

Ignatius of Antioch: A True Roman

Mitchel F. Cordes

Ignatius of Antioch was the bishop of the Christian church in Antioch at the beginning of the second century A.D. He was arrested in Syria under unspecified circumstances related to his Christian faith and was being transported to Rome when he wrote the works which we have today. There has been a great deal of scholarly debate as to which works are authentic and which are spurious. The consensus is in favor of the authenticity of the “Middle Recension” of seven letters: *Ephesians*, *Magnesians*, *Trallians*, *Romans*, *Philadelphians*, *Smyrnaeans*, and *Polycarp*. (See Foster 1: 487-89; Holmes 131-32; Ehrman 209-13; and Stoops 161.) All seven letters were written while Ignatius was in Asia Minor and we hear no further from him after he departs from Troas to Neapolis (Ignatius *Polycarp* 8.1). We do not know the details of the end of Ignatius’ life, but it is widely thought that he was martyred in Rome during the reign of the emperor Trajan (A.D. 98-117) and it has been proposed that he wrote his letters specifically in A.D. 113 (Holmes 131; Davies 178).

There are many unknowns concerning the epistles and martyrdom of Ignatius of Antioch. While some scholars see Ignatius’ actions as a contrast to the pagan Roman norm (Foster 2: 8; Brent 31), I argue that he is in many ways conforming to the ideals of the late Republic and early Empire. I will show that his death as a martyr was similar to the deaths of many famous Romans and that his willingness to die was tied to his desire to leave behind an earthly legacy. I argue that despite his impending death, he seems to have a limited focus on the afterlife

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and that his letters serve as a defense of his view of church hierarchy, which he perceived as his means toward achieving earthly immortality. I will also demonstrate that his very conception of church structure can plausibly be based on the structure of Roman government. While Ignatius was a Christian from the East, he nonetheless conformed to the norms and beliefs of the predominant pagan culture of those living in Italy and the city of Rome itself during the late Republic and early Empire.

Ignatius of Antioch was a Roman in the sense that he lived within the borders of the Roman Empire, although it is unclear whether Ignatius was actually a Roman citizen or not (Trevett 36). The name “Ignatius” (Ἰγνάτιος) is a Greek form of the Latin “Egnatius,” but he himself makes no mention of his citizenship or ethnicity; the focus in his writings remains on church unity and matters of faith (Schoedel 35-36). The city from which he came, nevertheless, must have had a significant effect on his identity. The city of Antioch was founded by Seleucus Nicator, who was one of the successors of Alexander the Great. Seleucus established Antioch as the capital of his kingdom and settled Athenian and Macedonian veterans there around 300 B.C. Pompey the Great conquered Antioch in 64 B.C. and it then became the capital of the Roman province of Syria. In the early Roman Empire, Antioch was an important and wealthy trade city and was the third largest city of the empire after Alexandria and Rome itself (Pomeroy et al. 338; Downey 84-91).

In addition to there being a strong Roman influence in Antioch, *The Acts of the Apostles* records the presence of Paul the Apostle there for over a year and mentions that “the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch” (*New International Version*, Acts 11.25-26). Also, the letter from Paul to the Galatians mentions both Paul and Peter spending time among the Gentiles in Antioch (Galatians 2:11-15). Thus, the Antioch from which Ignatius came was one with a rich Greek history, a strong Roman presence and with strong ties to the very beginnings of Christianity.

To put the life and death of Ignatius in the proper context, it is important to dispel the popular notion that there was widespread and fervent persecution of Christians for their faith during the first three centuries following the death of Jesus Christ. The most memorable

persecution of Christians is likely that of Nero in A.D. 65. Although many Christians were cruelly executed, this persecution was short-lived and limited to the city of Rome itself. In fact, while Christians were rightfully concerned about persecution, all persecutions which took place in the Roman Empire were of limited duration and scope (Guy 62-63). Perhaps the clearest picture of the persecution of Christians, especially in the time of Ignatius and in the geographical area of the churches of Asia Minor, comes from the correspondence between Pliny the Younger and the emperor Trajan. Pliny was serving as governor of Bithynia and Pontus around the year A.D. 110 and wrote many letters to Trajan for advice. He writes to Trajan that he has little experience with the legal prosecution of Christians and is unsure as to how strict he should be in the application of the law (Pliny *Epistulae* 10.96). It is clear from Pliny's letter that Christians are not being persecuted because of their belief in Christ, but for their lack of observance of Roman religion. Furthermore, Pliny found the Christians' religious activities to be harmless except for the fact that they had formed a secret society. Trajan's reply to Pliny shows the relatively mild attitude he had toward Christians:

