

Sovereignty in Ruins
The Death of Ignatius and Ecologies of Destruction

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“All the pleasures of the world, and all the kingdoms of this earth, shall profit me nothing. It is better to die in Christ Jesus than to reign over the ends of the earth.” (Rom 6.1)

“But if anyone should interpret Judaism to you, do not hear him. For it is better to hear Christianity from a man who is circumcised than Judaism from one who is uncircumcised. But if neither one speaks about Jesus Christ, they both appear to me as monuments and tombs of the dead, on which are written merely human names.” (Phil 6.1)

Introduction

Ignatius has been a figure of intrigue in the history of early Christianity – his apparent obsession with his own death has attracted both worry and confusion. The idea that his death is not only highly anticipated, but also expressed as emphatically voluntary, has lent Ignatius to overtly pathologizing interpretations that echo ancient worries about a certain “zeal for death” apparently associated with Christians.¹ Stepping to the side of the pathologizing or puzzlement, scholars such as Elizabeth Castelli, Judith Perkins, Judith Lieu, and Daniel Boyarin have read Ignatius’ letters as a construction of a subjectivity or identity – suggesting that is he not only representing himself as a self constituted by suffering,² but constructing a Christian identity,³ and even a burgeoning Christian orthodoxy,⁴ through his doubly fortifying role as bishop/martyr.

Ignatius is one of the earliest sources for the apparent phenomenon of Christian martyrdom. There is virtual consensus that he dies during the reign of Trajan, and dies for being a Christian. But the particulars of his arrest are opaque, and there are a few problems with the historical thesis of Ignatius being arrested and executed for being a Christian. I’ll begin from this problem of why is Ignatius sent to Rome to die – not to

¹ On pathologizing tendencies and interpretations of Ignatius (and martyrs at large), cf. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 79, and Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 33, 173.

² Cf. Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 173-199.

³ Cf. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 79-85; Lieu, *Neither Jew Nor Greek?* 24, 54, 130-133.

⁴ Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 11.

answer the question conclusively, but as an entrée in to untangling the larger presumptions of what we think Ignatius' investments to be. The notion that Ignatius dies for being a Christian, that his letters are some of the earliest sources for the phenomenon of Christian martyrdom and an emergent orthodox Christianity already articulating itself as Judaism's "other," is substantially questioned and rethought here.⁵ I attempt to localize and contextualize Ignatius apart from the assumed landscape of "Christian orthodoxy," or even an already-operating Christianity. Stepping to the side of not only readings that pathologize Ignatius, but also the broader tendency to focus on Ignatius as a singular authority figure, unique deployment of discourse, or an otherwise curious individual, I read Ignatius ecologically, as a thoroughly unexceptional negotiation of national losses and imperial biopolitics. By "ecologically" I mean a reading that is not only cued into the socio-political and material "environment" forming Ignatius and leaving traces in his letters -- a dynamic, complicated landscape with multiple networks, forces, and factors in play. But I also mean "ecology" as a term that suggests questions of life/vitality, death, complex interdependence, sustainability, and vulnerability. While "ecology" in liberal culture typically contains subtexts of "the natural," in this paper, in line with theories of biopolitics which follow certain strands of the work of Michel Foucault, the terms of life, death and sustainability are explicitly de-naturalized, and considered as scenes of immanence for state or imperial power.⁶ "Environment" is neither a flat landscape, nor is it "nature" as separate from "civilization," but it is full of social, political, discursive, affective, and material elements in dynamic relationship.

To be more explicit about what "ecology" means for this paper, I suggest Ignatius should be understood in the larger ecology of the ancient Mediterranean in the late first and early second century that includes aspirations of Judean national sovereignty and their failure, state disciplinary tactics and imperial politics of life and death, diasporic cultural questions (questions of Jewish/Judean practices in Antioch and Syria and Asia minor generally), uprisings of Judean populations across the Mediterranean and their suppression, and material ruins.

⁵ This follows the line of argumentation I offer in my recent monograph, *Rethinking Early Christian Identity*. I reproduce the argument here in part, in order to build on my reading of Ignatius' letters as haunted responses to diasporic loss and grief.

⁶ To just briefly offer an example of expressions of biopolitical theory, cf. Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze, eds. *Biopolitics: A Reader*, which takes as its points of departure Foucault's two essays, "The Right of Death and the Power Over Life," and "Society Must Be Defended." It includes the compatible work of Giorgio Agamben, Hannah Arendt, Gilles Deleuze, Slavoj Žižek, among others. This book is a good sampling, but only a sampling, of work theorizing the entwinements of life, death, and state power.

I'll begin by rereading the Pliny-Trajan correspondence not as a definitive source for locating "Christians" or diagnosing what these "Christians" are doing, or as an explanation for why Ignatius dies, but as a source for understanding certain imperial disciplinary mechanisms and how those mechanisms are reflected and engaged in Ignatius' letters. I'll follow by discussing Ignatius' use of *christianismos* (and *ioudaismos*) as implying not separate religious or cultural phenomenon, but questions of sovereignty, steeped in the difficult politics of being Judean in the late first and early second century Mediterranean. Finally, I'll re-read Ignatius' representation of his own death as a way of registering and reflecting on the imperial biopolitical landscape, and suggest some ways this reading of Ignatius might bring us toward new understandings of martyrdom at large.

