

'Come to the Father': Ignatius of Antioch and his calling to be a martyr

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This world is not conclusion;
A sequel stands beyond.
Invisible, as music,
But positive, as sound.
It beckons and it baffles;
Philosophies don't know,
And through a riddle, at the last,
Sagacity must go.
To guess it puzzles scholars;
To gain it, men have shown
Contempt of generations,
And crucifixion known.

Emily Dickinson

In the seven letters of Ignatius of Antioch we possess one of the richest resources for the understanding of Christianity in the era immediately following that of the Apostles.¹ Though somewhat staccato in style and filled with rhetorical embellishments they manifest, in the words of biblical

1 Rowan Williams, *Christian Spirituality* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), 14. For two exhaustive overview of studies on Ignatius, see William R. Schoedel, 'Polycarp of Smyrna and Ignatius of Antioch' in Wolfgang Haase and Hildegard, eds, *Temporini Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1993), II/27.1:273–349 and Charles Munier, 'Où en est la question d'Ignace d'Antioche? Bilan d'un siècle de recherches 1870–1988' in Haase and Temporini eds, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, II/27.1:358–484.

scholar Bruce Metzger, 'such strong faith and overwhelming love of Christ as to make them one of the finest literary expressions of Christianity during the second century'.² Accepting what is called the middle recension of these seven letters as genuine,³ it is evident there are three concerns which were uppermost in Ignatius' mind as he wrote these letters.⁴ First of all, he longed to see unity at every level in the life of the local churches to which he was writing. In his own words, he was a man 'dedicated to the cause of unity'.⁵ Second, he ardently desired his fellow believers to stand fast in their common faith against heresy. While there is no scholarly consensus as to the number of heresies in view in Ignatius' letters,⁶ it is clear that one of them was a form of Docetism, which maintained that the incarnation of Christ, and consequently his death and resurrection, did not really take place. Finally, Ignatius is eager to recruit the help of his correspondents in the successful completion of his own vocation, which is nothing less than a call to martyrdom.⁷

- 2 Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 44.
- 3 On their authenticity, see Christine Trevett, *A Study of Ignatius of Antioch in Syria and Asia* (Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 9–15; Schoedel, 'Polycarp of Smyrna and Ignatius of Antioch' in Haase and Temporini eds, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, II/27.1:286–92. It was the Irish Calvinistic Archbishop, James Ussher (1581–1656), who pioneered the way to the modern perspective on what constitutes the authentic letters of Ignatius. See his *Polycarpi et Ignatii epistolae* (Oxford, 1644). On the transmission of the text of these letters, see also the brief summary by Andrew Louth, 'Ignatius of Antioch' in Maxwell Staniforth, trans., *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers* (1968 ed.; repr. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1987), 55–56.
- 4 John E. Lawyer, Jr., 'Eucharist and Martyrdom in the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch', *Anglican Theological Review*, 73 (1991), 281.
- 5 *Ignatius, Philadelphians* 8.1 (trans. Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings*, 95). See also *Polycarp* 1.2; *Philadelphians* 7.2.
- 6 Thus, for example, Charles Thomas Brown [*The Gospel and Ignatius of Antioch* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 176–97] believes that there are two heretical groups in view, Gentile Judaizers and Gnostics. If so, the first group is addressed in *Magnesians and Philadelphians*, while the Gnostics are responded to in *Trallians and Smyrnaeans*. For other helpful contributions to this discussion, see L. W. Barnard, 'The Background of St. Ignatius of Antioch', *Vigiliae Christianae*, 17 (1963), 193–206; Trevett, *A Study of Ignatius of Antioch in Syria and Asia*, 194–99; Jerry L. Sumney, 'Those Who "Ignorantly Deny Him": The Opponents of Ignatius of Antioch', *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 1 (1993), 345–65; Schoedel, 'Polycarp of Smyrna and Ignatius of Antioch' in Haase and Temporini eds, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, II/27.1:301–304.
- 7 It is noteworthy that Ignatius never uses the term *martyrs* as a technical term. See Munier, 'Où en est la question d'Ignace d'Antioche?' in Haase and Temporini eds,

