



Preface

Ignatius is a man most famous for dying. What we know about him comes almost entirely from letters he wrote as he was on his way to martyrdom, with full knowledge that he had only a few weeks left to live. Not surprising, much of his reflection turns to dying, but his thoughts turn to other matters too. From such material, scholars have tried to reconstruct the wider environment in which Ignatius lived and to determine Ignatius's religious perspective and his place within the Christian community. Nothing like a full biography of Ignatius has been written, nor could it be.

My effort here is not to provide as complete a study of Ignatius as is possible. Many questions I leave untouched. But I do wish to stir the pot a little, largely by challenging some widely held views of Ignatius and his world and by asking a few new questions or by answering old questions in a slightly different way. In doing so, a few larger issues come into focus: in particular, the make-up of early Christian assemblies and the coming to distinctive identity of the Christian movement, or what has come to be called *the parting of the ways*.

Ignatius's language against Judaism is sharp, sweeping, uncompromisingly dismissive, and perhaps even shameful. Scholars sometimes attempt to redirect this language so that it is solely against Christian Judaizing elements in Ignatius's church and not against Judaism as a whole, but such efforts obscure the historical grit and grime inherent in the turbulent conflicts out of which new religious movements come into being. Ignatius's language and attitudes reflect the intensity of a powerful change in religious perception, and it is within that world that Ignatius lived and acted and makes sense. Present efforts to build bridges between Judaism and Christianity are not helped by attempts to sanitize the past. We are not responsible for what Ignatius said nor is he responsible for how we use what he said. To quote Brent Shaw, a former colleague of mine:

But what the sources record is, for better or for worse, what the sources record. A good part of what they record, certainly, is made up of systematic and successful repressions, but tinkering with the moral balance of the past is a disservice to the study of history and to the reform of society. The past is dead. We cannot change it. What we can change is the future; but the way to a better future requires an un-sentimental and accurate understanding of what happened in the past, and why. A

more civil and humane modernity will not be achieved by tendentious misreadings of antiquity.”¹

My effort here is to understand Ignatius’s world. If that helps us understand our own, so much the better. I will not be disappointed, however, if my work simply helps us understand a bit more clearly some aspects of Ignatius’s distant world.

The *New Revised Standard Version* has been used for English translations of the Bible. Various translations of Ignatius’s letters and the Apostolic Fathers have been used. Unless otherwise indicated, Bart Ehrman’s translation of *The Apostolic Fathers* in the Loeb Classical Library is used.² Sometimes Kirsopp Lake’s 1912 translation in the Loeb series,³ which Ehrman’s work replaces, offers the better translation, and Michael W. Holmes’s revision⁴ of the classic translation by J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer is always worth consulting.

¹Brent Shaw, “A Groom of One’s Own,” *The New Republic* (July 18, 1994): 41.

²*The Apostolic Fathers* (ed. and trans. Bart D. Ehrman; LCL 24–25; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

³*The Apostolic Fathers* (ed. and trans. Kirsopp Lake; LCL; Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1912).

⁴Michael W. Holmes, ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).