

Ignatius' Opponents

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Question: "Who does Ignatius see as his primary opponents? Discuss critically with detailed reference to the seven generally accepted Ignatian letters."

Ignatius of Antioch, while en route to his probable martyrdom, wrote a series of letters to a number of churches in the area of Asia minor. Despite facing almost certain death, he used a majority of his letters instead to oppose a number of threats he saw to the Christian churches. The letters of Ignatius of Antioch provide an excellent insight into early Christianity and its different forms, forms that are otherwise unrepresented by ancient texts. By studying the opponents Ignatius faces, we can see that Christianity was not simply a consistent system of beliefs, but was in fact quite diverse. Throughout his letters, Ignatius mentions a number of opponents he is concerned with. While his arresters are the most obvious type, Ignatius is also quite concerned with two other groups of opponents who he sees as threats to Christianity: Docetists and Judaizers¹.

Arresters

Although the soldiers and authorities responsible for Ignatius' arrest pose the greatest threat to his life, Ignatius doesn't actually seem to consider them his primary opponents. He gives only brief mention of his situation in the majority of his letters, leaving the subject instead to his letter to the Romans.²

"From Syria all the way to Rome I am fighting with wild beasts . . . chained amidst ten leopards (that is, a company of soldiers) who only get worse when they are well treated. Yet because of their mistreatment I am becoming more of a disciple . . ." (Romans 5:1)³

¹ All the sources studied generally propose the idea of two groups

² Since they obviously are more involved given Rome is where he is being taken

³ All quotes of Ignatius' letters are from the translations in Holmes, "The Apostolic Fathers"

It is obviously clear that he does see his captors as opponents but he also sees them as a means to an end. The main reason for writing his letter to the Romans appears to be to ensure that his martyrdom is not prevented⁴ and so he can therefore “reach God”⁵ through death. His astonishing willingness to die for Christ is shown in Romans 2:2 “Grant me nothing more than to be poured out as an offering to God”. So while Ignatius’ arresters are definitely his opponents, they are not his primary opponents, given that he is much more concerned with false teachers than being arrested.

Docetic opponents

Another group of opponents in Ignatius’ letters are those with docetic beliefs. This group is mostly mentioned in his letters to the Ephesians, Trallians and Smyrnaeans. Though not explicitly named by Ignatius⁶, this group is described as “mad dogs”, “atheists” and “heretical”⁷. His description of their beliefs and his constant affirming of Christ’s humanity strongly implies docetism.

“For he suffered all these things for our sakes, in order that we might be saved; and he truly suffered just as he truly raised himself – not, as certain unbelievers say, that he suffered in appearance only (it is they who exist in appearance only!). Indeed, their fate will be determined by what they think: they will become disembodied and demonic.” (Smyrnaeans 2)⁸

These docetic opponents do not appear to be part of the churches Ignatius is writing to; rather they are most likely either travellers or citizens outside of the church. This situation likely varies between the different churches in Ignatius’ letters but in all three⁹, Ignatius clarifies that he does not suspect any members are following these beliefs.

⁴ He may have feared that speculations of apostasy would arise (Holmes, Page 89)

⁵ Rom 4:1 (note: abbreviations and names are always for Ignatius’ letters)

⁶ Not as easy to define as something like Judaism

⁷ In order: Eph 7:1, Tra 10:1, Smy 6:2

⁸ See also Tra 10

⁹ Referring to the letters with docetic opponents: Ephesians, Trallians and Smyrnaeans

"But I have learned that certain people from elsewhere have passed your way with evil doctrine, but you did not allow them to sow it among you." (Ephesians 9:1)¹⁰

Obviously the word docetic implies a Christian belief, but there does appear to be a complexity to who exactly Ignatius is talking about. In Trallians 10:1 Ignatius describes these opponents as "atheists" and "unbelievers"¹¹, but in the very next verse describes them as "wicked offshoots" and "not the Father's planting"¹². It would appear that Ignatius is either labelling docetists as atheists in an extreme sense or is talking about another group that is not Christian at all.

