The Christology of Ignatius of Antioch

by Cullen I. K. Story

Approximately in the year AD 106-107, Ignatius, bishop of the church of Antioch in Syria, was seized by Roman authorities and removed from his church. The circumstances of his arrest are unknown. Two things, however, are clear: first, Ignatius — in fetters and guarded by a detachment of ten soldiers — was led away a prisoner toward Rome to meet his fate with the wild beasts in the Roman amphitheatre; and second, while he was en route, he wrote seven letters — six to churches and one to a bishop. Four of the seven letters were written from Smyrna (to the churches of Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, and Rome) and three from Troas (to the churches in Philadelphia and Smyrna and to Polycarp, bishop of the Smyrnean church).

The text of the letters was established by J. B. Lightfoot in the nineteenth century. Since Lightfoot's monumental work, the content of the letters has been the object of serious inquiry by numerous scholars. My concern in this essay is not with the writer — though what a fascinating study this is! There is, for example, the refreshing honesty of the bishop as it emerges from his letter to the church at Rome. He pleads with the church not to intercede for him to the Roman authorities to have his death sentence commuted, for, he affirms, my death in the Roman arena is God's will. Yes, even if upon arriving at Rome I should ask you to intervene on my behalf, do not listen to me. Listen, rather, to what I am writing to you now (Rom. 7:1-2). Here is a person who knows full well the frailty and fickleness of the human mind and heart — his own included. But our primary concern in this essay is not with the bishop, nor even with the churches to which he writes — their faith and life, their unity and hierarchical form of government including Ignatius' passionate concern for the right ordering of their sacramental life. Nor are we for the moment concerned with an investigation of the relationship which the Ignatian letters have to the various New Testament writings, especially to those of John and Paul — though what an attractive and demanding study that is!

Our focus falls on one item only: the christology that the Ignatian letters reveal. Or, to put it simply, we address to Ignatius the same question which Jesus posed to the leaders in Jerusalem, 'Ignatius, what do you think of Christ?' (cf. Matt. 22:42). The answer of Ignatius is important and far-reaching. I suggest that it can be expressed under two main headings found in the New Testament pastoral letters. To Ignatius, (1) Christ is God made manifest in the flesh (variant reading of 1 Tim. 3:16), and (2) Christ is God our Saviour (Tit. 3:4; 2:10).

**God Manifest in the Flesh**

The very first mention of Christ in the Ignatian letters (inscription, Eph.) uses the striking phrase, 'Jesus Christ, our God' (cf. also Eph. 15:3; 18:2; 19:3; Tr. 7:1; Rom. inscription, 3:3; 6:3; Smyr. 1:1; Polyc. 8:3). Taken by itself, the recurring claim could imply an incipient monophysite doctrine which emerged later full-blown as a reactionary position to the form of the incarnation, according to Ignatius, is the virgin birth (Eph. 7:2; 18:2; 19:1; Tr. 9:1). Jesus was conceived through Mary but he is of the seed of David. Ignatius' account of the star that 'shone over the place where the young child' (Matt. 2:2, 9, 10). while the Christ, 'They appear as ones who had withstood the power that had once destroyed' (19:2.)

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(1) 'From which fact, all magic was being destroyed'. The adverb ἀπὸ τοῦ συνανταγμοῦ links the statement to the supernatural phenomenon of the star (19:2; cf. Matt. 2:2, 9, 10), while ἀπὸ τοῦ συνανταγμοῦ surely suggests a reference to the ἄκαθος mentioned by Matthew (Matt. 2:1ff.). It is a well-known fact that early writers sensed that the birth of Jesus meant the overthrow of magic and sorcery, which were viewed as manifestations of the evil one. So, for example, Justin Martyr describes the magi (Matt. 2) as those who had been made a prey due to all (their) evil practices which 'were being energized' by the evil one. Yet by coming and worshipping the Christ, 'They appear as ones who had withstood the power that had once made them a prey'. Presumably, in a somewhat similar way, Ignatius sees the demise of ἀπὸ τοῦ συνανταγμοῦ in the journey of the ἄκαθος to Bethlehem and in their obeisance to the young child.

(2) 'Every bond of malice was disappearing'. Ignatius sees beyond Herod's malicious massacre of the Bethlehem children to the king's own fast-approaching death (Matt. 2:16-19).