Pliny, Trajan, and Ignatius: Reconsidering Being "Christian"

The correspondence between Trajan and Pliny, often cited as evidence of subversive Christian practices or at least tension between Christians and Roman authorities, does not offer as much clarity on Christians as one might hope. While Pliny is writing about his concerns about Christians, Trajan himself seems to have little concern about them, and tells Pliny not to seek them out. First, it's clear that Pliny doesn't know much about the "Christians" or what standard practice is for those being so accused. He's unsure if the problem is just the very designation or whether there is a criminal component to the accusation. He's mostly worried about their ostensible stubbornness in the face of authority. He also notices that the more he addresses the problem the more – and more various – the charges tend to be.⁷

First, it seems that charges are flying, and the specificity of the charges doesn't matter all that much.⁸ Pliny, in fact, illustrates a kind of arbitrary and casual attitude towards questions of who lives and who dies, and for what. It's also clear that the admission of being a "Christian" occurs in contexts of imperial law, justice, and torture. At least in Asia Minor, and, importantly, for Trajan, the problem of "Christians" is murky, relatively innocuous, and subject to torture and death just like anyone else. As I have suggested, this exchange hardly witnesses to a coherent movement with any kind of obvious content – a "Christianity."⁹ I have also suggested that understood in the

⁷ Pliny, *Ep.* 10:96-97

⁸ The primary charge is "superstition" which was a common slander for suspicious populations, for example. Both Phil Harland and Richard Ascough have emphasized how standard the charges Pliny applies to the "Christians" here are. Harland, *Dynamics of Identity*, 42-43. Ascough, "Translocal Relationships," 241.

⁹ Cf. Kotrosits, *Rethinking Early Christian Identity*, 58-59.

context of the rest of the Pliny-Trajan correspondence, in which Trajan *does* express anxiety over the mixing/unidentifiability of associations in general, that “Christian” appears to be more of a smear, and imperial slander, that picks up on circulating rhetoric around Christ in order to produce delinquents. In other words, the Pliny-Trajan correspondence demonstrates a racializing dimension to the term “Christian” that produces – not represents – a population.¹⁰ Indeed, given the contingencies of truth in contexts of torture, the fact that “Christian” seems primarily to be an accusation, and that “confessing” one is a Christian occurs in contexts of torture should immediately make us suspicious of the referentiality of “Christian,” at least in any definitive way.

If the Pliny-Trajan correspondence can be said to witness to some broad set of circumstances that affect or explain Ignatius’s situation, it is unlikely that he goes to Rome to die “for being a Christian” – a formulation, by the way, that Ignatius himself never makes.¹¹ It could be, however, that in Ignatius one hears the echoes of some of the imperial dynamics in the Pliny-Trajan exchange, in which “Christian” appears as the racializing assemblage/production of a population through the disciplinary mechanisms of the state. For example, it seems that Ignatius attaches a lot of contingency to being a Christian. He writes to the Romans, “For me, ask only that I have power both inside and out, that I not only speak but also have the desire, that I not only be called a Christian but also be found one. For if I am found a Christian, I can also be called one, and then be faithful, when I am no longer visible in the world” (3:2). He hopes not only to be “called” (*legwmai*) a Christian, but hopes to be “found” (*eurethw*) one, as well. This gap here between being called and being found is provocative, and a similar formulation appears elsewhere in Ignatius’ letters.¹² The notion that for Ignatius, his Christian-ness is in question until he dies, that he anticipates the revelation of his being Christian in the arena, would seem to confirm that “Christian” carries the valence of imperial targeting, if not tortured-induced truth production, rather than an identity with obvious or given

¹⁰ Ibid., 60.

¹¹ Ignatius does say that he dies “for the sake of/on behalf of the name” (Eph 1:1), suggesting that he sees himself as an ambassador or exemplar, rather than “martyr” as we have construed it.

¹² He writes to the Magnesians that “it is fitting not only to be called Christians, but also to be Christians” (4:1). Similarly, the moment of his death is also the moment in which Ignatius truly becomes a disciple, in which he will “belong” to Jesus Christ. Ignatius would seem to be scolding the Magnesians for behavior, and while part of this line’s context is about listening to the bishop (God sees what you’re doing, he writes in 3:2), the line links instructions to listen to the bishop with waxing on death: “Since then, these matters have an end, and the two things are set together, death and life, and each person is about to depart to his own place...” (Magn 5:1). Indeed, the full line reads “And so it is fitting not only to be called Christians, but to be Christians, just as there are some who call a person the bishop but do everything without him” (4:1). The “just as” (*wsper*) indicates *an analogy*, rather than an assumption that “being Christian” has to do already with obedience to the bishop.

content. The “truth” of being a Christian, for Ignatius, is revealed primarily in the crosshairs of state discipline.¹³ Indeed the only real content to “being Christian” for Ignatius is imitating Christ in death (as someone else who died under the auspices of the state): he hopes to become worthy of “the name” by dying honorably and voluntarily. In anticipation of his death, he figures himself as Christ, or as about to “attain” Christ, thus becoming a “sacrifice” for those in the *ekklesiai*.¹⁴ Consonant with the noble death traditions that shaped understandings and representations of Jesus’ death, for Ignatius, “Christian” what gives *meaning* to his death or, put differently, what *rescues his death from meaninglessness*, rather than what causes it.