The reason why Ignatius is so opposed to these docetists is that they are denying Jesus' humanity and therefore his sacrifice. If Christ only appeared to suffer then it reduces the importance of his suffering, death and resurrection. Moreover, he links Christ's unique quality of being "both flesh and spirit"¹³ with him being essential for salvation. . .

"Those who belong to the flesh cannot do spiritual things, nor can those who are spiritual do fleshly things. . ." (Ephesians 8:2)

. . . since it is only through Christ's unique quality that humans, mere flesh, can be spiritual.

". . . those things that you do according to the flesh are in fact spiritual, for you do everything in Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 8:2) ¹⁴

Ignatius is also concerned that these beliefs will bring division to the church, destroying the unity that he sees as one of the most distinguishing marks of the true faith.¹⁵

"Flee from divisions as the beginning of evils." (Smyrnaeans 8:1)

¹⁰ See also Tra 8:1 and Smy 4:1

¹¹ See also Smy 2:1 and 5:3

¹² See also Eph 7:1, 9:1, Tra 6:1-2 and Smy 6:2

¹³ Eph 7:2

¹⁴ See also Eph 18:2

¹⁵ Holmes "The Apostolic Fathers" Page 88

In order to combat these opposing views, Ignatius continuously affirms the humanity of Christ throughout his letters. He does this through a number of creeds such as the one in Trallians 9:

"Jesus Christ, who was of the family of David, who was the son of Mary; who really was born, who both ate and drank; who really was persecuted under Pontius Pilate, who really was crucified and died while those in heaven and on earth and under the earth looked on; who, moreover, really was raised from the dead when his Father raised him up." (Trallians 9)¹⁶

As well as structured creeds, Ignatius also makes a number of general references to Jesus' humanity. Some examples include: "abide in Christ Jesus physically and spiritually"¹⁷, "God appeared in human form"¹⁸, "he was clothed in flesh"¹⁹. These creeds, or confessions of faith, serve to acknowledge Jesus Christ as being essential for salvation and to create a firm doctrine to unite the Christian communities under.²⁰

Another strategy he uses to combat divisions is the defining of a monarchical church structure. One in which "each church must adhere closely to the authority of its bishop, along with his ruling board of elders (the 'presbytery') and the group of ministering deacons"²¹. By doing this he is ensuring that the bishops of the churches have more control over theological ideas, preventing heretical ideas from as easily entering the church. Ignatius firmly grounds this church structure in the image of Christ himself, calling believers to be obedient for both the sake of Christ as well as the bishop.

"Similarly, let everyone respect the deacons as Jesus Christ, just as they should respect the bishop, who is a model of the Father, and the presbyters as God's council and as the band of the apostles. Without these no group can be called a church." (Trallians 3:1)

¹⁶ See also Eph 7:2 and 18:2

¹⁷ Eph 10:3

¹⁸ Eph 19:3

¹⁹ Smy 5:2

²⁰ Jefford "Reading the Apostolic Fathers" Page 58

²¹ Ehrman "After the New Testament" Page 325

The docetic opponents of Ignatius are most certainly one of his primary opponents and perhaps even seen by him as the greatest threat to the churches he writes to. Although they do not yet appear to have affected the churches, he is still very concerned about what the future might hold. Emphasis on the humanity of Christ can be found throughout his letters, making certain his fear of docetic beliefs.

Judaizing Opponents

The final prominent group of opponents in Ignatius' letters are the "Judaizers". These opponents appear in his letters to the Magnesians and the Philadelphians. From Ignatius' criticisms, they seem to be mixing Judaism with Christianity at the expense of some beliefs Ignatius considers doctrine. From Ephesians 10:3 it is quite clear that Ignatius is strongly opposed to these Judaizers.

"It is utterly absurd to profess Jesus Christ and to practice Judaism" (Ephesians 10:3)

This verse also tells us that these "Judaizers" are not actually Jews but are in fact Christians promoting certain Jewish values. Furthermore, these opponents do not appear to even be of Jewish decent, rather they appear to be gentiles intrigued by Jewish values.

"For it is better to hear Christianity from a man who is circumcised than about Judaism from one who is not" (Philadelphians 6:1)

While some of his Judaizing opponents may very well be Jewish converts, it would seem that a significant amount are in fact gentile Christians.