They are not to be sought out; if they are prosecuted and proved to be guilty, they should be punished, provided, however, that the man who denies he is a Christian and makes this evident by his action, that is by offering prayers to our gods, shall obtain pardon for his repentance, however suspect he may be with regard to the past. However, pamphlets posted up without an author's name ought to have no place in any criminal charge. (Pliny *Epistulae* 10.97)

Thus, from the Christian viewpoint, they faced either denying Christ and participating in idolatry or being put to death. However, the officials who were carrying out the persecution must have thought themselves rather lenient in that a simple recantation on the part of the supposed Christian would result in clemency. Therefore, while Christians were indeed persecuted, it was not to the extent that is often popularly assumed.

Another misunderstanding is that someone at the time of Ignatius would have a strong Christian precedent in dying for his beliefs

(Stoops 165-66). Ignatius does contrast himself with Peter and Paul, although he does not mention their deaths, which scholars believe occurred during the persecution of Nero (Ermatinger 69; Guy 63). Ignatius implores the Romans, “Allow me to be an imitator of the suffering of my God” (Ignatius *Romans* 6.3).¹ From this we begin to see that the Christian practice of martyrdom is only just beginning and Ignatius is following in the footsteps of Christ rather than a famous martyr who preceded him. It will be Ignatius himself who will act “as an inspiration to countless members among the band of martyrs throughout the centuries.” (Foster 2: 10). One such Christian to whom Ignatius was an example was Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna. On his journey to Rome, Ignatius spends time in Smyrna and addresses one of his letters to the church there and one to its bishop. Around A.D. 167 we get an epistle written collectively by the church of Smyrna to the church at Philomelium entitled, *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* (Holmes 223). This letter describes how Polycarp was arrested, resisted denying Christ, and was executed. While Ignatius uses the word “martyr” to denote its literal sense of “witness,” by the time of *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, “martyr” has taken on the meaning we ascribe to it today. Thus, I agree with Paul Foster’s assessment that Christianity “may accurately be described as a martyr-cult” (2: 8). However, he sees Ignatius’ actions as a result of this martyr culture whereas Ignatius preceded it and unknowingly helped to found it.

Not only did Ignatius not have a strong Christian model for his martyrdom, but he also does not appear to have been inspired by Hebrew scriptural accounts of such deeds (Schoedel 9). Instead, I propose that he is following in a widespread Greek and Roman precedent of willingly dying for one’s beliefs. As a standard for comparison, I will use the description of a Roman suicide as presented in Miriam Griffin’s two-part article, “Philosophy, Cato, and Roman Suicide” (65-66). I will show that the death of Ignatius of Antioch fits quite well with this model and, therefore, his death should be thought of as primarily reflecting Roman culture. Only in hindsight do we see that the willing death of Ignatius as the beginning of the Christian tradition of martyrdom.

In comparing martyrdom to acts of suicide, it is important to consider the differences and similarities between the two acts. If

suicide is any act of taking one's own life, then even the famous death of Socrates suggests an element of suicide. He was ordered to drink hemlock, but he himself took the action which ended his life. He likely could have bargained for exile instead of death, but chose not to do so based on his political and philosophical convictions (Pomeroy et al. 259). Likewise, it is possible that Ignatius allowed himself to be arrested as a religious statement (Trevett 48). As will be discussed below, he asked the church at Rome not to intercede on his behalf in order to prevent his death. Therefore, because of action or inaction, the death of Ignatius of Antioch is similar to some acts of suicide. Distinctions among executions, suicides, and acts of martyrdom are sometimes more difficult to draw than might appear at first glance. However, I by no means am attempting to show that the martyrdom of Ignatius is similar to all types of suicide. The private suicide driven by depression and despair has little to do with martyrdom. Instead, I maintain that the death of Ignatius was inspired by the lauded principle-driven deaths of famous Romans.