As Elizabeth Castelli writes, “Visibility, remainders, physical presence are all obstacles to Ignatius’ achievement of a stable spiritual selfhood....Indeed, there is a deep-seated tension in Ignatius’ letters between notions of presence and absences, visibility and identity, the body and language.”¹⁵ Ignatius’ desires to disappear completely, to be sublimely transfigured in death,¹⁵ are thus intimately entangled with imperial visibility politics, since “Christian” appears on the imperial map as a way to identify and thus produce a (racialized) population out of the mess and mixing of the late first and early second century social landscape. It is an ironic politics, for sure – the moment one is “seen,” located, pinpointed, is the same moment in which one is destroyed. But it is what animates Ignatius’ very sense that dying as a “Christian” is what renders one legible, consequential, against the threat of oblivion.

Christianity, Judaism, and Crises of Sovereignty

Related to being “Christian,” of course, is Ignatius use of “Christianity.” When Ignatius evokes *christianismos*, readers typically assume that he is referencing a phenomenon, one which (at least for Ignatius) is distinct from Jewish identity. Despite this standard reading of Ignatius in which he represents a burgeoning orthodox Christianity at odds with “Judaism”, though, the term *christianismos* is not attested anywhere before Ignatius. Polycarp, who follows Ignatius, only contains the second usage.¹⁶ This leads Judith Lieu to conclude that Ignatius actually coins the term.¹⁷ How might we understand Ignatius’ invention of “Christianity”? What are the quiet

¹³ Ignatius obviously claims “Christian,” though. The fact that he has adopted “Christian” for himself and those he is in correspondence with, does not mean he is not also witnessing to the circumstances under which “Christian” came into being.

¹⁴ More will be said about being a sacrifice later in the paper.

¹⁵ Cf. David Seeley, *The Noble Death*. Stephen J. Patterson, *Beyond the Passion*, 45-52.

¹⁶ Lieu, *Neither Jew Nor Greek?*, 54.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

resonances of the term that we may have missed, living as we are in the wake of a world religion that goes by the same name?

The contexts in which Ignatius evokes *christianismos* are of course crucial:

“But if anyone should interpret Judaism to you, do not hear him. For it is better to hear *christianismos* from a man who is circumcised than *iudaismos* from one who is uncircumcised. But if neither one speaks about Jesus Christ, they both appear to me as monuments and tombs of the dead, on which are written merely human names.” (Phil 6.1)

“For this reason, since we are his disciples, let us learn to live according to *christianismos*. For whoever is called by a name other than this does not belong to God. So lay aside the bad yeast, which has grown old and sour, and turn to the new yeast which is Jesus Christ. Be salted in him, that no one among you become rotten; for you will be show for what you are by your smell. It is outlandish to proclaim Jesus Christ and judaize (*ioudaizein*). For *christianismos* did not believe in *ioudaismos*, but *ioudaismos* in *christianismos*, in which every tongue that believes in God has been gathered together.” (Magn 10)

In both of these quotes, Ignatius articulates *christianismos* in relationship to, even in contrast to, *ioudaismos*. The modern connotations of “Judaism” as a religion or as synonymous with Jewish identity have cast these statements in a decidedly supersessionist light. But it is important to note the ancient connotations of both *ioudaismos* and *ioudaizein*. First, as Lieu notes, *ioudaismos* initially appears in Maccabean literature as that for which one dies.¹⁸ She writes that it was an

all-embracing term to encompass the life and belief for which the battle was fought: ‘those who for the sake of Judaism vied in acting the man’ (2 Macc. 2.21; cf. 8.1; 14.38; 4 Macc. 4.26). Perhaps inevitably, bound up with the threat of martyrdom there developed an understanding of Judaism and of the Jewish people set over against a hostile world which was bent on its destruction. Judaism demanded a loyalty of belief and life that could lead to death itself and set the Jewish people apart from all other peoples. It provided a citizenship or city life of its own, even when circumstances gave this no political reality. (Lieu, *Neither Jew Nor Greek?* 59)

¹⁸ Cf. Lieu, *Neither Jew Nor Greek?*, 59. Shaye J.D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, 106.

Lieu sees *ioudaismos* as imagining universality (“all embracing term,” “the Jewish people”) but notes that the term itself is rare outside of Maccabean literature.¹⁹ Paul of course evokes the term, which perhaps accounts for some of Ignatius’ interest in it since he is an avid reader/interpreter of Paul’s letters, but the larger meaning and context for *ioudaismos* is what it at stake. If this term is not universally claimed in Ignatius’ time, and inherently carries Maccabean subtexts, it thus gestures to a very particular way of conceptualizing belonging to Israel, as well as particular meanings around “what one dies for.” The history of the Maccabees as primarily associated with an investment in Israel’s sovereignty in the face of foreign domination, as well as its militaristic (if contradictory) approach to gentile/Hellenistic culture, means that *ioudaismos* is not simply an abstraction of belonging to Israel, though it is that, for sure. It is also a political orientation – a decidedly sectarian one -- and given the ambivalent and contested nature of Maccabean rule and traditions, would certainly have mixed resonances.²⁰ Likewise, the term “judaize”/*ioudaizein* was often used to denote a political affiliation, to “side with the Jews,” which could of course include adopting some of the cultural markers or practices of Israel, such as circumcision.²¹ Given the deep entanglement of cultural practices and political affiliations for Israel in the hellenistic and Greco-Roman periods (and before), it would be difficult say that *ioudaizein* only indicates a political orientation *or* cultural one.