All of these three areas of Ignatius' letters have occasioned both significant scholarly elaboration and sharp critique. Of the three, it is Ignatius' desire for martyrdom that has occasioned the most criticism as a number of scholars have suggested that Ignatius' remarks about his death reveal a man mentally unbalanced. W. H. C. Frend, in his monumental study of *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, describes Ignatius's letters as displaying 'a state of exaltation bordering on mania',⁸ while G. E. M. de Ste. Croix bluntly states that Ignatius has 'a pathological yearning' for death, the sure sign of 'an abnormal mentality'.⁹ A careful study, though, of Ignatius' thinking about his own death reveals a man who rightly knows that Christian believing demands passionate engagement of the entire person, even to the point of physical death. To borrow some words from contemporary theologian Kevin Vanhoozer, martyrdom for Ignatius is 'a powerful form of truth-disclosive action', namely the truth about Christ and about himself as a Christian.¹⁰

In an important study of the differences between Ignatius' letters, Mikael Isacson has rightly noted that Ignatius' letters to the Romans and to Polycarp are substantially different from the other five. The one to Polycarp is the only one of which is addressed to an individual and contains mostly a series of pastoral exhortations from one bishop to another. The letter to the Romans is to a church with which Ignatius has no personal link, unlike the other five churches to which he sends letters. With regard to its content, it is extremely focused: it is on his impending martyrdom.¹¹ As such, Ignatius' martyr-centred letter to the Romans will be the focus of the central section of this paper.¹² Given his concern to rebut heresy, it is not surprising to find Ignatius linking the theme of martyrdom and

Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt, II/27.1:456; G. W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 6, 77.

8 W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), 197.

9 G. E. M. De Ste. Croix, 'Why were the Early Christians Persecuted?', *Past & Present*, 26 (November 1963), 23–24. He further suggests that Ignatius is the precursor of a type of early Christian martyr heavily critiqued by church leaders, namely, the voluntary martyr (23–24). There is no evidence to support this suggestion.

10 Kevin Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press/Leicester, England: Apollos, 2002), 364–65.

11 Mikael Isacson, *To Each Their Own Letter: Structure, Themes, and Rhetorical Strategies in the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2004), 20.

12 For the phrase 'martyr-centred', I am indebted to Lucy Grig, *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity* (London: Duckworth, 2004), 16.

Christological orthodoxy. This link is primarily made in the letter to the Smyrnaeans and will be examined in the final section of this paper. First, what can be known about his journey to Rome, the historical context of his letters, needs to be laid out.

The physical journey

Ignatius, bishop of the church in Antioch of Syria, had been arrested in this city somewhere between AD 107 and 110, and sent to Rome for trial.¹³ There are no details of the persecution in which he was arrested, though Ignatius does mention others who were probably arrested during the same persecution and who had preceded him to Rome.¹⁴ He was taken across the great roads of southern Asia Minor in the custody of ten Roman soldiers, whom he likens to 'savage leopards'.¹⁵ He expects the end of the journey in Rome to have one certain outcome: death.

Yet, there is a difficulty concerning certain details of his arrest. Since Ignatius is on his way to Rome for execution, this would suggest that he is a Roman citizen, because a citizen's right to trial by the emperor was, at this stage in Roman history, a firmly established right.¹⁶ However, some modern scholars have asked why, if he is a citizen, does he say that he is expecting to meet 'fire, cross, beast-fighting'¹⁷ when he gets to Rome, since it has been believed that these forms of punishment were not used in the execution of citizens at this time?¹⁸ In general, Roman punishment was measured to fit the social status of the criminal rather than the nature of the crime. In the words of Ramsey MacMullen: 'everything depended on

13 For the date, see Trevett, *Study of Ignatius of Antioch*, 3–9. Schoedel suggests that Ignatius' martyrdom might conceivably be placed as late as AD 135, though he opts for a date before the death of the Emperor Trajan in AD 117: 'Polycarp of Smyrna and Ignatius of Antioch' in Haase and Temporini eds, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, II/27.1:274, 347–49.