For example, Cato the Younger would provide a lasting example of a noble Roman suicide. Cato was a respected politician and Stoic who was vehemently opposed to the tyranny of Caesar. While others succumbed to Caesar's famous forgiveness of foes, Cato refused, saying, "I would not be beholden to a tyrant for his acts of tyranny" (Plutarch 66.2). Therefore, with defeat imminent, he chose the only honorable course available to him—to take his own life. Plutarch tells us that Cato not only stabbed himself with his sword, but pulled his intestines back out after a physician had attempted to repair Cato's self-inflicted wound (70.4-5). Although lacking a specific religious element, Cato's voluntary death for his cause is similar to the martyrdom of Ignatius of Antioch. They both persevered in their beliefs and left behind a praiseworthy example to future generations.

The great Roman statesman, Cicero, was certainly inspired by the famous death of Cato the Younger—a man for whom Cicero had written a eulogy which invoked the ire of Julius Caesar. In his defense of the Republic, Cicero would incite Marcus Antonius to order his proscription. Cicero had attempted to flee from his assassins, but "finally a weariness both of flight and life came upon him" (Livy Book 120). After saying, "Let me die in the fatherland I have so often saved,"

Cicero yielded and offered his head from his litter for decapitation (Livy Book 120). Cicero was zealous in his belief in the Republic and was willing (though he was left with little choice in the matter) to die in defiance of tyranny. As stated earlier, it is somewhat unclear as to what level of choice Ignatius had in his death. Nonetheless, it is no stretch to say that Cicero's "political martyrdom" would have been familiar to men throughout the Roman empire of Ignatius' day.

The lasting example which Cato established is also clearly seen in Seneca's *Epistle 70*. Seneca writes to Lucilius, "You need not think that none but great men have had the strength to burst the bonds of human servitude; you need not believe that this cannot be done except by a Cato" (70.19). Using Cato as an example of a great man's noble suicide, Seneca goes on to argue that lowly men, too, can find the strength to end their own lives. He cites examples of one gladiator slave who suffocated himself with a sponge used for wiping oneself after using the latrine and one who allowed his neck to be broken in the spokes of a wagon wheel (70.20; 70.23). Both attained nobility by ending their own lives instead of suffering the indignity of dying in the arena. Seneca himself would end up taking his own life in A.D. 65 at the command of his former pupil, Nero. Tacitus tells us that after Seneca was prevented from writing his will, he instead bequeathed to his friends "his sole but fairest possession—the image of his life" (*Annals* 15.62). After more discussion, Seneca takes his own life, dying with the bravery and resolve which he had preached. While Tacitus may have embellished his account, we can safely assume a leading Stoic would indeed die with dignity and thoughts of the legacy he is leaving behind. Ignatius, after having been arrested, would find himself in a situation similar to Seneca. His death was not guaranteed, but he could choose to face it with calmness in order to make a lasting statement for those following in his "philosophy" of Christianity.

While followers of Stoicism provide us with good examples of noble suicides, Epicureans such as Atticus, the confidant of Cicero, also resorted to suicide. Atticus, as Cornelius Nepos reports, chose to end his life not in defiance of a tyrant or to stand up for his principles, but to escape from a painful illness (21-22). However, Epicureanism was generally against suicide and even Stoicism did not approve of all acts of suicide. Nonetheless, suicide was fairly common among the

Romans even before the influx of Greek philosophy (Griffin I: 68, 72). Therefore, it is appropriate to place the willing death of Ignatius in the greater context of Roman suicides rather than the beliefs and practices of a single school of philosophy.

To show more specifically how the death of Ignatius is similar to a Roman suicide, I will use the four characteristics which Miriam Griffin describes of a typical Roman suicide: *philosophical overtones*, *social character*, *theatricality*, and *calmness*. The *philosophical overtones* of the Ignatius' death are obvious. Not only is he a witness for Christianity in general, but he also addresses concepts within Christianity such as the organization of the Church, the observation of the Eucharist, and even abstract ideas such as the nature of Christ. Griffin describes the *social character* of the dramatic Roman suicide as including the presence and comforting of friends and attempted dissuasion from the act of suicide (Griffin I: 66). Ignatius is indeed visited by many people, and, even more so, his letters allow him to bridge the distance between himself and his wider community of Christians. (See his letters to the *Magnesians* 2.1, *Ephesians* 1.3, *Trallians* 1.1, and *Philadelphians* 11.1-2). Though he was doubtlessly comforted by both those who visited him, the refutation of perceived dissuasion is what comes through most strongly. To the Ephesians, Ignatius writes, "I was on my way from Syria in chains for the sake of our common name ... and was hoping through your prayers to succeed in fighting with wild beasts in Rome" (*Ephesians* 1.2). Thus, Ignatius makes his intentions very clear, anticipating and responding to any objections to his choice of death. Even more clearly, Ignatius writes to the church in Rome, "I...am insisting to everyone that I die for God of my own free will—unless you hinder me. I implore you: do not be 'unseasonably kind'" (*Romans* 4.1). Stevan L. Davies proposed that Ignatius may have been indicted by the legate of the governor of Syria and was expecting and hoping for execution and that the church in Rome may have been able to have the indictment of the legate dismissed (178). We see that Ignatius' extended martyrdom has a social character matching the political martyrdoms of lauded Romans, especially his need and desire to dissuade any of his friends who might stand in his way. Further, Ignatius makes it clear that his death is of his own free will, which makes his death closer to a voluntary suicide than an imposed execution.

