

REVIEW

Thomas A. Robinson

*Ignatius of Antioch and the Parting of the Ways:
Early Jewish-Christian Relations*

(Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), paperback, xiv + 285 pp.

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In his study of Ignatius of Antioch, Thomas Robinson explores Jewish-Christian relations in the late first to the early second centuries of the Common Era and argues against the current trend in scholarship that reads the phenomenon of the “parting of the ways” of Christianity from Judaism as a much more complicated process that extended beyond the second century CE. Against scholars such as Daniel Boyarin, Judith Lieu, Paula Fredriksen, and Annette Reed, he suggests that the distinctions between Judaism and Christianity were much sharper and that the boundaries of self-understanding more solid.

In chapter one, Robinson critiques modern interpretations of Ignatius that question his authority as the leader of the church in Antioch and portray him as peripheral to the development of the early church, and attempts instead to reconstruct a portrait of Ignatius that is reflective of the wider world in which he lived. In Robinson’s view, those in this wider world saw Christianity as distinct and separate from Judaism. In order to make his case, Robinson explores the social, cultural, political, and religious environment of Antioch from its founding as Seleucid Antioch to the time of Ignatius, examining in particular the role and status of Jews. In his second chapter, Robinson builds his argument by examining Christianity and Christian conversion in Antioch in terms of religious competition and increased tensions between Jews and Christians and concludes that Ignatius’ letters fit in well with the situation in Antioch.

In chapter three, Robinson turns directly to Ignatius’ church and his role as bishop of Antioch. Against scholars including Walter Bauer, Christine Trevett, and William Schoedel, who question Ignatius’ authority and attribute his arrest to opposition within the church, Robinson argues for what he deems a more “natural reading” of his letters, namely, that Ignatius was indeed the bishop and that his church was unified and supported him in his role as leader (p. 96). It is in this chapter that Robinson reexamines the much debated identity of Ignatius’ opponent(s). Unconvinced that there were separate Christian assemblies in the Antioch church, Robinson cautiously argues against the two-group hypothesis (Judaizers and Docetics), although he offers no suggestions for attempting to determine the identity of Ignatius’ opponent(s). Instead, Robinson states that the nature of Ignatius’ letters does not allow for such a precise determination and argues, perhaps overly simplistically, for a context in which Ignatius understood his world: “one is either in the bishop’s church or outside of it, one is either on God’s side or on the side of the prince of this world” (p. 125).

Robinson examines arguments put forth for the cause of Ignatius’ martyrdom based on various religious and ethnic tensions (Gentile-Jewish, internal Jewish, and Jewish-Christian) in Antioch in his fourth chapter. Highlighting the influence of the Maccabean revolt and events such as the Roman civil war, Caligula’s attempt to place his statue in the Jerusalem Temple, and the

Jerusalem council, Robinson reevaluates and critiques strongly the general trend in recent scholarship toward what he describes as the “muting” of the tensions between Jews and Christians through scholars’ reinterpretation of stories of conflict from the “realm of reality to the realm of rhetoric” (p. 149). In his fifth chapter, Robinson, in his close examination of P. N. Harrison and Willard Swartley’s study on Ignatius’ vocabulary, continues his critique of scholars who have excessively diminished the differences between Judaism and Christianity. Robinson argues that the traditional view championed by J. B. Lightfoot, that Ignatius’ martyrdom was the result of anti-Christian persecution, was incorrectly challenged and dismissed by those following Harrison and Swartley, who were persuaded by the argument that the martyrdom was the result of internal conflict in the church.

In his final chapter, Robinson examines Jewish and Christian identities and boundaries during Ignatius’ time. Contrary to recent trends that view terms such as “Christianity” and “Judaism” as problematic and inaccurate, Robinson emphatically reminds his readers that these terms were the very “crucial labels by which Ignatius defined his world” (p. 204). In a final discussion, Robinson returns to the question of the “parting of the ways” by evaluating six approaches to the relationship between Judaism and Christianity and concludes that in reality in Ignatius’ world there existed one Judaism and one Christianity and that the boundaries between Jews and Christians were significant and clear.

While Robinson’s reexamination of recent scholarship on the question of the “parting of the ways” is important and his attempt to reign in unfounded readings of Ignatius’ world is necessary, his critiques often read as reactionary and seem as extreme as those he wishes to critique. This moves the conversation far away from the cautious and balanced reading he emphatically seeks. For instance, in his argument for the use of the terms “Christianity” and “Judaism,” Robinson strongly argues for their continued employment and makes a fair point that the discussion of proper terminology has become “too unwieldy” (p. 205), resulting in more problems than clarity. However, he goes on to argue that the decisive factor for determining self-definition should not be based on a particular label or term, but rather on whether or not such a group had a separate and distinct understanding of its identity, since, as Robinson states, “the debate is really simply a debate about words” (p. 206).

Robinson’s assertion about proper terminology also leads him to interesting conclusions about image versus reality in Ignatius’ letters. He writes against those who argue for distinguishing between image and reality and suggests instead understanding image as reality. In this way, Ignatius’ “boundary-marking terms” are not simply perceptions or images but rather define and therefore, in his view, create reality; in this way, perception is reality and reality is perception (p. 228). In this scenario, Robinson interprets Ignatius’ extreme distinction between Jews and Christians as Ignatius’ reality. But what of the reality of the world in which Ignatius lived? It is quite one thing to argue that Ignatius’ distinction between Jews and Christians reflects what Ignatius thought of his world, but it is quite another thing to suggest that Ignatius’ thoughts are representative of the reality of all those who lived in close proximity in time and place to him. The very fact that Ignatius must make an argument for the distinctions between Jews and Christians is enough evidence to allow for a reading that emphasizes that the boundaries were not as clear as Ignatius would have liked.

While Robinson’s analyses and important observations may not bring the debate on the “parting of the ways” to any definitive conclusions, there is no doubt that his study will contribute to the important discussion on Jewish and Christian relations and self-definition and to our understanding of Ignatius in general.