One noted instance of the use of *ioudaizein* to indicate a political (or cultural-political) affiliation appears in Josephus’ *The Jewish Wars*:

Frightful disorder took hold of the whole of Syria; every city was divided into two camps, and the safety of one party lay in their anticipating the other. They (the inhabitants of the cities of Syria) passed their days in blood, their nights, yet more dreadful, in terror. For, though believing that they had rid themselves of the Jews (*ioudaioi*), they kept the judaizers under suspicion. And no one dared kill offhand the ambiguous element in their midst, and it was feared as if it were truly foreign, although it was mixed. (*BJ* 2.462-3; trans. Shaye Cohen)

¹⁹ Lieu, *Neither Jew Nor Greek?*, 192-193.

²⁰ Cf. Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society*, 19-100.

²¹ Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, 182. Cohen’s very important book is marked by a number of problematic distinctions, including the assumption that Paul is easily or obviously aligned with a burgeoning Christianity. He thus suggests Paul is one of the singular uses of “*ioudaizein*” to imply only cultural, not political, domains. Distinguishing cultural and political is itself tricky business, especially regarding “Jewish” culture in the Greco-Roman world.

As Cohen observes, the “judaizers” here are those whose are “ambiguous” or “mixed,” and the passage, as well as the circumstances it depicts, are obviously politically charged.²² Although Cohen translates *ioudaioi* as “Jews” here, the use of the term “foreign” in the passage to denote the *ioudaioi* suggests “Judean” – as a more concerted geographical or ethnic designation – might be a better fit. The “judaizers” are those for whom a cultural or ethnic category, and thus political affiliation, is hard to pinpoint.

The fact that this passage refers to a conflict in Syria, although one before the Jewish War and thus 50 or more years before Ignatius, gives it even more relevance for understanding Ignatius’ use of the same term. In fact, for decades preceding Ignatius’ execution, questions of practices associated with “Judeans” or belonging to Israel, were quite thorny in Syria. John Barclay outlines how from the period of the Maccabees and through the Bar Kokhba revolt, associations with Israel/Judea, its traditions and practices, were regarded suspiciously by others throughout Syria.²³ Barclay also describes the ways in which sabbath observance was part of the struggle for self-preservation and colonial negotiation in this broad period. Sabbath was not just simply what Jews/Judeans might have done, it was a point of contention between authorities and Israel-affiliated people across the board. According to Josephus, Antiochus tried to stop sabbath observance,²⁴ and in both Asia and Antioch more generally, sabbath observance was not only fought for, but seen as a “social and cultural offense.”²⁵

This gives us some subtext for understanding Ignatius’ possible associations around and between *ioudaismos*, *ioudaizein*, and the only Jewish tradition that seems to be a problem for Ignatius: sabbath.²⁶ Specifically, in his letter to the Magnesians, Ignatius, he warns against “sabbatizing” (*sabatizontes*):

And so those who lived according to the old ways came to a new hope, no longer practicing sabbath, but living according to the Lord’s, in which also our life arose through him and his death, which some deny. (Magn 9.1)²⁷

While interpretational history has read this passage as an early attestation to Sunday gatherings of Christ groups, Richard Lewis has shown that this passage hardly confirms the picture. First, while standard translations (including the Loeb Classical Library)

²² Cohen, *Ibid.*, 184.

²³ Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 255-258.

²⁴ BJ 7:52-53; Barclay, *Ibid.*, 256.

²⁵ Barclay, *Ibid.*, 442.

²⁶ Even then, it appears only to be a problem with respect to the Magnesians, since he doesn’t mention it anywhere else.

²⁷ My translation from the Loeb Classical Library.

insert “day” after “living according to the Lord’s,” the word “day” does not occur here. It is an insertion meant to clarify the sentence. Early manuscript traditions, according to Lewis, either end the clause at “Lord’s” (Latin manuscripts), or (in an early Greek manuscript) read “the Lord’s life” (*zoen zwntes*). While Lewis suggests the latter is the more “correct” version, it seems in any case it seems to be a problem to assume Ignatius is talking about Sunday gatherings, especially since he’d be one of the earliest, if not *the* earliest, attestation of it anyway.²⁸