(3) 'Ignorance was being overpowered'. The situation in Matthew comes immediately to mind. A question is asked and answered correctly from the prophetic word (Matt. 2:4-6), yet the very ones who answer by quoting the prophecy - i.e., the priests and scribes - fail to act on their own answer. The ignorance of the magi, however, 'was being overpowered' (or 'destroyed') for,

pre-incarnate Christ, he claims, actively inspired the Old Testament prophets so that unbelievers might be fully persuaded that there is one God, the God who manifested himself through Christ his Son (Mag. 8:2). In the following sentence (9:1-3) Ignatius claims that the prophets were Jesus' disciples 'in spirit' and that they lived in expectation of his coming, who, when he came, 'raised them [i.e., the prophets] from the dead' (Mag. 9:3). It is possible that Ignatius refers to the curious text in Matt. 27:52-53 concerning a resurrection of many bodies of saints sleeping, though both Matthew and Ignatius need careful exegetical treatment on the issue.

The incarnation takes on special meaning in view of the work of Jesus Christ in creation. He is the one who spoke the word and creation appeared (Eph. 15:1; cf. Psalm 35:9) and the one who has wrought in silence things that are worthy of the Father. The language is clear and brings together together with swift strokes the sovereign work of the pre-incarnate Jesus and his silence during his incarnation — in childhood (but cf. Luke 2:49), in his refusal of kingship (cf. John 6:15), and before his accusers (cf. Mk. 14:61; 15:5). Similarly also, Ignatius juxtaposes the incarnation to holy history. The
in contrast to the religious leaders, they made their way to the feet of the newborn king.

(4) 'An ancient kingdom was being ruined while God was appearing in human form unto newness of eternal life'. Ignatius clearly directs us to the impending ruin of Herod 'the king' (king, by the way, not 'of the Jews' but of 'Judea'; Jesus alone is ἀρχόν τῶν Ἰουδαίων, 'king of the Jews') — contrast Matt. 2:1 and Luke 1:5 with Matt. 2:2 and 27:29, 37. As for the phrase, 'while God was appearing in human form', it finds its true reference in the one who is called Emmanuel, 'God with us' (Matt. 1:28).

(5) 'The thing perfected in the presence of God was receiving a beginning'. Ignatius is conscious that the birth narrative in Matthew points to the fruition of the perfect counsel of God (Isa. 7:14 = Matt. 1:22-23; Mic. 5:2 = Matt. 2:5-6), but no less to the beginning of the fruition of that counsel (cf. Matt. 1:1, 'The book of the birth [γένεσις = beginning] of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham').

(6) 'From then on all things were being set in motion because the destruction of death was being carried out'. It is possible that Ignatius has given us in this single sentence a deep and comprehensive understanding of the birth narrative in Matthew, i.e., what it means that God was 'manifested in the flesh'. By his use of the passive voice in the two expressions ('were being set in motion' and 'was being carried out'), the bishop of Antioch suggests that God is behind the birth events (cf. in Matt. 1:2 divine providence in the prophetic word, the conception by the Spirit, and in the guidance that was offered through star and dream). And what God is doing behind the scenes, says Ignatius, points in the direction of the 'newness of eternal life' (sentence 4 above) as well as the 'destruction of death' (sentence 5). In the massacre of the Bethlehem children (Matt. 2:16-18), it is clear that Matthew points to the tragedy of death. Yet both Matthew and Ignatius claim that the birth of Jesus marks the inauguration of a life-giving and saving work of God whereby human sin and death are ultimately to be conquered and destroyed (cf. Matt. 1:90-31). In this light, it is quite certain that Ignatius has found the birth account in Matthew to be the narrative of the confession, 'God was manifested in flesh'.

Ignatius' confession was made in the face of the docetic heresy that had its subtle beginning in his own day. In a recent article in this journal,8 Issa A. Saliba has pointed out clearly how Ignatius' confession contrasts sharply with Gnosticism and its precursors. He notes that the gnostic idea claiming evil to be inherent in the material world confronted the problem of the person of Jesus Christ with the question, 'How could the Holy Saviour enter the realm of evil matter and possess a physical body?' The heresy lies in the background of the confessional statements in the Johannine letters, e.g., 'Every spirit which confesses Jesus Christ as having come in flesh is of God' (1 John 4:2; cf. 2 John 7). At times, Ignatius' confession assumes a creedal form, e.g.:

Jesus Christ ... the one of the race of David, the one of Mary, who truly was born, he both ate and drank, he was truly persecuted in the time of Pontius Pilate, he was truly crucified and died, while those dwelling in heaven and those on earth and those under the earth were looking on, who also was truly raised from the dead, his Father having raised him, whose Father in Christ Jesus in a similar way also will raise us up who believe in him, apart from whom we do not have the true life.