The *theatricality* of the death journey of Ignatius is closely connected with his *calmness*. Not only is Ignatius calm concerning his impending death but he is even eager for his gruesome end as shown in one of the most striking passages of the corpus:

Let me be food for the wild beasts through whom I can reach God. I am God's wheat, and I am being ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I might prove to be pure bread. Better yet, coax the wild beasts, that they may become my tomb and leave nothing of my body behind, lest I become a burden to someone once I have fallen asleep. Then I will truly be a disciple of Jesus Christ, when the world will no longer see my body. (Romans 4.1-2)

We do not know whether Ignatius met his end as bravely as he hoped, but his anticipatory comfort with his own painful and violent end is quite clear. Later on in the same letter he continues his morbid imagery:

Fire and cross and battles with wild beasts, mutilation, mangling, wrenching of bones, the hacking of limbs, the crushing of my whole body, cruel tortures of the devil—let these come upon me, only let me reach Jesus Christ! (5.3).

Although Ignatius differs from men such as Cato, Cicero, and Seneca with his passionate references to his Christian faith, all of these men express a comfort in dying for their beliefs. Ignatius' vivid description of his death goes beyond a Roman's typical philosophical musings but serves to make his death all the more dramatic and theatrical. Griffin describes the theatricality of Roman suicides as defined by "their length and the presence of a considerable audience" (Griffin I: 65). His actual death in the arena (if it indeed occurred there) would have had a massive audience. Though, if we consider his epistles and their description of his trip from Syria to Rome to be his "death scene," then it was indeed a lengthy affair which reached a considerable audience. Along his journey, Ignatius is able to receive representatives from the churches of Ephesus, Magnesia, and Tralles (*Ephesians* 1.3; *Magnesians* 2.1; *Trallians* 1.1). Furthermore, Ignatius reaches a large audience by addressing his epistles to entire churches, or in one case

to the bishop Polycarp. We can assume, though, that he expected that his letters would be copied and shared among many Christian churches (Stoops 177). Thus, his audience would be extremely large but would also continue to affect Christians and scholars for two millennia. In fact, in his fourth-century *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius discusses the martyrdom of Polycarp and Ignatius. Specifically, Eusebius quotes Ignatius' striking imagery of his death from his letter to the Romans (3.36). Because of his dramatic writing and his interesting journey, Ignatius was able to reach a broad audience and ensure that his death was remembered.

Therefore, with the philosophical overtones, social character, theatricality, and calmness of his death, Ignatius matches the characteristics of a noble Roman suicide as described by Griffin. Consequently, my view of the death of Ignatius of Antioch contrasts with Paul Foster's assertion that Ignatius' attitude toward his own death "reflects the counter-cultural attitudes exhibited in early Christianity" (Foster 2: 8). Instead, I see the martyrdom of Ignatius, although expressed through allegiance to a different belief system, to fall in line with a relatively common cultural practice.

In addition to describing the characteristics of a Roman suicide, Griffin attempts to explain the commonness of suicide among the Romans. She states, "Whereas Christianity was to offer, in its doctrine of the afterlife, some incentive to ending one's life, ... Roman religion offered little in the rewards after death" (II: 193). I agree that the lack of a rewarding afterlife most likely enhanced the Roman desire to leave behind an earthly legacy; however, the idea of everlasting life in heaven seems to have had a limited effect on Ignatius. I presume Griffin's concept of the Christian "doctrine of the afterlife" is based on the New Testament, much of which was written by Paul the Apostle. Aside from *1 Corinthians*, it is uncertain which of Paul's letters Ignatius was familiar with, though he knew Paul was the author of several epistles (Schoedel 9). Ignatius certainly held Paul in high esteem and says in his letter to the Ephesians, "You are fellow initiates of Paul, who was sanctified, who was approved, who is deservedly blessed—may I be found in his footsteps when I reach God!" (12.2). Therefore, one would expect to find similar references to heaven in both Paul and Ignatius, but that is not the case. In fact, we see rather different

approaches to heaven between Ignatius and other Biblical writers such as Paul.