14 Ignatius, *Romans* 10.2. Polycarp, in his sole surviving letter, mentions the names of two of these prisoners, Zosimus and Rufus: *Philippians* 9.1.

15 Ignatius, *Romans* 5.1. This is the earliest occurrence of the word for leopard in Greek. See D. B. Saddington, 'St Ignatius, Leopards, and the Roman Army', *Journal of Theological Studies*, 38 (1987), 411.

16 F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (Rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1988), 453–54 and 454, n. 11. Compare Pliny, *Letters* 10.96.3–4, who also mentions sending imprisoned Christians to Rome for trial.

17 Ignatius, *Romans* 5.3 (trans. Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings*, 87).

18 Trevett, *Study of Ignatius of Antioch*, 5.

status'.¹⁹ Thus, beheading or the opportunity to commit suicide were the major forms of execution for those upper class citizens of the Empire who had committed a capital offence. But others, those of the lower classes, would be exposed to a whole range of horrific violence, including burning, being forced to drink molten lead, being crucified, being beaten to death, and being mauled to death by dogs and ferocious beasts.²⁰ Yet, as Peter Garnsey and Ramsey MacMullen have pointed out, citizens of the lower classes could be exposed to these latter forms of punishments, especially as the second century wore on.²¹ This might imply that while Ignatius was a citizen, he may well have come from the lower classes.

The road Ignatius probably travelled, the main highway across southern Asia Minor, ran westwards to Ephesus, where travellers, or in this case, a prisoner, would take ship to go either directly to Italy or on up the coast to Troas. Near Laodicea, though, his guards turned north and west to Philadelphia and later to Smyrna, where Ignatius apparently stayed for some time. Polycarp (c. 69/70–155/156), recently appointed bishop of Smyrna, sought to minister to his needs upon his arrival in that town. When he came to Smyrna there were also representatives of three other churches to meet him. Damas, the bishop of the church in Magnesia-on-the-Meander, had come along with two elders from his church, Bassus and Apollonius, and a deacon, Zotion.²² From Tralles came the bishop Polybius²³ and from Ephesus a number of leaders: Onesimus the bishop, a deacon by the name of Burrhus, and Crocus, Euplus and Fronto.²⁴

19 Ramsey MacMullen, 'Judicial Savagery in the Roman Empire', *Chiron*, 16 (1986), 147.

20 For the range of punishments, see MacMullen, 'Judicial Savagery in the Roman Empire', 147–66. For the punishments to which Christians were subject, see Elaine H. Pagels, 'Gnostic and Orthodox Views of Christ's Passion: Paradigms for the Christian's Response to Persecution?' in Bentley Layton, ed., *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism. Volume 1: The School of Valentinus* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1980), 266–70.

21 Peter Garnsey, 'Legal Privilege in the Roman Empire', *Past & Present*, 41 (December 1968), 3–24; MacMullen, 'Judicial Savagery in the Roman Empire', 149–53. See also the larger study by Garnsey, *Social Status and Legal Privilege in the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970) and Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory. Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 39–41.

22 Ignatius, *Magnesians* 2.

23 Ignatius, *Trallians* 1.1.

24 Ignatius, *Ephesians* 1.3–2.1. It has been argued that the Onesimus here is none other than the slave Onesimus referred to in Paul's letter to Philemon. The name, however, is a common one and it is unlikely that it is the same person. See William R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch. A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch*, ed. Helmut Koester (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 43–44.

It was at Smyrna that Ignatius wrote the letter to the Roman Church,²⁵ which contains the heart of Ignatius' reflection about his martyrdom. This is the only one of all Ignatius' letters that is dated. He was writing it, he tells the Roman believers, on the ninth day before the Kalends of September, that is, 24 August.²⁶ Obviously a date is included since he wishes to give the church at Rome some idea as to when to expect him.²⁷ Not long after writing this letter to the Roman Church the Antiochene bishop left Smyrna for Troas. This stage in Ignatius' journey is not clear: the soldiers took him either to Troas by road or by a vessel that would have sailed within sight of the shore. We are also uncertain as to how long they stopped at Troas.²⁸ Ignatius, however, was able to write three more letters from there: letters to the churches at Philadelphia, Smyrna, and finally one to the man who befriended him in Smyrna, Polycarp.²⁹