(Tr. 9:1-2)

The iterative or intermittent occurrence of the adverb ἀληθῶς ('truly') gives to the creedal statement a solemn and sober quality as though to say that the various stages in the life of Jesus Christ are supported by incontrovertible evidence that will stand firm under the most careful and critical scrutiny.10 Moreover, Jesus' life enjoys a vast host of witnesses — heavenly, earthly, and even witnesses from under the earth (cf. Philipp. 2:10-11). At times, in order to underscore his conviction concerning the incarnation, Ignatius uses the very word from which we receive the term 'docetic' or 'docetism'. I refer to the verb δοκεῖν, 'to seem, appear, be unreal'. For example, in Tr. 10:1 he writes: 'Now if ... certain ... unbelieving ones claim that he [Christ] has suffered in an unreal way, they themselves being unreal, why am I in bonds ...' (cf. also Smyr. 2:1; 4:2).

Without doubt, to Ignatius, Christ was God manifested in flesh. More than in any other place, the claim of Ignatius emerges with clarity and vigour in the third chapter of his letter to the church of Smyrna where he addresses the subject of Jesus' resurrection appearances. His language is quite similar to that of Luke 24:39. In fact, the four words, 'handle me and see' in Luke are reproduced exactly in Smyr. 3:2, ὄφθαλμοι καὶ χεῖρες με καὶ ἱδέατε.'

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9 Ibid., 67. Saliba's article throughout focuses on the anti-docetic quality in Ignatius' letters, certainly a legitimate study.
10 The confession found in Eph. 7:2 has lines throughout of almost equal length. M. Staniforth, Early Christian Writings, The Apostolic Fathers (Penguin Books), 77f., has attempted to capture the rhythmic and lyric quality of the confession and shows that it must have been originally an early hymn. He renders it as follows:

- Very flesh, yet Spirit too;
- Uncreated, and yet born;
- God-and-Man in One agreed;
- Very-Life-in-Death indeed,
- Fruit of God and Mary's seed;
- At once impassible and torn By pain and suffering here below:

Jesus Christ, whom as our Lord we know.
For I know and believe that he was in the flesh even after the resurrection. And when he came to Peter and his companions, he said to them, 'Take, handle me and see, because I am not a disembodied spirit.' And immediately they touched him and believed, being mixed together with his flesh and with his spirit. Because of this, they even despised death and were found beyond death. Now after his resurrection, he ate together with them and drank together with them as a fleshly person although spiritually he was united to the Father (Smyr. 5:1-3).

Is he God? Yes, for spiritually he was united to the Father. Is he fully human? Yes, for after his resurrection he ate together and drank together with his disciples. They touched him and believed, 'being mixed together with his flesh and spirit.' 'Being mixed together' — what a strange expression to be used here! The verb καταστράφημι is normally used of mixing wine and water together. Its compound form (συγκρατάμωσι) is found in Heb. 4:2, where it suggests that the word which ancient Israel heard was not mixed together with another ingredient, i.e., faith, and thus the word did not benefit the people.11 Word mixed together with faith; disciples mixed together with the flesh and spirit of Jesus. Like the repeated διλήθης in Tr. 9:1-2, the term in Smyr. 3:2 is intended to arouse the readers to the real in-flesh person of the risen Jesus with whom the disciples had to do. But now, we hasten on to the second part of Ignatius' answer to the question, 'What do you think of Christ?'

CHRIST IS GOD OUR SAVIOUR

In Ignatius' first letter (i.e., to the Ephesians), Jesus Christ appears successively as 'our God' (inscription) and 'our Saviour' (Eph. 1:1). According to Ignatius, God's salvation through Jesus contains both a dynamic and a eucharistic emphasis.

