If the continuing debate over the number and the nature of the heresies which Ignatius attacked in his letters to the churches of Asia Minor does nothing else, it does demonstrate the elusive character of the evidence. The scholarly diversity at this point stems from the meagerness of the data which Ignatius' letters provide. Ignatius does not catalogue the opposing groups, or describe the precise points at which they have gone astray, as Irenaeus did later in the century. Ignatius writes as a condemned prisoner on the way to execution, to churches confronting serious problems which disturb and divide them. He is primarily a pastor, not an apologist or a theologian, and his chief concerns as he writes are pastoral. He wants to help the churches to which he writes come to grips with the problems which beset them, to help them overcome the divisions into opposing groups which theological differences have produced. It is unfortunate for our purposes that Ignatius was not more explicit and systematic, but the reverence for him which the churches to which he wrote displayed, and their desire to share and to preserve the letters which he had written them attest to the keenness of his pastoral insight.

The nature of the evidence makes conclusive proof impossible at almost every point. Even more than is customary in historical study, we must content ourselves when discussing Ignatius' opponents and their beliefs with probability rather than with certitude. I do not claim for my exegesis that it is at every point the only sound interpretation, and I recognize how uncertain the cumulative result of exegesis contested at every point is. Still, I feel that there is some value in presenting a construction which integrates its interpretation of Ignatius with known phenomena from the history of early Christianity, and which avoids appealing to undocumented hypotheses from the history of religions school.

I presuppose that the letters of Ignatius are direct evidence for the church at Antioch rather than for the churches of Asia Minor. Although
Ignatius spent enough time both at Philadelphia and at Smyrna that he could not only meet different groups of individuals but also preach, his responses to various problems are too consistent, too much a part of his own theological outlook, to have arisen on the spot, under such trying conditions. Ignatius applies his Antiochean experience to the not dissimilar problems which he encounters in Asia Minor.¹

My aim in this essay is to determine what issues separate Ignatius from those he denounces for their Jewish tendencies, and to attempt to place those opponents on the spectrum of Christian belief and practice documented in other early Christian literature. The first question which we must address is the number of heretical groups against which Ignatius struggles: did he fight on two fronts, on one against Judaizers and on another against Gnostics,² or did he fight a single syncretistic foe with both Jewish features and a deficient Christology? The common opinion, first enunciated at the end of the nineteenth century by Lightfoot and Zahn, more recently advocated by Molland and Barnard, is that Ignatius confronts a single opponent, Judeo-Gnosticism.³ The arguments which they advance fall into two categories: 1) Ignatius uses the same terms to describe his opponents both in Jewish and in Gnostic contexts, and 2) in the two letters in which Ignatius portrays his opponents as having Jewish characteristics, Magnesians and Philadelphians, he also alludes to their Gnosticism. I shall begin by examining these arguments.

To acknowledge Ignatius' pastoral concern for the unity of the church and his conviction that the episcopate alone assures the orthodox faith is to make it impossible to appeal to Ignatius' use of similar terms to denounce both Gnosticism and Jewish Christianity in the attempt to identify these groups with one another. What is not orthodox is heterodox (Smyrn. 6,2; Magn. 8,1); what is not orthodox is not the planting of the Father (Trall. 11,1; Philad. 3,1); all not in close communion with the


² I accede to common usage by calling those whose Christology Ignatius found deficient 'Gnostics'; earlier scholarship called them, more descriptively, 'Docetics'. My word choice does not intend to make any positive statement about their origins or their theology.