The Roman soldiers and their Christian prisoner seem to have left Troas in something of a hurry and made their way to Neapolis in Macedonia.³⁰ From there they would have passed through Philippi to Dyrrachium, on what is now the Adriatic coast.³¹ From Dyrrachium they probably would have taken another ship for Brundisium in Italy and then by land made their way to Rome. At this point a curtain is drawn across the historical events and nothing more of Ignatius' earthly career is known, except the report by Polycarp to the church at Philippi that he was martyred, presumably at Rome.³²

The spiritual journey

As Ignatius' remarks about martyrdom in his letters are read, one fact above all must be kept in mind. As William C. Weinrich has put it: 'Ignatius [here] reflects upon *his own* coming martyrdom.'³³ This explains the passionate nature of some of his statements. It also means that we should

25 Ignatius, *Romans* 10.1.

26 Ignatius, *Romans* 10.3.

27 Virginia Corwin, *St. Ignatius and Christianity in Antioch* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), 14–17.

28 Corwin, *St. Ignatius and Christianity in Antioch*, 17.

29 Ignatius, *Philadelphians* 11.2; *Smyrnaeans* 12.1; *Polycarp* 8.1.

30 Ignatius, *Polycarp* 8.1.

31 For the mention of Ignatius passing through Philippi, see Polycarp, *Philippians* 1.1.

32 Corwin, *St. Ignatius and Christianity in Antioch*, 18. See Polycarp, *Philippians* 9.1 for the report of Ignatius' death.

33 William C. Weinrich, *Spirit and Martyrdom. A Study of the Work of the Holy Spirit in Contexts of Persecution and Martyrdom in the New Testament and Early*

not take these letters to be a systematic theology on martyrdom.³⁴ Ignatius speaks for himself and about himself. Again, Weinrich comments: 'What he says, he says about himself as one who is going into death because he is a Christian.'³⁵

It would appear that Ignatius is aware that certain individuals in the Roman Christian community, who came from higher social circles in Rome, had 'connections' and political influence that they could exercise so as to get Ignatius released.³⁶ If Ignatius says nothing to these believers about them not using their influence, he believes that they may well try to get him freed and may even succeed in this endeavour. Since he does not want this (for reasons detailed below), he decides to speak. 'What fills me with fear,' he tells these politically influential believers at Rome, 'is your own kindly feeling for me.' It might be easy for them to intervene to get Ignatius released, but this will only make it more difficult for Ignatius 'to get to God'. He thus urges the Roman Christians, 'keep your lips sealed'. If they do, then they will enable Ignatius to become 'a word of God'.³⁷ In other words, the silence of the Roman believers will mean that Ignatius, by his martyrdom, can proclaim to the world the sincerity of his faith. Ignatius' claim to be a Christian will then be seen to be more than mere words. It will be authenticated by deeds – in this case, the act of martyrdom.³⁸ The authenticity of Ignatius' faith will be revealed by his dying well.

In spelling out how he wants the Roman believers to act, Ignatius reveals the conviction that he does not view his martyrdom as an individual event, but one that involves the entire Roman Church.³⁹ The Roman believers are not mere bystanders who are simply expected to allow something to happen. Both Ignatius and the believers at Rome must choose either to act out the implications of Christ's passion or to desire the

Christian Literature (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981), 115. This is an excellent study of early Christian thinking about the pneumatology of martyrdom and I am deeply indebted to a number of Weinrich's insights.

34 Pace Williams, *Christian Spirituality*, 14.

35 Weinrich, *Spirit and Martyrdom*, 115–16.

36 Corwin, *St. Ignatius and Christianity in Antioch*, 23–24; Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, trans. Michael Steinhauser and ed. Marshall D. Johnson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 88–89.

