Jews and Christians under Trajan and the Date of Ignatius’ Martyrdom

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This paper aims to shed some light on the so-called ‘parting of the ways’ between Jews and Christians before the last Jewish revolt against Rome in 132-136 AD. It proposes the hypothesis that the otherwise unknown historical events which led to the arrest, the imprisonment and finally the death of Ignatius of Antioch can be explained by placing them against the backdrop of the Jewish Diaspora revolt of the years 115-117 AD.¹

The Trial of Ignatius and the Evidence in Malalas

There is no certainty about the date and the cause of the arrest and the execution of Ignatius, bishop of Antioch. The only chronological information is supplied in Eusebius’ Chronicon, where it is reported that Ignatius was martyred in the tenth year of Trajan’s reign.² Modern scholars distrust Eusebius’ date, with good reason, because of his tendency to connect different and distant events in the same chronology – in this case, the martyrdom of the bishop with the outburst of persecution which took place in Bithynia under the rule of Pliny (111-113), who asked Trajan for instructions and received the latter’s famous rescript. Ignatius’ death has been placed at different points between 110 and 140 AD, leaving aside the opinion of those scholars who consider the whole of Ignatius’ epistolary corpus a forgery to be dated almost fifty years later. Furthermore, the causes that led to the bishop’s imprisonment and transfer to Rome have been associated with certain conflicts within the Christian community (or communities)

¹ I thank Livia Capponi, Giovanni Bazzana, and Alessandro Galimberti for their suggestions about my argument and especially for their expertise in papyrological matters.
² Corresponding to 107 AD, see Eusebius, Chron (Helm p194).
in Antioch and Syria, concerning the primacy, the role, and the person of bishop Ignatius.³

No doubt, this picture is consistent with the main contents of Ignatius’ seven authentic letters and with his concerns about Christian churches in Syria and Asia Minor, which emerge from them. We can wonder whether a conflict within a marginal group – such as the Christians were in a large metropolis like Antioch – was sufficient to provoke riots of a magnitude that could justify a capital sentence. For instance, in the similar case of John, the author of the Revelation, not too remote in chronological terms, a banishment in a nearby, even if uncomfortable, island seemed more than enough. Further, Ignatius’s transfer to Rome, under a military escort of ten soldiers,⁴ raises other problems. Firstly, this cannot be the case of a Roman citizen who had to be judged by the Emperor himself, since Ignatius is conscious that he will meet his fate in the amphitheater between the teeth of the beasts – a punishment not allowed against a Roman citizen. Secondly, the large escort and the relative freedom to meet people and manage epistolary contacts tolerated in the case of Ignatius would be inconsistent if he had been only one among many other prisoners, as supposed by some scholars.⁵ On the contrary, this feature characterizes him as a prisoner of a certain esteem or at least one whose profile was not that of a simple disturber of the public order.

It could be possible to find a way to solve these problems and to date Ignatius’ execution by taking into consideration an underestimated piece of information recorded in John Malalas’ Chronographia. Of course, this attempt will be highly hypothetical and speculative,⁶ since the sources upon which it can rest are scarce and subject to differing interpretations: scholarly debates are still ongoing without any definite consensus about the historical figure of Ignatius. More specifically, Malalas’ reliability is another subject of discussion, even though in the last few years, a more confident approach to his work has grown

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³ For Ignatius, the Antiochene church, the epistles, their text and authenticity, and commentary, see the edition by Prinzivalli – Simonetti, Seguendo Gesù, 279–425; on the state of the church of Antioch, cf 296–298. The best commentary in English remains Schoedel, A Commentary. All agree that the conflict within the Antiochene church had theological origins. From Ignatius’ epistles, two different groups of ‘heretics’ emerge: on the one hand, those who did not believe in Christ’s incarnation (the so-called ‘Docetists’); on the other hand, the ‘Judaizers’ (according to Ignatius’ definition in Magn 10:3), who still observed in full the prescriptions of Moses’ Law.

⁴ Ignatius, Rom 5:1.

⁵ Cf Prinzivalli – Simonetti, Seguendo Gesù, 590 n318.

⁶ For a synoptic chronology of my proposal, see the Appendix to this paper.