What emerges out of this is a much more fluid and nuanced picture of Ignatius in relationship to Israel’s traditions. The Maccabean underpinnings of *ioudaismos*, as well as the long history in Syria (and Antioch specifically) in which Israel’s traditions were issues of considerable political controversy and danger, alters our understandings of Ignatius’ use of the term *ioudaizein* as well as his presentation of sabbath. Add to this the intense humiliation and resentment that circulated after the Jewish war, perhaps particularly in Antioch, which was a gathering point for Roman legions assigned to suppress the Judean revolt, and where accusations flew regarding rebellious intentions amongst those affiliated with Israel.²⁹ Driving home the larger sense of turbulence and humiliation, and in the more immediate temporal vicinity of Ignatius’ letters, were the rebellions in Egypt, Cyprus, and Cyrenaica (116-117 CE),³⁰ which resulted in even more casualties and crushing defeats for people affiliated with Israel. The precarity and suspiciousness associated with belonging to Israel in this period was so distinct that Barclay writes that “it would take many generations before their revolutionary reputation would be shed.”³¹ It seems that especially around the time of the revolts in Egypt, Cyprus, and Cyrenaica one would attract a lot more imperial ire with the label *ioudaios* than *christianos* (although we would be mistaken to think these labels refer to distinct groups of people).

²⁸ Lewis, “Ignatius and the Lord’s Day.” Lewis also picks up on the verb “sabbatize,” noting that it need not necessarily mean simply “practice sabbath.” The Greek fragment of the Gospel of Thomas, for example, includes the awkward-seeming phrase “sabbatize the sabbath”: If you do not fast with regard to the world, you will not find the kingdom of God. If you do not sabbatize the sabbath (*sabbatizate to sabbaton*) you will not see the father. (GThom 27) The phrase has been almost universally translated to suggest “practice a true sabbath,”

²⁹ Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 256; Whether Josephus can be trusted on the details is of course always the question. But his impression of strife, contestation, and resonating effects of the Jewish war can nonetheless be taken seriously.

³⁰ Syria’s placement on the edge of Trajan’s Parthian campaign (according to Cassius Dio, Trajan dies in Antioch in 117), and the timing of the revolts with this campaign, could not have been comfortable. Cassius Dio even describes a dramatic scene of things falling apart in Antioch (Roman History, 68.24) at the time of Trajan’s death.

³¹ Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 258.

All of this gives us some clue, I think, about why Ignatius might be coining *christianismos* as a verbally and conceptually similar counterpart to *ioudaismos*.³² If *ioudaismos* resonated with the Maccabean tradition and investments in Israel/Judea's sovereignty, it might very well seem to be an ambivalent or – more to the point -- futile cause with which to associate oneself.³³ How could *ioudaismos* give meaning to Ignatius' death if it felt like the hopes for sovereignty associated with it were themselves dead? Indeed, Ignatius himself pointedly relegates *ioudaismos* to the realm of the dead:

“But if anyone should interpret Judaism to you, do not hear him. For it is better to hear Christianity from a man who is circumcised than Judaism from one who is uncircumcised. But if neither one speaks about Jesus Christ, they both appear to me as monuments and tombs of the dead, on which are written merely human names.” (Phil 6.1)³⁴

Christianismos is thus not only Ignatius' own rhetorical concoction, but a haunted one at that, calling to mind not only the imperial disciplinary state and visibility politics embedded in “Christian,” but Israel's violent, colonial history of struggles for sovereignty (and the impossibility of aspirations of sovereignty), as well.³⁵ Adding gravity to this haunted rhetorical turn, Ignatius figures his own path to death as a processional in honor of Israel's god, in which the recipients of his letters are imagined to be carrying Israel's precious cultic objects.³⁶ In the wake of the temple's destruction (and the imperial looting of the temple, including its sacred objects), this processional

³² Ignatius also casts his death as a “ransom” (Eph. 21.1; Smyr 10.2; Pol 2.3, 6.1), which has a history in Maccabean contexts, as well, again suggesting that he is relying on Maccabean conceptualities to make sense of his own death while at the same time eschewing them. Otto Perler, “Das vierte Makkabaerbuch,” 47-72. Cf. 4 Macc 6:29 and 17:21.

³³ Since Ignatius is an avid reader and interpreter of Paul, some of the traction Paul's letters contain for Ignatius might be because of Paul's own change of mind about his affiliations with *ioudaismos*. Paul, too, is less concerned with Jesus' life or teachings than what his death and resurrection mean – not only for belonging to Israel's god, but Israel's collective fate, as well.

³⁴ His evocation of circumcision here sounds ironic to modern ears, which anticipate the clusters of Judaism/Jewish/circumcised and Christianity/gentile/uncircumcised to not only align within themselves but oppose each other. But what if we take Ignatius somewhat seriously on this point? If markers of belonging to Israel were manifold and debated – not only in terms of what constitutes “real” belonging, but what was worth putting up a fight for – it seems that Ignatius chooses circumcision as one of the criteria. Nonetheless, *christianismos*, *ioudaismos*, circumcised or not, Ignatius emphasizes that anything without Christ means death.

³⁵ Kotrosits, *Rethinking Early Christian Identity*, 71-83.