37 Ignatius, *Romans* 1.2–2.1 (trans. Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings*, 85).

38 Ignatius, *Romans* 2. See also Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch*, 171.

39 Weinrich, *Spirit and Martyrdom*, 134–35.

world. Thus, he tells them: It is the hope of this world's prince to get hold of me and undermine my resolve, set as it is upon God. Pray let none of you lend him any assistance, but take my part instead, for it is the part of God. Do not have Jesus Christ on your lips, and the world in your heart; do not cherish thoughts of grudging me my fate. Even if I were to come and implore you in person, do not yield to my pleading; keep your compliance for this written entreaty instead.⁴⁰

For the Roman believers to enable Ignatius to attain to his calling of martyrdom is, in a very real sense, to share in that suffering with him.⁴¹

But there is another request here. Ignatius knows that he is no superman. He is a man with a vivid imagination who can well envision the sort of death that awaits him at Rome. As he says earlier in the letter:

Leave me to be a meal for the beasts, for it is they who can provide my way to God. I am His wheat, ground fine by the lions' teeth to be made purest bread ... Fire, cross, beast-fighting, hacking and quartering, splintering of bone and mangling of limb, even the pulverizing of my entire body – let every horrid and diabolical torment come upon me, provided only that I can win my way to Jesus Christ!⁴²

Ignatius is afraid that at the last his courage may fail and that he will ask the Roman believers to get him freed. Thus, he tells them, do not listen to me if that happens: 'Even if I were to come and implore you in person, do not yield to my pleading; keep your compliance for this written entreaty instead.'⁴³ Given his fears, it is quite understandable that he asks the Romans to pray for him. 'The only petition I would have you put forward on my behalf,' he asks them, 'is that I may be given sufficient inward and outward strength to be as resolute in will as in words.' Again, near the end of the letter he pleads with them, 'Intercede for me that I may have my wish.'⁴⁴ Ignatius' request for prayer for perseverance bespeaks the realization that true faith is found to be genuine only in the place of endurance.⁴⁵

40 Ignatius, *Romans* 7.1–2 (trans. Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings*, 87).

41 Ignatius, *Romans* 6; Weinrich, *Spirit and Martyrdom*, 135–36.

42 Ignatius, *Romans* 4.1; 5.3 (trans. Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings*, 86, 87).

43 Ignatius, *Romans* 7.2 (trans. Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings*, 87).

44 Ignatius, *Romans* 3.2; 8.3 (trans. Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings*, 86, 88).

45 See Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 368.

Martyrdom as imitation and renunciation

Why, though, is he willing to die? First, Ignatius is certain that his martyrdom will please God. As he declares with confidence about his desire to die for Christ: 'I am not writing now as a mere man, but I am voicing the mind of God.'⁴⁶ The use of genitives in his description of himself as 'His [i.e. God's] wheat' and 'the purest bread for Christ'⁴⁷ reveals Ignatius' awareness that 'God is the author of martyrdom'. Consequently he must be pleased with those who die for the sake of their faith in Christ.⁴⁸

Why exactly does Ignatius' martyrdom please God? First of all, he conceives of it as an imitation of the death of Christ. 'Leave me to imitate the Passion of my God,' he says at one point.⁴⁹ If God the Father was pleased with his Son's death for sinners, Ignatius' dying for his faith in Christ is also pleasing to God. Just as Christ's death was one in which violence was done to him, but he did not retaliate,⁵⁰ likewise was the death of Ignatius, the imitator of his Lord's passion. Weinrich rightly notes, though, that there is not the slightest hint that Ignatius' death has any salvific value for others as Christ's death has.⁵¹

46 Ignatius, *Romans* 8.3 (trans. Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings*, 88). See also *Romans* 2.1, where he is urging the Roman Church to allow his martyrdom to take place: 'It is not men I want you to gratify, but God' (trans. Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings*, 85).

47 Ignatius, *Romans* 4.1 (trans. Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings*, 86).

48 Weinrich, *Spirit and Martyrdom*, 115.

49 Ignatius, *Romans* 6.3 (trans. Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings*, 87). Noteworthy in this text is Ignatius' high Christology. In referring to Christ as 'God', Ignatius evidently expected the Christians in Rome to be both familiar with a high Christology and comfortable with it. See also the following texts where Ignatius describes Christ as God: *Romans*, Salutation 'Jesus Christ our God' (trans. Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings*, 85), 6.3; *Ephesians*, Salutation, 1.1 (where Ignatius refers to the 'blood of God'), 18.2; *Smyrnaeans*, 1.1.

