary and from God; first subject to suffering and then free from suffering, Jesus Christ our Lord" (Eph. 7:2). Christ is "of the line of David according to the flesh, son of man and son of God" (Eph. 20:2).¹¹ Ignatius is not embarrassed to say that

our God Jesus Christ was conceived by Mary according to divine dispensation, of the seed of David on the one hand, of the Holy Spirit on the other. He was born and baptized, that by suffering He might purify the water" (Eph. 18:2).

Christ "suffered truly, as also truly He raised Himself. It is not, as certain unbelievers say, that He only appeared to have suffered" (Smyrn. 2). Those who deny that Jesus "wore flesh and blood" completely deny Him, for by their definition He was a "mere corpse bearer" (Smyrn. 5:1-2). Clearly drawing from Paul's words in First Corinthians 15, Ignatius points out that

if, as some atheists [*atheoi*], that is, unbelievers, say, that He only seemed to have suffered (and they only seem to be [genuine Christians] themselves), why am I bound? Why am I praying to fight wild beasts? Then I am dying for nothing, and then I am even telling lies against the Lord" (Tral. 10).

True believers are not even to listen to those who deny the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, or the actual death of Christ on the cross. "Stop your ears," Ignatius admonishes the Trallians, "when anyone speaks to you apart from Jesus Christ, who was the line of David and the son of Mary; who truly was born, who both ate and drank; truly was persecuted under Pontius Pilate; truly was crucified and died in the sight of beings heavenly, earthly and subterranean; who also truly was raised from the dead, when His Father raised Him" (Tral. 9:1-2).

10. *Ibid.*, p. 271. One does not have to share this estimate of John's Gospel in order to appreciate Corwin's chief point.

11. I take these terms as descriptive here, not titular.

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF CHRIST

God's incarnation in Jesus Christ was an eschatological event of cosmic significance, according to Ignatius. For then, he says,

in heaven a star flashed, more brilliantly than all the stars. Its light was beyond description, and its remarkable newness caused astonishment. All the rest of the stars, together with the sun and the moon, made a chorus around that star, and its light transcended them all.

There was a great disturbance as to where its remarkable newness came from, so dissimilar it was to them. Because of it, all magic began to be dissolved and every wicked bond began to vanish. Ignorance began to be abolished, the old kingdom began to be destroyed, when God appeared in human form to bring the newness of eternal life. What God had fashioned was beginning! The whole universe [*ta panta*] was set in commotion from then on, because the destruction of death was being accomplished (Eph. 19:2-3).

Jesus Christ is "the new man" through whom the "divine plan" is carried out (Eph. 20:1). His birth, suffering and resurrection bring in the final days, the eschatological age, and this, in turn, demands action from man.

The last times are here. Let us therefore feel ashamed. Let us fear the longsuffering of God, so it will not mean our condemnation. Let us either fear the coming wrath, or let us love the present grace—one of the two (Eph. 11:1).

Christians are not intended to perish in the coming wrath. Christ "died for us, in order that by believing in His death you might escape dying" (Tral. 2:1). Polycarp, therefore, is to

observe the times well. Wait for the One who is beyond time [*hyper kairon*] and timeless [*achronon*], invisible yet visible for our sakes, incapable of suffering yet subject to suffering for us, who in every single manner endured for us (Poly. 3:2).

Though the proleptic event has transpired already, there remains the eschatological consummation. For this reason, the salvation Christians now enjoy in part and in prospect may not yet be taken for granted. For "since matters have come to an end [*telos*] and two things lie together before us, namely life and death, each man is about to go to his own place" (Mag. 5:1-2). The Christian who "corrupts faith in God by evil teaching" will "go to unquenchable fire, as will the one who listens to him" (Eph. 16:2).

Even "the heavenly beings, the glory of the angels and the visible and invisible rulers, if they do not put their confidence in the blood of Jesus, will be condemned" (Smyrn. 6:1).

Christians must continually do battle with Satan (Eph. 13:1)¹² Ignatius confesses his own need for humility "by which the ruler of this world can

12. Ignatius also refers to him as the devil (Eph. 10:3; Tral. 8:1; Rom. 5:3; Smyrn. 9:1), or as the ruler of this world (Eph. 17:1; 19:1; Mag. 1:2; Tral. 4:2; Rom. 7:1; Phld. 6:2).

be destroyed" (Tral. 4:2). Believers are to beware of "the intrigues and the ambushes of the ruler of this world" so as not to be caught in the pressures of his purpose (Phld. 6:2). Perseverance is necessary, for only "by enduring every ill-treatment of the ruler of this age, and escaping," will they reach God (Mag. 1:2). Faithfulness is made easier by frequent meetings. "When you assemble as often as possible, the powers of Satan are annulled and his destructiveness is dissolved by the harmony of your faith" (Eph. 13:1). The Eucharist also figures in this, for it is the "medicine of immortality, an antidote against dying, to make us live in Jesus Christ always" (Eph. 20:2).

As for himself, Ignatius hopes to be joined to the Lord soon via martyrdom. He insists that the Romans not interfere or attempt to save his life. "I fear that your love may do me injury," he writes, for "it is easy for you to do what you wish, but it is going to be hard for me to attain to God unless you leave me alone" (Rom. 1; cf. Rom. 2:2; 4:1-3; 5:2-3). Though he has confidence in the face of death, Ignatius is humbly aware of his need for divine grace.

Being bound for Jesus Christ, I am more afraid, still being imperfect. But your prayer to God will perfect me, that I may attain by the lot which is mercifully given me (Phld. 5:1).

"Remember me in your prayers," he asks the Magnesians, "that I may attain to God" (Mag. 14).

SUMMARY AND CLOSING OBSERVATIONS

God's saving purpose is from eternity. He partially revealed this purpose through the Old Testament prophets, but He unveiled it fully in Jesus Christ. Christ is fully God, though as Son He may be distinguished from the Father. His birth was a true incarnation of deity in human flesh. He is truly man, born of the virgin Mary of the line of David. He really suffered, under the jurisdiction of rulers who may be identified in history. He really died. He really rose from the dead. By His birth, suffering and resurrection, Jesus obtained salvation for His people, began the annulment of Satan's power and ushered in the last days. Christians still live in history, however, and they must still resist the devil. Only by faithful perseverance will they receive the reward which Christ already has made possible. A day is coming—also within history, though at its end—when God will judge men and angels, and He will then separate those who believe in the death of Christ from those who do not. The former will enjoy eternal blessing; the latter will be cast into eternal punishment.

Centuries have passed since Ignatius gave his testimony as a true martyr. Some heresies he faced have reappeared, though with new names and fresh faces. Not all that he taught himself was completely true to the Scriptures. Yet the eschatological themes Ignatius affirmed, focused as they

were on Christ and firmly grounded in history, must continually be repeated. For, as Corwin notes,

The suffering on the cross was real... History and the world... remain the areas in which God works. Nor is redemption an isolated, profoundly individual moment all but out of time, as the modern existentialists would have it,¹³ but a stumbling and wholly human journey in a real world, to find grace in company with others in the church, and in the end to attain unto God.¹⁴

13. The existentialists are not alone in this regard. That a number of so-called "evangelicals" share the same fault is evidenced in the instant-salvation frequently offered to any who will "simply make a decision for Christ at this very moment and have eternal life forever," or by the (not only youthful) cries of "give us Jesus but we'll have none of the church!"
14. Corwin, p. 271.