³⁶ Cf. Allen Brent, “Ignatius of Antioch and the Imperial Cult,” 30-58. Harland, *Dynamics of Identity*, 52-59.

resonates as eerie at least, if not a ghostly enactment of Israel's defeat.³⁷ He associates his own death not only with Christ's, but with the destruction of the temple, thus implicitly associating Christ's death, too, with the destruction of the temple – an association that was of course already at play in earlier literature.³⁸

Despite their apparent futility on a national level, aspirations of sovereignty do not completely disappear from Ignatius' letters, however. Ignatius' worries about order in the *ekklesiai* and the authority of the bishops, and his longing to refigure his impending execution as a "voluntary" death, I want to argue, all suggest a kind of melancholic recapitulation of national sovereignty; these are locations in which crises of national sovereignty are mourned and anxiously worked out. For instance, at one point Ignatius writes "All the pleasures of the world, and all the kingdoms of this earth, shall profit me nothing. It is better to die in Christ Jesus than to reign over the ends of the earth." (Rom 6.1), but Ignatius' emphasis on Christ as the "seed of David" also suggests an investment, if a distant or changed one, in sovereignty as an idea. Even the fact that Ignatius preserves the notion of an *entity* (an '*ismos*') for which one dies and which makes one's death meaningful, while on an explicit level it eschews certain forms of national sovereignty, itself seems to express a certain desire to protect against social dissolution or scattering.

I should note that I am assuming that Ignatius' body, the body of the *ekklesiai*, and the larger social body of Israel are implicated in each other, and even have a kind of metonymic relationship to each other. Particularly in the ancient world, the "individual" body was always already a social body.³⁹ It was both a version of the cosmos in miniature (according to Plato, at least), and a reflection of social collectivities (the *demos* or the *ethnos*, e.g.). Likewise, the association gatherings and their meals (which is where Ignatius' readers, like so many other groups, are gathering) were expressly understood

³⁷ See my longer discussion: Kotrosits, *Rethinking Early Christian Identity*, 75-76. Strikingly, Ignatius describes the Ephesian *ekklesia* as constructing the temple (Eph. 9.2; 15). Paul also describes the social body as a temple (1 Cor. 6:19-20), but the question is not just whether he gets it from Paul, but why does he like this metaphor of Paul's and what new meaning or poignancy might it contain?

³⁸ For example, Mark's association of the destruction of the temple with Jesus' death (the tearing of the temple veil at the moment of Jesus' death and abandonment by God), or Hebrews' figuration of Jesus as both high priest and sacrifice, or the Gospel of John's rather direct affirmation that Jesus body is the new temple.

³⁹ There has been much scholarship noticing the metonymic or otherwise connected figurations of the individual and social body in the ancient world, indeed too much to name specifically. Some representation of this work from a variety of fields and perspectives: David Halperin, "The Democratic Body: Prostitution in Classical Athens," Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self*.

as little versions of the world – literally, as microcosms – in which social relationships were subject to consideration, perfection, and experimentation.⁴⁰

The notion of sovereignty is specifically a notion in which the registers of individual and social bodies are mutually constituting. Individual citizens' bodily boundaries and presentations or performances were understood to have implications for collectivities in their entirety. Questions of collective political autonomy and subjection resonated explicitly through representations of masculinized conquerors or feminized conquered peoples, for example, and citizens of such collectivities were seen to express or endanger the invulnerability/intactness of the social whole.⁴¹ In other words, while in contemporary theory and philosophy "sovereignty" tends to refer to *either* political salience/autonomy *or* personal self-determination, in the ancient world, there would be no "or."

Therefore, in Ignatius, aspirations of nationalist sovereignty have collapsed, but they have also been collapsed and concentrated into smaller frames, for example in his intensified focus on oneness, which appears as fears that there will be "corruption" or too much fracture or variety,⁴² or in his reprimand to act "civilized" and maintain self-control.⁴³ Ignatius' worries about dissolution, about the loss of integrity/wholeness, inflect his bodily self-presentation a bit differently, however. He insists he must die "voluntarily," echoing his larger interests in mastery and self-control, but he manages his impending dissolution metaphorically. He becomes "food for beasts," but in doing so becomes wheat ground for the "pure bread of Christ" (Rom 4.1). He wants nothing of himself to remain, for his total disappearance means he will "truly be a disciple of Jesus Christ" (Rom 4.2).

Indeed worries about "remains" and deadness regularly drift in and out of Ignatius' letters.⁴⁴ Ignatius rankles at the apparent deadness of *ioudaismos*, and seeks a vitality only thought possible through Christ. But ironically his own sovereignty, his own hopes for life in Christ, are articulated in and through death and ruin: Ignatius' body itself becomes the ruins out of which *christianismos* becomes possible, and the *ekklesiai*, as the social body whose wholeness saves Ignatius from insignificance, become a resurrected, or at least reconstructed, temple.⁴⁵ Ignatius' worries about deadness and

⁴⁰ Hal Taussig, *In the Beginning Was the Meal*, chapters 3, 4 and 7.

⁴¹ Cf. Halperin, "The Democratic Body"; Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered*; Burrus, "The Heretical Woman As Symbol"; Knust, *Abandoned to Lust*.

⁴² Eph. 3.2; 4.2; 5.1; 13; 14.1; 20.2; Magn. 1; 6.2; 7.2; 11; 13; 15; Phil. 4; Smyr 1.2; Phil 3.3; Trall 11

⁴³ Eph 10.2-3; 14.1.