Numerous Biblical passages portray heaven as a tangible place, whereas Ignatius' writings are devoid of such suggestions. For example, Matthew's Gospel quotes Jesus as saying, "I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven (τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν)" (Matthew 19:23). In *Luke*, Jesus tells the repentant criminal crucified beside him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise (ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ)" (23:43). These two ideas from the mouth of Jesus depict heaven/paradise as a place where a person would actually exist. In *Mark*, the ascension of Jesus is described: "After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven (εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν) and sat at the right hand of God" (16:20). Likewise, Peter's first epistle to the churches of Asia Minor states that after the resurrection, Jesus went "into heaven and is at God's right hand" (1 Peter 3:21-22). Luke also reports that after the resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples and then "he left them and was taken up into heaven" (Luke 24:51). Moreover, Paul's letter to the Romans also refers to the ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven (10:6-7). These examples all depict heaven as a physical place where a person (or at least Jesus) could dwell in a real sense. Furthermore, the preposition "into" (εἰς) is used to clearly indicate motion toward a place. It is true that the word "heaven" could refer to the sky and what is beyond, but even in this sense, the body of Jesus is going to a *place*. Paul, in *2 Corinthians* writes, "We have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven" and to the Philippians he writes that those opposed to Christ have "their mind on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven" (2 Corinthians 5:1; Philippians 3:20). Although we can assume that he is merely speaking metaphorically, Paul nonetheless uses the imagery of a house and a city and thereby refers to heaven as a material place where a person could actually live.

Unlike the above Biblical passages, Ignatius does not refer to heaven as a place where one would exist after death but only refers to "salvation and eternal life," being "saved," his desire to "reach God (θεοῦ ἐπιτυχεῖν)" or "reach Jesus Christ (Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐπιτύχω)," and one reference to his hope to "rise again" (*Ephesians* 18.1; *Smyrnaeans* 2.1; *Trallians* 12.2; 13.3; *Romans* 2.1; *Polycarp* 7.1; *Romans* 5.3; *Ephesians*

11.2). Therefore, it is apparent that Ignatius differs from his Christian contemporaries in his view of heaven. In his seven epistles, Ignatius makes two references to “heaven” itself. One is when he urges the Smyrnaeans to send an ambassador to Syria “in order that [their] work may become perfect both on earth and in heaven (ἐν οὐρανῶι)» (*Smyrnaeans* 11.2). The other is to the Trallians where he described the crucifixion of Jesus occurring “while those in heaven (τῶν ἐπουρανίων) and on earth and under the earth looked on” (*Trallians* 9.1). He also uses the term “heavenly things” (τὰ ἐπουράνια) twice in his letter to the Trallians, but is referring more to concepts than to a location (5.1-5.2). Given that the Gospels make it clear that Jesus has a physical body after his resurrection, the ascension accounts of Luke and Mark show heaven to be a place that could be reached in physical form from earth (Matthew 28:9; Luke 24:40-43; John 20:27). In his letters, Ignatius counters the Docetic belief that Jesus did not truly ever exist in human form. The human nature of Jesus is made clear by Ignatius’ description of a 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...who really was raised from the dead” (*Trallians* 9.1-2). Ignatius also makes it clear that Jesus had a human body even *after* rising from the dead: “And after his resurrection he ate and drank with them like one who is composed of flesh, although spiritually he as united with the Father” (*Smyrnaeans* 3.3). While there was debate as to whether Jesus actually existed in the flesh, there is no evidence of any divide in the church concerning the doctrine of the ascension of Jesus into heaven. Given that both Peter and Paul clearly endorsed the belief in Christ’s ascension and given their influence in the establishing of the church in Antioch, it is logical to conclude that Ignatius, too, believed that Jesus ascended into heaven after his resurrection. Therefore, with Ignatius’ focus on the human and fleshly nature of Jesus, it is surprising that he does not focus more on heaven as an actual place. He instead speaks of reaching God and being saved as if his death will lead to more of a spiritual or philosophical salvation than eternal life in a paradise-like heaven.

