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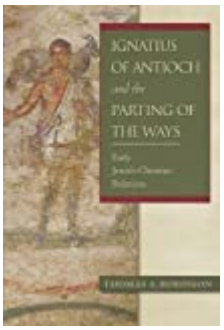

Thomas A. Robinson. *Ignatius of Antioch and the Parting of the Ways: Early Jewish-Christian Relations.* Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009. xiv + 285 pp. $27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-59856-323-8.

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Jews and Christians in Antioch

This book focuses on Ignatiusâs views on the Jews and Judaism, and their relevance for our understanding of the âparting of the ways.â The study examines the demographic situation in Antioch in the late first and early second century, Christianity in Antioch, Ignatiusâs church and the office of bishop, religious tensions in Antioch, and the situation that led to Ignatiusâs martyrdom. The book concludes with a consideration of the implications of these topics for our understanding of how the Christian movement came to its distinctive identity as a group separate from Judaism.

Thomas A. Robinsonâs main conclusion is that the sharp distinctions between Jews and Christians expressed in Ignatiusâs letters should be taken as accurate reflections of his own thinking and of the real situation in Antioch. Ignatiusâs life and death were shaped by religion; boundary issues were âpressing and necessary businessâ and Ignatius construed them in a stark and binary fashion (p. 18). Robinson argues that the Christian community in Antioch saw itself as quite separate and distinct from Judaism, and that the two groups lived together with some degree of tension. These conclusions run contrary to recent trends in Ignatius scholarship as well as in scholarship on the history of early Christianity and the parting of the ways. Robinson argues that while some of the recent discussion has been a welcome corrective to earlier supersessionist views, scholars have overly minimized the differences between Judaism and Christianity, and the importance of those differences to Christian leaders, such as Ignatius.

Robinson uses Ignatius as a lens through which to mount a serious and far-reaching critique of the current tendency to push the point of separation to centuries after Ignatius. Much of the book consists of critical descriptions and analyses of other scholarly opinions with regard to Ignatiusâs views of the Jews and to the parting of the ways more generally. The tone is frank and pointed. Robinson notes that the tendency of some scholars to view Ignatiusâs comments about the Jews as directed not against Jews but against Christian Judaizers is a âsanitizing effortâ that leads to âfalsification or obscuration of the kind of historical grit and grimeâ that

characterize the early phases of any new religious movement (p. 240). Robinsonâs honesty extends to his own attempt to refrain from speculating beyond what the evidence allows. He notes, for example, that his failure to find a widely convincing explanation for Ignatiusâs anxiety or the nature of the âpeaceâ in Antioch, while unsatisfying, is better than settling on the wrong answers to these questions (p. 202).

In many cases, the close analysis and critique of contrary opinions is pertinent and necessary. Chapter 5, for example, argues for a return to the traditional position, as exemplified by Joseph Barber Lightfoot, that Ignatius was the victim of an anti-Christian persecution. This argument necessarily involves a detailed discussion of the more recent and increasingly accepted view that the problem in Antioch was primarily an internal dispute within Ignatiusâs church. Reviews of Percy Neale Harrisonâs and Willard Swartleyâs analyses of Ignatian vocabulary are helpful for Robinsonâs further consideration of Ignatiusâs statements about his own unworthiness and his defense of the anti-Christian persecution hypothesis. The final chapter offers a good categorization of the major scholarly models for the early relationship between Judaism and Christianity, and some insightful reflections on the vexing issue of vocabulary and categories.

At times, however, the critique of scholarly positions seems both relentless and superfluous, in the sense that it does not further the main argument of the book. For example, Robinson takes issue with Glen Warren Bowersockâs view that Christian martyrdom did not have Jewish roots (pp. 155-158). Yet as he notes, Bowersock does not represent the consensus view, to which Robinson himself adheres. If so, why spend three full pages critiquing Bowersockâs presentation of the opposite view? It would have been more appropriate to discuss briefly the grounds on which the consensus is based, and relegate Bowersock and other dissenters to a brief footnote.

At times, Robinson engages in the sorts of speculations that he criticizes in others. For example, Robinson raises the question of whether and how Jewish newcomers would have been admitted to the formal Jewish community (p. 34). Underlying this question are some unwarranted assumptions about the nature of Jewish community in the ancient world. Robinson does not provide any evidence that the Jewish community was institutionalized to the point of requiring formal admission. The opposite is more likely to be true; absent evidence to the contrary, it is more reasonable to assume that Jewish newcomers to Antioch would simply have been accepted into the Jewish community by virtue of their Jewish identity, established not by formal entrance requirements but rather by a complex and subtle set of behavioral signals and both spoken and unspoken interactions.

Another example concerns the relationship between language and reality. Robinson makes the interesting point that boundary-marking terms define and thereby create reality (p. 228). But what does this âreallyâ mean? Robinson may be correct in viewing Ignatiusâs highly polarized view of the relationship between Jews and Christians as evidence for what the bishop âreallyâ thought. But what is the relationship between Ignatiusâs statements and what others in his own time and place âreallyâ thought, or to what modern scholars would see if they had detailed data about monotheistic belief and worship in first-century Antioch? Robinsonâs call to take the words of Ignatius and others seriously, while important, does not necessarily settle the matter of the parting of the ways whether in Antioch or elsewhere.

Finally, the book as a whole suffers from a forest/trees problem. The overwhelming number of critiques of other scholars obscures the larger narrative that Robinson is trying to tell and allows our attention to wander too often and too far from Ignatius of Antioch. It would have been helpful for nonspecialists had the book begun with a brief description of what we can know of Ignatiusâs life, including his approximate dates, and had the discussion included more description and exegesis of his comments on the Jews in the context of his letters as a whole. That would have allowed Robinson to make a more convincing argument by anchoring the discussion more firmly.

Even if it is not the last word on the parting of the ways nor even on Ignatiusâs role in and contribution to that process, however, Robinsonâs study is a worthwhile contribution to the debate. While it is unlikely to stem the turn toward viewing the parting of the ways as a complex and lengthy process extending beyond the second century, it does serve as a corrective against an overly irenic view of the early decades of the nascent Christian movement. The book will be useful to specialists in Ignatius and to a broader audience interested in the question of Jewish and Christian identity formation in the early centuries of the common era.

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