⁴⁴ At one point, Ignatius also tells the Magnesians not to be "rotten" (Magn 10:2). Cf. also Ignatius' accusation that whoever denies Christ's actual suffering "bears a corpse" (Smyr 5.2).

⁴⁵ Eph 15.3.

remains are not only a response to the rubble of the temple, or Israel/Judea's sovereignty in ruins, however. They register another, related set of vulnerabilities of which the inherent vulnerability of belonging to Israel is a part: the larger imperial ecology of life, sustenance, and death.

Death in the Social Body: Violence, Vitality, and Eating

"I have no pleasure in the food that perishes nor in the pleasures of this life. I desire the bread of God, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, from the seed of David; and for drink I desire his blood, which is imperishable love." (Rom 7.3)

If Ignatius expresses hopes for a kind of sovereignty outside of the national frame, his imagination of his death as haunted processional casts hope for any kind of sovereignty as haunted. That hope is haunted not just by the nation, but also by a politics of life and death – a biopolitics – in which vitality is inextricably tied to destruction. Theories of biopolitics (and their corollary, theories of necropolitics), which following Foucault highlight the variety of ways that nation-states and imperial powers assume the prerogative of deciding who lives and who dies, including through direct violence or war, neglect, the allocation and withdrawing of healthcare, food, and other resources, uneven crisis management, environmental wreckage, and particularly through policies of eminent domain and American exceptionalism which seek to preserve "a way of life" or "our way of life."⁴⁶ While I don't wish to transpose contemporary systems of the management of life and death onto the first and second centuries, I do think a general recourse to biopolitical theory offers new ways to consider ancient cultural habits, sensibilities, and discourses that find confluence in Ignatius.

I'm particularly interested in Ignatius' desire to become "food for beasts," wheat ground for the "pure bread of Christ." Ignatius not only reverses the familiar so-called "words of institution" – instead of bread becoming body, body becomes bread here, as Castelli notes – thus placing himself via metaphor at the center of the meal gatherings. But a few lines later, Ignatius likens the soldiers attending him to "wild beasts...who become worse when treated well" (Rom 5.1), not only insulting them by calling them animals, but making a kind of subtle commentary on the imperial "food chain."⁴⁷ In doing so, he is echoing back darkly the Roman imperial propoganda that connected war

⁴⁶ On American exceptionalism, biopolitics/necropolitics, and the sliding referentiality between queerness and terrorism, see Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*.

⁴⁷ In a perhaps similar vein, Eph. 7.2, Ignatius also describes those who "bear the name in wicked deceit" as "raving dogs who bite."

and the subjection of peoples to “prosperity,” often represented as abundance, harvest, or the fertility of land. So of course for Ignatius, life in this world is death, and death nonetheless promises vitality.⁴⁸

The arena, the scene of Ignatius’ impending death, has already been described by scholars in somewhat ecological terms, and even with some biopolitical/necropolitical subtexts.⁴⁹ The theatrical dimension of the arena in which battles, both mythological and historical, are re-enacted, in which criminals are executed, and animals devour the condemned, all might be imagined as a kind of “biopolitical drama” which offers up for consideration – through “consumption” by spectators – the ways in which imperial power orchestrates the terms of life and death at large, and how the imperial social body feeds and sustains itself with the bodies of certain (criminalized, racialized) populations. Ancient discourse on the arena is full of latent recognitions that the people who die in the arena die “like animals,” and that the arena is a place in which “civilization” both depends on the dehumanization of certain populations, and itself comes dangerously close to devolving into “animalistic” states.⁵⁰ The boundaries of civilization in the arena, particularly, are understood through the category of the animal and terms of consumption – either visual or literal.

Ignatius’ recourse to sacrifice as a way of understanding his death, too, might be read ecologically. Sacrifice has been naturalized as a (loaded) term around Jesus’ death, and while it is clear that Ignatius is borrowing from earlier links between Jesus’ death and sacrifice, links that seem especially strong after the practice of sacrifice in Judea was foreclosed by the destruction of the temple, the context for that link itself requires unpacking. First, as Andrew McGowan has argued, there is material context for such a link: associations often met in dining rooms adjoining temples, where sacrifices were performed, this is indeed often where they got their meat for their meals (and what may have been causing problems at the Corinthian gatherings). Association gatherings were also a primary place in which the dead were remembered. So the link between the practice of sacrifice – and its many various meanings – and the remembrance of the dead is not surprising.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 83.

⁴⁹ Cf. While not using the term ecology or biopolitical analytics, the following scholars do analyze the arena for its drama of imperial violence and self-understanding, attending to many actors, participants, and cultural dynamics in the spectacles. Kahl, *Galatians Reimagined* (chapter 3); Allison Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*; Christopher Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire*; Carlin Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*.

⁵⁰ Cf. Kotrosits, “Seeing is Feeling: Revelation’s Enthroned Lamb and Ancient Visual Affects.”

⁵¹ Cf. Andrew McGowan, “Eucharist and Sacrifice: Cultic Tradition and Transformation in Early Christian Meals.” See also *Ancient Mediterranean Sacrifice* (Knust and Varhelyi, eds.) for a richer, more complicated picture of practices and meanings associated with the term “sacrifice.”