Ignatius’ lack of focus on heaven, therefore, stands in opposition to Griffin’s assertion that the Christian idea of an afterlife provided

“some incentive to ending one’s life” (: II: 193). This may have been true for other Christians, but it does not seem to be the case for Ignatius. Ignatius seems to conceive of “reaching God” not after his death, but with the very act of his death. Instead of looking forward to an eternity in heaven, Ignatius focuses on his last moment on earth. This leads me back to my argument that Ignatius is not diametrically opposed to the pagan Roman norm but is, in fact, expressing a similar world-focused viewpoint. Further, I argue that his lack of focus on the afterlife enhances his typically Roman desire to gain immortality, not in the afterlife, but by leaving behind a literary legacy.

An attraction toward death is not the only attribute Ignatius shared with Cicero. Both men were acutely aware that they would be scarcely remembered without their writings. Cicero is especially consumed with his literary immortality and is a prolific letter-writer. Shortly after his exile, Cicero asks Atticus, “What will history say of me a thousand years hence? I am far more in awe of that than of the tittle-tattle of my contemporaries” (“Atticus” 2.5). Indeed, Michael Trapp puts it best in stating, “Cicero was never truly off duty, as a stylist or as a self-presenter” (Trapp 14). Ignatius likewise seemed to want to make a significant mark on this world. Part of his enthusiasm for his own death is that if he is to succeed in dying for Christ, “his whole life along with his teachings would be recognized as a model that could lead others to attain God” (Stoops 175). While he is likely following the pattern of epistle-writing of Paul, he must also be aware of the mark that he will leave on the Christian church as a whole. Ignatius is self-effacing in saying, “I am not commanding you, as though I were somebody important” and, “I do not give you orders like Peter and Paul” (*Ephesians* 3.1; *Romans* 4.3). However, he is, in fact, encouraging the reader to compare him to the great Apostles who came before him. In doing so, he is ensuring that his death will be all the more poignant and memorable. To the Trallians, Ignatius expresses his desire to not “perish by boasting” and that he must not “pay attention to those who flatter [him]” and he questions whether he is “worthy for the envy” (4.1-4.2). Ignatius may very well have been concerned about maintaining modesty in the face of his self-sacrifice. Since, for Ignatius, “the phrasing of Paul’s writings serves as a normative exemplar,” we would expect of him the same humility that we see of

Paul (Mitchell 27; 1 Corinthians 15:9; Ephesians 3:8; 1 Timothy 1:15). However, by mentioning the praise that was lavished on him, he subtly communicates to all future readers how he should be remembered. Not only could this part of the letter have the power to affect opinion in his own time, but nearly two thousand years later we are given a picture of a man who was so highly praised that he had to focus on not becoming conceited.

A great deal of effort and intent went into the dissemination of Ignatius' letters (Schoedel 12). Because he was not able to visit every community in Asia Minor personally, messengers were needed to alert the churches when Ignatius arrived in Smyrna. Once in Smyrna, Ignatius received visitors from Ephesus, from Magnesia, and from Tralles who then carried his letters back to their home churches (*Ephesians* 1.3, *Magnesians* 2.1; *Trallians* 1.1). He also had men who were able to relay messages to and from his church in Antioch (*Philadelphians* 11.1-2). From Polycarp's letter to the Philippians, we hear that Ignatius had given Polycarp a collection of letters to distribute to other churches: "We are sending you the letters of Ignatius that were sent to us by him" (13.2). Additionally, the letter to Polycarp itself displays Ignatius' intention of reaching a larger audience. Midway through the letter, Ignatius shifts from addressing Polycarp to using the second person plural, thus addressing the entire church at Smyrna and other churches as well (*Polycarp* 6.1ff). If Ignatius was intending to insert himself into the Christian canon, it seems he was somewhat successful although his letters would not eventually become part of the New Testament. However, the third-century Church Father, Origen, quotes Ignatius along with other New Testament authors (*Commentary on The Song of Songs*). I have no doubt of his faith and his desire for the Christian church to flourish, but he also undoubtedly wished that his death would be remembered and that his writings would be a literary monument to his sacrifice.

In his defense of his conception of church hierarchy, Ignatius takes his most notable step toward this end. In these writings he expresses the Christian viewpoint of desiring to be judged positively by God, but also demonstrates the Roman preoccupation with being remembered favorably by his fellow man. Ignatius' view of church structure is of a bishop/overseer (ἐπίσκοπος) as the head of the church in each town.