Reinforcing these texts is the statement in *Magnesians* 6.1 that 'Jesus Christ ... was with the Father (*para patri*) from all eternity' (trans. Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings*, 72). This clause is parallel to the Johannine affirmation in John 1:1 that 'the Word was with God (*pros ton theon*)'. In *koine* Greek at this time, the use of *para* with the dative to express the idea of 'with someone' was receiving competition from *pro* with the accusative. In other words, Ignatius' statement that Jesus was 'with the Father' and John's declaration that the Word 'was with God' are making the same point: Jesus Christ/the Word enjoyed intimate, personal communion with the Father from eternity.

50 See, for example, 1 Peter 2:21–23.

51 Weinrich, *Spirit and Martyrdom*, 112–13. Thus Weinrich comments: 'It is ... quite

Martyrdom is also the expression of and culmination to Ignatius' ultimate renunciation of the world. As he states: 'All the ends of the earth, all the kingdoms of the world would be of no profit to me; so far as I am concerned, to die in Jesus Christ is better than to be monarch of earth's widest bounds.'⁵² Martyrdom vividly brought to the fore a key theme of much of early Christian teaching and conviction: the world, in their case the world of the Roman Empire, was neither a friend of the Church nor of her God.⁵³ However, it is curious, as Frend points out, that apart from the reference to the soldiers guarding him as 'savage leopards', Ignatius says nothing directly about the Empire.⁵⁴

One of Ignatius' most powerful evocations of this theme of renunciation comes in the following declaration in his letter to Rome:

Earthly longings have been crucified (*ho emos erōs estaurōtai*) and in me there is left no spark of desire for mundane things, but only a murmur of living water (*hydōr zōn*) that whispers within me, 'Come to the Father'.⁵⁵

The reference here to the 'living water' is almost definitely an allusion to Jesus' words in John 7:37–39 that liken the Holy Spirit to 'rivers of living water'.⁵⁶ It is the Spirit, therefore, who speaks within Ignatius, 'Come to the Father'. The Spirit speaks thus from within a context of crucifixion: the death of Ignatius' 'earthly longings', according to Maxwell Staniforth's

doubtful whether Ignatius conceived of his martyrdom as sacrificially vicarious for his fellow Christians' (*Spirit and Martyrdom*, 113). Compare, this with Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 199.

52 Ignatius, *Romans* 6.1 (trans. Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings*, 87). Frend sees in this statement an echo of Paul's statement in Philippians 1:21, 'For me to live is Christ and to die is gain' (*Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 198). On this theme of martyrdom and renunciation, see David A. Lopez, *Separatist Christianity: Spirit and Matter in the Early Church Fathers* (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 74–78.

53 For further discussion of this theme, see Lopez, *Separatist Christianity*.

54 Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 200. On the reference to the soldiers, see Ignatius, *Romans* 5.1.

55 Ignatius, *Romans* 7.8 (trans. Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings*, 87, altered).

56 See also the link of the Spirit and water in Revelation 22:1–2, 17. See the comments of Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch*, 185; Henning Paulsen, *Die Briefe des Ignatius von Antiochia und der Brief des Polykarp von Smyrna* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1985), 77.

translation cited above.⁵⁷ This phrase 'earthly longings' is literally 'my love'.⁵⁸ In the century following Ignatius, the great Alexandrian exegete Origen (c.185–254) initiated a long tradition of interpretation of this Ignatian text when he remarked that 'one of the saints, by name Ignatius, said of Christ, "My Love is crucified"'.⁵⁹ Origen goes on to say that he finds it odd that Ignatius uses the term *erōs* for Christ, but he states that he is unwilling to censure him for such. However, over and above the fact that the term *erōs* is not used in the New Testament at all, let alone referred to divine love, the context of Ignatius' statement seems to demand that it be understood as 'earthly longings'. The use of the conjunction 'and' places the phrase 'earthly longings' on the same level as the clause 'in me there is left no spark of desire for mundane things'.⁶⁰ In other words, the 'living water', the Spirit, has quenched the fire of 'earthly passion' and is exhorting Ignatius to 'come to the Father'.⁶¹ Thus, the Spirit is leading Ignatius to the Father by way of martyrdom and his leading entails a death to all earthly longings. This passage reflects both a keen understanding of the opposition of the Spirit to 'earthly longings'⁶² and the awareness that martyrdom is, in a sense, a gift of the Spirit.