But whatever those various meanings, sacrifice was also part of material economies and expressions of cultural distinctness – as well as simply a mode of production of food. As a mode of production of food, however, one in which (at least in the sacrifice of animals) it likely contained in it already ample space for biopolitical reflections about the interimplication of life/sustenance and death, especially on a grand scale (i.e., the imperial level). In combination with the “for you” formulation of noble death mythologies, such a notion of a death being a “sacrifice” or “ransom” (if we can separate those terms from their over-familiarization) manages to double or at least intensify the sense that one’s living is entwined with another’s dying.

Yet Ignatius’ use of sacrifice, ransom, and “for you” language for conveying the meaning of his death is also where his refiguration of sovereignty becomes troubled. His sovereignty, as a wish for the autonomy and integrity of the social body, is figured through his voluntary and virtuous death. But because his death is figured as a sacrifice “for you,” it partakes of the same economies, cultural politics, and imperial regimes of life and death from which he wishes to sublimely absent himself in the first place. The figure and rhetoric of “Christ” for Ignatius encapsulates and entwines questions of biopolitics and sovereignty distinctly: he is the “seed of David” whose sacrificial death promises a kind of post-imperial vitality for those who can die in heroic subjection. Christ renders senseless violence as cosmically meaningful – but so does the imperial rhetoric of life and death, as that which is destroyed or eaten is absorbed into the social body for its “greater good.” That is to say that Ignatius is not *refusing* the imperial politics of life and death as much as simply *registering* those politics in a Judean key, registering himself and his ruined nation as part of an intimate and sorrowful ecology in which the life and prosperity of the imperial social body depends on a set of sinister and consumptive interrelations.

Conclusion: Reading “Martyrdom” Ecologically

Far from a singular figure who contributes unique theological content to an always-already phenomena of Christianity, or one of the first people to be put to death for his faith in Christ, Ignatius is simply another link, vulnerable and complicit, but also creative, in the chain of Rome’s politics of living and dying. Rather than pathologically obsessed with his own death, he is captivated by imperial politics of visibility, in which the promise of being seen goes hand in hand with heightened odds of being destroyed.

Because of the variety of practices and meanings accorded to “sacrifice” in the ancient world, the question biopolitics/necropolitics and sacrifice is a knotty one that I only offer some initial and quick reflections on here, and deserves much more time and space.

Perhaps most significantly, rather than offering evidence of supersessionism at the heart of early orthodoxy, Ignatius letters and language are tightly knotted to the history and precarities of belonging to Israel. They are haunted by proximity to revolt, cultural ambivalences, social suspicion, and longings for and collapses of national sovereignty. In fact, those are the ruins that Ignatius seems most unable to stand. An already diffuse Israel is continuously being -- or at least fears being -- "swallowed" into the imperial whole, and so Ignatius will "volunteer" himself to become food for beasts if he thinks it means the social body, in some manner, can remain intact. I would like to underline here: Ignatius needs to be seen *as a Judean diasporic figure*, one whose ambivalences about certain strands or dimensions of Judean/Israelite tradition (Maccabean traditions, sabbath) are not only completely understandable in the larger ecology of the early second century Mediterranean, but need to be understood alongside his deep connection to scripture/prophetic traditions, the temple, certain recapitulations/recalibrations of national sovereignty and, of course, Israel's god. Not only is Ignatius fully connected to Israel/Judea, but it is obvious that his congregations are too, since they are the ones "sabbatizing," "judaizing," and questioning whether Ignatius' *christianismos* coheres with Hebrew scriptures.

With this reading, I'd also like to propose a reconsideration of not just Ignatius' death, but martyrdom at large in ecological terms. Rather than a phenomenon, and even more than a discourse or a construction, what we call "martyrdom" might be reconsidered as unexceptional symptoms of and reckonings with biopolitical and necropolitical networks of power. I'd also like to suggest that the (overlapping) questions of agency, selfhood, self-mastery, power, and Christian identity that typically attend readings of martyrological materials be recalibrated as questions of sovereignty, belonging, diaspora, and social integrity/vulnerability. While questions of discourse, identity, and power that arose relative to martyrdom in the wake of the linguistic turn certainly moved us forward in terms of understanding the possible contexts and effects of "martyrdom" (or, more broadly construed, narratives of empire and violent death), importantly differentiating certain constructions of victimhood from their realities, I want to suggest that reorienting ourselves toward sovereignty, belonging, diaspora and social integrity/vulnerability will push us even further into non-exceptionalist interpretations of "martyrdom." In other words, what if what we call martyrdom is neither particularly special, problematic, or subversive? This changes the frame so that the question is not even "what is martyrdom," which will probably always cause us to seek a definition of it as curious, special, or unique in either its subversiveness or its problematics. The question is how to thoroughly reconsider the social fabric of Ignatius' (and others') presumed historical moment so that he is not a strange outlier, extreme pathological case, narcissistic authority figure, or even a keystone in the arch of

orthodoxy, but simply a temperature taker of the moment in which he lives and dies, a knot in a network, or better: one point of convergence of numerous historical forces, factors, and feelings – and only one among others.

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