Under the bishop is a group of presbyters/elders (πρεσβύτεροι) under whom are the deacons (διάκονοι) who serve as church-supported servants and messengers. It has been proposed that the lack of “peace” in his home church of Antioch arose due to Ignatius’ belief that he, as bishop, ought to exert total control of the church (Ehrman 208). It appears that Ignatius may have allowed himself to be sacrificed in a last-ditch attempt to bring order to his church since he writes to the church at Smyrna, “I am a ransom on behalf of those who are obedient to the bishop, presbyters, and deacons” (*Polycarp* 6.1). From his writings, we discover that order was restored in Antioch before Ignatius sailed west from Asia Minor. He writes to the Smyrnaeans, “it is appropriate that your church appoint...a godly ambassador to go to Syria to congratulate them, because they are at peace” (11.2). Similarly, he writes to ask the Philadelphians to send a deacon to Antioch to congratulate them since “it has been reported to [him] that...the church at Antioch in Syria is at peace” (10.1). With order restored in Antioch, Ignatius is able to use his letters as a means to reinforce the “proper” scheme of church hierarchy and to serve as an eternal witness to the great sacrifice he has made on behalf of his church.

Since Ignatius’ entire corpus may have served as a literary defense, it demonstrates yet another similarity between him and his Roman counterparts. A prime example of a Roman’s literary defense comes from Ovid, who was exiled by Augustus for his racy manual on how to conduct an extramarital affair. When in exile, both Ovid and Cicero spend their ample free time writing in an effort to sway opinion in order that they might be recalled and to leave behind a record of the injustice of their banishment. In his *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*, Ovid repeatedly makes the case that his *Ars Amatoria* was not meant for the eyes of married women and that, nonetheless, it is no more corrupting than many other common works: “Perverted minds can be corrupted by anything that in its own proper context does no harm...and the first page of my *Art*, composed for courtesans only, warns free-born ladies to drop it on the spot” (Book 2). When in exile, Cicero uses letters to coordinate efforts for his return. He writes to his wife, “if there is any hope of my return, you must build it up, and help in the campaign” (*Familiares* 14.4). Cicero also uses his brother as a proxy in Rome and explains his actions in order to gain his brother’s support (*Quintum*

Fratrem 1.3). While Cicero coordinates support and Ovid downplays his offensive work, Ignatius, instead, resorts to standing firm on his ideas of episcopacy: “It is obvious, therefore, that we must regard the bishop as the Lord himself” (*Ephesians* 6.1). He further illuminates the divine aspect of church officers, stating, “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). He makes it quite clear that whatever the conflicts were in Antioch, he is right to insist on a rigid hierarchy. In his letter to the Magnesians he even denounces those who do not obey their bishop: “It is right, therefore, that we not just be called Christians, but that we actually be Christians, unlike some who call a man ‘bishop’ but do everything without regard for him” (4.1). Therefore, viewing Ignatius’ letters as a defense written “in exile,” he matches a secular Roman pattern quite well. While Foster states, “Ignatius represents the belief in a reversal, or inversion, of worldly values and attachments,” I see one’s reputation as very much an earthly concern (Foster 2: 8). Therefore, while Ignatius is being put to death presumably because he refuses to follow Roman religious practices, his letter-writing on the way to his death is very much Roman.

Ignatius is also similar to both Ovid and Cicero in that, once exiled, the desire for death is keen. After having been exiled, Cicero writes to Atticus, “You keep me from laying violent hands upon myself, but you cannot keep me from regretting my decision and the fact that I am alive” and he goes on later to say, “no one ever suffered so crushing a blow or had greater cause to pay for death. I might have met it with honour, but the moment was let pass by” (*Atticus* 3.7). Cicero is unlikely to have actually ended his own life in exile. However, the loss of his authority is so significant to him that it elicits thoughts of suicide. Likewise, Ovid also laments being alive in his exile: “For my own part, may I die, pierced by a native arrow” and “So sharp is my death-wish, I fault great Caesar’s anger: why could he not avenge his wrongs with the sword?” (*Epistulae ex Ponto* Book 5; *Tristia* Book 8). Ovid regrets not the loss of his authority, but being banished from the culture of Rome. For both Cicero and Ovid, being cut off from life in Rome is the same as death. For Ignatius, being severed from his place

of honor in Antioch leaves him with only one option for an honorable and meaningful life, namely death.