57 Similarly Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch*, 181: 'My longing'.

58 Thus J. H. Srawley, *The Epistles of St. Ignatius Bishop of Antioch* (3rd ed.; London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1919), 78; Paulsen, *Die Briefe des Ignatius von Antiochia*, 76: 'Meine Liebe'.

59 *Commentary on the Song of Songs* Prologue 2 (trans. R. P. Lawson, *Origen: The Song of Songs Commentary and Homilies* (Ancient Christian Writers, vol. 26; Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press/London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1957), 35). For another much later example, see Samuel Pearce, 'Lines written on the words of Ignatius, "My Love is Crucified"' in Andrew Fuller, *Memoirs of the Rev. Samuel Pearce, A.M.*, ed. W. H. Pearce (London: G. Wightman, 1831), 223–25. Pearce (1766–99), an English Calvinistic Baptist pastor, clearly understands Ignatius' words to be a reference to Christ.

60 I am indebted to a good friend, Dr Benjamin Hegeman of SIM, now based in Houghton, New York, for this point.

61 P. Th. Camelot, trans., *Ignace d'Antioche, Polycarpe de Smyrne: Lettres, Martyre de Polycarpe* (3rd ed.; Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1958), 134–35, n.1; Brown, *Gospel and Ignatius of Antioch*, 109.

62 Similarly J. B. Lightfoot translates this phrase by 'my earthly passion has been crucified' (*The Apostolic Fathers: Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp* (2nd ed.; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1981), II/2, 222). See also the comments of Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 81, 83.

Martyrdom and being a disciple

In an important study of Ignatius as martyr and Christian disciple, Daniel N. McNamara notes that within Ignatius' letters the bishop of Antioch speaks of 'being a disciple' in two different ways. First, he expresses the hope that he will 'be found a disciple' in his confrontation with death as a martyr. By this McNamara understands Ignatius to be saying that 'he hoped that his final confrontation with death would be found consistent with his profession of faith in Christ'. In a second understanding of what it means to be a Christian disciple, the emphasis is placed on the devotion of the Christian to the Lord Jesus.⁶³

For Ignatius, martyrdom is the clearest way to express his personal devotion to Christ and his rejection of the world. But he is quite aware that there are other ways to journey. For example, his urging of the believers in Rome to express their devotion to Christ by allowing him to die as a martyr clearly indicates an awareness that his path of discipleship and theirs are not identical. Although Ignatius might see martyrdom as the straighter road upon which he must travel, he is not denying the fact that there are other paths which other disciples can travel.⁶⁴ In this regard, it is vital to note that he does not exhort any of the believers in Rome, nor for that matter any of his other correspondents, to join him as a martyr. He obviously does not see martyrdom as being essential to discipleship.⁶⁵

Martyrdom and the defence of the Faith

A final aspect of Ignatius' thinking about his martyrdom is the way that he believes it forms a bulwark against a species of false teaching that threatened the unity of at least a couple of the churches to which he was writing, namely those in Smyrna and in Tralles. Present even during the days of the Apostles,⁶⁶ the proponents of this perspective, known as Docetism, denied the death of Christ and asserted that Christ's 'sufferings were not genuine'.⁶⁷ Ignatius uses what was becoming a technical word

63 Daniel N. McNamara, 'Ignatius of Antioch On His Death: Discipleship, Sacrifice, Imitation' (Unpublished PhD thesis, McMaster University, 1977), 247.

64 Corwin, *St. Ignatius and Christianity in Antioch*, 254–55.

65 Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 198. See also, in this regard, Ignatius' exhortation to Polycarp in *Polycarp* 2.