It is dynamic with respect to objective and experimental emphases. In Eph. 9:1, Ignatius describes vividly the growth of the church via a unique 'building' metaphor. At the outset, one realizes that the description is comparable to the metaphor in Paul's Ephesian letter (2:20-22) of a building 'founded upon the apostles and prophets', which building 'continues to grow unto a holy temple in the Lord'. But Ignatius' description goes further. The stones prepared for the Father's sanctuary, 'continues to grow unto a holy temple in the Lord'. But Ignatius' 'building' metaphor. At the outset, one realizes that the description is dynamic according to Ignatius, God's salvation through Jesus contains both a dynamic and a eucharistic emphasis.

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To understand the eucharistic emphasis that is here, we need to sense the burning passion of Ignatius for the unity of the church. He calls himself a man who does his own thing (!), one who is set on unity - τὸς ἑνότατος κατηγορηματικός (Philad. 8:1), and one who is utterly convinced that God does not take up residence where division exists (8:1). Two nouns meaning 'oneness' and the verb ἑνώω 'to unite' occur an aggregate of some 25 times in the letters. Moreover, there are some other 30 references to the numeral 'one'. Unity appears in many forms, not only the unity of the church at Antioch which church Ignatius had to leave behind, but the unity of the Asian churches with their respective bishops, presbyters, and deacons, and the all-important unity of the Father and the Son (Mag. 1:2). In this light, it is not at all strange to find in Ignatius the emphasis on the eucharistic feast. It is in the holy sacrament that the unity of the church appears in bold relief. The eucharist is valid if it is 'under the bishop' or the person to whom the bishop entrusts its celebration (Smyr. 8:1). 'Run together', he says to the Magnesians church, 'as to one altar, to one Jesus Christ' (7:2). The unity of God and of the church are solidly imbedded not only in the passion and resurrection as unique events, but in the sacrament, 'in his flesh and blood' (Smyr. 12:2) as the unique celebration of those events. In brief, the concern in Ignatius is not on how the eucharist is to be celebrated, even less on what happens or does not happen to the bread and wine during the celebration of the eucharist. In essence, the eucharist is a feast that proclaims God our Saviour. The eucharist is the bread of God (Rom. 7:3) and the flesh of the Saviour, which flesh suffered for our sins, which flesh the Father raised up (Smyr. 7:1). The eucharist is 'the cup of Jesus' blood' (Philad. 4:1). Moreover, in the context of the eucharistic 'altar' we hear Ignatius express it in still another way. The eucharist means, he says, that you 'renew yourselves in faith' (Tr. 7:2-8:1), faith in Jesus Christ our God and Saviour (Eph., inscription and 1:1).

CONCLUSION

The christology of the church has always been and ever will be the crucial issue in every age of her history. What do you think of Christ? On the one hand, to answer the question by parroting the Bible can at best produce only a dry sterile confession, perhaps orthodox to the very core, yet void of power. On the other hand, to attempt to answer the question out of personal experience and from a sensitive societal consciousness revealing,
however, only a partial and selective concern with the biblical message itself may both imperil and erode the christological foundation on which the church stands. We are familiar with the shaky 'second-hand' witness of the seven sons of Sceva and the withering and embarrassing question put to them by the demon-possessed man as he sent them reeling, 'I know Jesus and I know Paul, but who are you?' (Acts 19:15).

Like the psalmist (Psalm 46) who proclaimed God as both a fortress and a flowing stream, the church is to be faithful to the strong biblical witness concerning Christ and yet to be dynamic in her reformulation of christological emphases as the Spirit of God leads her in witnessing to a society whose distinctive features include change and decay. The continuity of a strong biblical and dynamic christology in Ignatius contains the kind of encouragement that we need. 'My eros has been crucified', says Ignatius, 'and there is in me no fire that desires anything material' (Rom. 7:2).

With clarity and conviction, Ignatius has answered the christological question which we posed to him at the beginning. He, in turn, leaves us with a haunting christological question which may be framed as follows: 'is our own self-love — like his — crucified and does Christ's love "press in upon us from every side" and cleanse us as it cleansed Ignatius from "material" gain, and claim from us as it claimed from Ignatius a fearless witness to church and society of that one who knew no sin whom God made sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in him' (2 Cor. 5:21)?

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182 See the verb form ὀυρέγε in 2 Cor. 5:14 (cf. also its use in Luke 8:45 and 19:43).