Turning back to Ignatius' model for church leadership, we must wonder from where he got the notion of such as strict structure. I will examine several potential sources of Ignatius' ideas of Church framework and show that the Greek and Roman tripartite government provides a sound explanation for the origin of his ideas. One possibility for the source of Ignatius' strict Church structure would be a tradition handed down from prominent early church leaders such as Paul and Peter. However, while bishops/overseers, presbyters/elders and deacons are mentioned in the extant works of those two men, there is a distinct lack of rigid organization in their model. It is clear that Ephesus had some sort of leadership by elders: "From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church (τοὺς πρέσβυτεροὺς τῆς ἐκκλησίας)» (Acts 20:17). Paul's letter to Titus instructs him to appoint elders (πρεσβυτέρους) for the Churches on Crete. However, Paul also refers to the elder as an overseer (τὸν ἐπίσκοπον) and seems to make no distinction between the two terms (Titus 1:5-9). Similarly, Peter's first letter to the churches of Asia Minor refers to the elders themselves serving as overseers. In fact, by addressing "the elders among you" and the young men in turn, he seems to be referring simply to the older members of the church as opposed to particular leadership or deliberative body (1 Peter 5:1-10). Therefore, when earlier church leaders established oversight, it was much more of a charismatic and communal organization than the episcopacy of Ignatius. Also, while Paul's establishment of bishops, elders, and deacons seems to be a means to an end, Ignatius seems particularly concerned with the structure itself.

Another possibility is shown by Ignatius' own words that he sees a divine blueprint of leadership: "You must all follow the bishop as Jesus Christ followed the Father and follow the presbytery as you would the apostles....Let no one do anything that has to do with the church without the bishop. Only that Eucharist which is under the authority of the bishop (or whomever he himself designates) is to be considered valid" (*Smyrnaeans* 8.1). Thus, according to Ignatius, not only must the church obey the bishop, but also the bishop must be present for sacrament. He further describes the need for deference

stating, “For Jesus Christ...is the mind of the father, just as bishops appointed throughout the world are in the mind of Christ” (*Ephesians* 3.2). Ignatius speaks of yielding to the bishop as akin to yielding to “the Father of Jesus Christ, the Bishop of all” (*Magnesians* 3.1). Also in his letter to the Magnesians, he makes the place of the deacons somewhat more clear: “Be eager to do everything in godly harmony, the bishop presiding in the place of God and the presbyters in the place of the council of the apostles and the deacons...having been entrusted with the service of Jesus Christ” (6.1). However, I read Ignatius’ divinely-inspired hierarchy as somewhat poorly defined. The apostles are indeed a group, but are not usually thought of as a council. With his high opinion of apostles such as Peter and Paul, it is much more likely that Ignatius saw them as bishops rather than presbyters. Ignatius also seems to waver concerning whether a bishop is in the image of Jesus or of God the Father. Moreover, deacons are described in a ministry position which seems to correlate with the original apostles.

Therefore, I suggest that while Ignatius’ idea of church hierarchy has some parallels to the role of the apostles and was begun with the appointments made by Peter and Paul, the idea of rigid structure was inspired by the structure of the omnipresent Roman government with its authoritative emperor and advisory body of the Roman Senate. While this administrative structure is not a uniquely Roman concept, it would have been constantly associated with the Roman government, especially as it would have been replicated in most cities throughout the empire (Shelton 270-72). Ironically, then, his elaborate defense of hierarchy within the early Christian church itself indicates another reason in which Ignatius was a product of Rome and not its antithesis.

Ignatius of Antioch wrote his epistles as a legacy, as a defense, and as an example for all Christians. His desire to die reflected a need for his life to have meaning and for his writings to have the weight of the last words of a martyr. His ideas concerning heaven and the structure of church leadership are in line with those of a non-Christian Roman and, as such, give further credence to the idea that his literary desires follow a particularly Roman pattern. By demonstrating similarities between Ignatius of Antioch and his Roman contemporaries, I have challenged the claim of scholars who perceive Ignatius as the antithesis of Rome and its pagan values. Ignatius of Antioch had the faith of a

true Christian, but the ego of a true Roman.

Notes

¹ Throughout this paper I follow the convention of classical scholarship in which references to primary works are referred to by section and line number as opposed to page number. All of the letters by Ignatius of Antioch are found in the volume by Michael W. Holmes.

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