66 See, for example, in the New Testament: 2 Tim. 2:16–18; 1 John 4:1–3; 2 John

67 Ignatius, *Trallians* 9–11.

to describe these theological opponents of core Christian teaching: they have embraced 'heresy' (*haireisis*).⁶⁸ Moreover, according to Ignatius, those who have embraced this false teaching do not live godly lives, for they have broken with the church, refusing to attend the Lord's Table or to pray together with the church.⁶⁹ While Docetism was not part and parcel of every variant of second-century Gnosticism it can be found in a variety of Gnostic documents. In *The Letter of Peter to Philip*, for example, it is asserted that 'Jesus is a stranger to ... suffering'. In another text, entitled the *First Apocalypse of James*, a statement is attributed to Christ in which he affirms, 'Never have I suffered in any way'.⁷⁰

Now, in the letter to the church at Smyrna Ignatius makes a powerful connection between his own death and that of Christ. He writes that Christ was 'truly pierced by nails in his human flesh' and 'truly suffered'. It is thus necessary to confess over against the heretics that 'his Passion was no unreal illusion'.⁷¹ Nor was Christ's physical resurrection an illusion. 'For my own part,' Ignatius declares, 'I know and believe that he was in actual human flesh, even after his resurrection'. Ignatius finds proof for this declaration in the resurrection accounts in Luke 24, where Christ appeared to his disciples, challenged their unbelief, and urged them to eat and drink with him.⁷²

If the Docetists were correct and all of the Lord Jesus' incarnate life were 'only illusion,' then, Ignatius declares with biting sarcasm, 'these chains of mine must be illusory too!'⁷³ From the point of view of Docetism, if Christ did not really suffer, it was meaningless for any of his disciples to take such a pathway. Martyrdom was thus not a distinctive characteristic of the Docetist communities. A number of second-century authors after Ignatius

68 See Ignatius, *Trallians* 6.1. He also uses the term 'teaching falsehood' (*heterodoxountas*) with regard to this perspective: Ignatius, *Smyrnaeans* 6.2. It is interesting that Ignatius is the only second-century Christian author to use this term. See Brown, *The Gospel and Ignatius of Antioch*, 174–75.

69 Ignatius, *Smyrnaeans* 6–7.

70 Both texts cited by Guy G. Stroumsa, 'Christ's Laughter: Docetic Origins Reconsidered', *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 12 (2004), 272.

71 Ignatius, *Smyrnaeans* 1.2–2 (trans. Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings*, 101, altered).

72 Ignatius, *Smyrnaeans* 3.1–2 (trans. Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings*, 101). On the Docetists at Smyrna, see also Sumney, 'The Opponents of Ignatius of Antioch', 349–53; Isacson, *To Each Their Own Letter*, 158–79.

73 *Smyrnaeans* 4.2 (trans. Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings*, 102). See also *Trallians* 9–10.

note the absence of martyrs among such communities.⁷⁴ But Christ's suffering was real and this validated the physical suffering of his people. Ignatius continues:

To what end have I given myself up to perish by fire or sword or savage beasts? Simply because when I am close to the sword I am close to God, and when I am surrounded by the lions, I am surrounded by God. But it is only in the name of Jesus Christ, and for the sake of sharing his sufferings, that I could face all this; for he, the perfect Man, gives me strength to do so.⁷⁵

Ignatius' martyrdom was thus a powerful defence of the saving reality of the incarnation and crucifixion. In suffering a violent death, Ignatius was confessing that his Lord had also actually suffered a violent demise. So important was that confession, it was worth dying for.

74 See the references in Pagels, 'Gnostic and Orthodox Views of Christ's Passion' in Layton, ed., *Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, 265–71. There were some Gnostics who appear to have affirmed Christ's bodily sufferings and thus the value of martyrdom: see Pagels, 'Gnostic and Orthodox Views of Christ's Passion' in Layton, ed., *Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, *passim*; Heikki Räisänen, 'Marcion' in Antti Marjanen and Petri Luomanen, eds, *A Companion to Second-Century Christian 'Heretics'* (Leiden/Boston: E. J. Brill, 2005), 100–24.

75 *Smyrnaeans* 4.2 (trans. Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings*, 102)