The amount of influence these Judaizers have on the churches appears to be quite minor. We learn from both letters²² that the "alien views"²³ haven't yet infiltrated the churches Ignatius is writing to.

²² Referring to the letters with Judaizing opponents: Magnesians and Philadelphians

"Now I write these things, my dear friends, not because I have learned that any of you are actually like that. . . I want to forewarn you not to get snagged on the hooks of worthless opinions" (Magnesians 11)²⁴

Unlike the docetic opponents, we only really hear of these judaizers in his letters to the Magnesians and Philadelphians. This could suggest that the issue is not as widespread as that of docetism, although docetism itself is fairly enclosed within the letters to the Ephesians, Trallians and Smyrnaeans, with subtler references found in most of Ignatius' letters.

Ignatius' problem with these Jewish influences is that they appear to be either denying or downplaying Jesus' part in Christianity.

*"Jesus Christ, our only teacher, how can we possibly live without him"
(Magnesians 9:1-2)²⁵*

For that reason it is quite clear why Ignatius calls this practice "absurd", although it's likely that others are simply trying to keep certain Jewish practices, such as the Sabbath. This is noted by Ignatius in Magnesians 9:1, where he insists that the Jewish practice should be replaced by "the Lord's day".

"If, then, those who had lived according to ancient practices came to the newness of hope, no longer keeping the Sabbath but living in accordance with the Lord's day, on which our life also arose through him and his death" (Magnesians 9:1)

The lack of scripture on Christianity compared to that of Judaism also appears to be a stumbling block for these opponents of Ignatius.

"For I heard some people say, 'If I do not find it in the archives, I do not believe it in the gospel'" (Philadelphians 8:2)

²³ Phi 3:3

²⁴ See also Philadelphians 3:1

²⁵ See also Mag 8:1

Ignatius deals with these opposing beliefs in a few ways, one of which is to relate Old Testament prophecies with Jesus.

"Jesus Christ, our only teacher, how can we possibly live without him, whom even the prophets, who were his disciples in the spirit, were expecting as their teacher? This is why the one for whom they rightly waited raised them from the dead when he came." (Magnesians 9)

*"For Christianity did not believe in Judaism, but Judaism in Christianity"
(Magnesians 10:3)*

This method would likely be effective against those who oppose Christianity because of its lack of scripture. He also states that the fact of Jesus' death and resurrection are his "archives", as historical proof rather than words on a page.

"But for me, the 'archives' are Jesus Christ, the unalterable archives are his cross and death and his resurrection and the faith that comes through him; by these things I want, through your prayers, to be justified." (Philadelphians 8:2)

Another solution Ignatius has to his opponents is one that he also applies to his docetic opponents, that is, a monarchical church structure. This is his blanket solution to the problem of division in the church. Ignatius' status as a bishop himself makes the doctrine quite liable to partiality, which is most likely why he is sure to root it in firm Christian doctrine.

*"Jesus Christ, the bishop of all. For the honour, therefore, of the one who loved you it is right to be obedient without hypocrisy, for it is not so much a matter of deceiving this bishop who is seen but of cheating the one who is unseen."
(Magnesians 3)*

The Judaizing opponents of Ignatius are definitely one of his main concerns as he writes to these Christian churches. Although the issue is possibly not as prominent as that of docetism, this influence of Judaism is still seen as a major threat by Ignatius. Again we

see his fear of division in these "heretical" beliefs, and the solution of an ordered church structure to keep the doctrine truthful and dependable.

Conclusion

Ignatius was someone in extremely stressful circumstances, who despite facing almost certain death, chose instead to oppose the threats of docetism and Judaism to the Christian churches. From the concerns in his letters we gain an insight into the different forms of early Christianity. The primary opponents of Ignatius were the docetists and Judaizers, who threatened Ignatius' firm beliefs in a very real and very human Jesus Christ. By constantly affirming Jesus' humanity through a number of creeds, as well as defining a solid church structure to battle the threat of division, Ignatius hoped to protect his fellow Christians from false teachers and doctrines.

Bibliography

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