

The Biblical Christology of Ignatius of Antioch: A Case for Scriptural Authority

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During the year 110 AD,¹ a pastor from the city of Antioch in Syria was enroute toward his inevitable martyrdom. It was during this journey from Antioch to Rome that he visited multiple local churches along the way. Through the seven letters written to Ephesus, Tralles, Magnesia, Rome, Smyrna, Philadelphia, and Polycarp,² we can surmise that Ignatius of Antioch articulated some of the earliest and most coherent Christological statements following the turn of the first century. In this article, I will argue that Ignatius referenced Old and New Testament Scriptures to articulate his Christology. I will first discuss how Ignatius referenced Scripture in three forms, direct citation, allusion, and imagery.³ I will then show how Ignatius utilized these three forms to discuss the names of Christ, Christ's unity in the Godhead, and the incarnational narrative.

IGNATIUS' USE OF SCRIPTURE

Much work has been done concerning Ignatius and his use of Scripture.⁴ However, it is difficult to tell how well a canon of Scripture was developed

during his time of writing.⁵ That said, there are many identifiable references to Scripture throughout the writings of Ignatius in various forms.⁶ This discussion is helpful in understanding how early Christian articulation of Christology was not conducted in a vacuum, but rather early Christians were embedded in a reading culture centered in Old and New Testament writings which they used as the source for their theological articulation.⁷ Given how prominent Scripture is referenced throughout his writings, it is clear that Ignatius held Scripture to an authoritative standard, particularly in regard to his Christology. One of the clearest places Ignatius makes a case for the authority of Scripture is in *Philadelphians* 8.2. In this passage, Ignatius is writing against so-called Judaizers who were causing division in the church. These Judaizers made the claim that they do not have to obey certain teachings of Christ, stating, “Unless I find *it* in the archives, I do not believe *it* in the gospel.”⁸ According to Ignatius, the “archives” are the Jewish Scriptures, and the “gospel” is not a written gospel account but rather the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

To this claim made by the Judaizers, Ignatius responds that Christ *is* the archives, stating, “But to me the archives are Jesus Christ, the sacred archives his cross and death and his resurrection and the faith which is through him.”⁹ Some have made the assertion that Ignatius’ response is evidence that he was unfamiliar with the Old Testament (OT) and thus, a poor exegete. His comment of Jesus being the archives was an evasion tactic so that he did not have to address Judaizers writings in which they were more comfortable with. Paul Donahue is a proponent of this view claiming, “Ignatius could not win his exegetical argument with his opponents, so he changes the rules; he appeals to a higher, more decisive standard.”¹⁰ However, this is unlikely given how the three occasions in which Ignatius’ uses verbatim citations are from the OT. Given this, Carleton Paget considers that Ignatius attributed authority to the prophets and the law of Moses.¹¹

Rather than evading the Judaizers critiques, Ignatius is reorienting hermeneutical priorities in which Jesus is now the key to understand the OT and the one that the OT is pointing to.¹² The point Ignatius is trying to make is that while he and his opponents both see the OT as important, “they disagree about the degree to which they take precedence over the gospel in exposition of the Christian message.”¹³ While Ignatius does not explicitly state his hermeneutical priorities, the way in which he views interpreting

Scripture is first starting with Christ and then working backwards. Ultimately, this leaves a reader of the OT seeing how Christ was the fulfillment of it by his life and death.¹⁴ For Ignatius, and the broader Christian world, interpretation of Scripture starts and ends with Christ and his Gospel.

Ignatius viewed Scripture, both the OT and the NT, as a source of authority for his theology. Scripture is particularly influential in the way Ignatius understands Christology. For him, Christ is the ultimate hermeneutical key for how all Scripture is to be interpreted and in which all Scripture points to. I will now discuss the three ways in which Ignatius referenced Scripture, namely, direct citation, allusion, and imagery. Following this discussion on how Ignatius referenced Scripture I will then discuss how he used these forms of scriptural referencing to articulate his Christology.

Ignatius and the Use of Direct Citation

Ignatius directly cites Scripture on at least three occasions.¹⁵ In *Ephesians* 5.3, Ignatius quotes from Proverbs 3:34 and in *Magnesians* 12, Proverbs 18:3. Both of these quotations are introduced by the terms *gegraptai*. In *Trallians* 8.2, he introduces a quotation from Isaiah 52:5 using the term *gar*. In a later section, I will propose that Ignatius used a fourth direct citation from Luke 24:39, introducing the quotation with the word *ephē*. His use of these terms indicates that he has a specific referent of Scripture in mind before he goes on to cite it. Given his use of these citations, we can see that Ignatius had some knowledge of the OT even if he did not regularly cite it explicitly.

Jonathon Lookdoo points out that it would be a mistake to hold Ignatius to the same standards of modern methods of citation.¹⁶ Evidence of other methods of citation in the ancient church can be found through the author of the *Didache* as well as Paul in his letter to the Colossians. The *Didache* only gives explicit citations of Scripture on two occasions, but this does not hinder the author from using other means of referencing material from the Torah, prophets, and teachings of Jesus.¹⁷ Referencing Paul Foster, Lookdoo points out how Paul is influenced by the OT such as Isaiah 29:13 in his reference to human traditions and commands in Colossians 2:22. Paul also likely has Psalm 110:1 in mind writing about Christ being “seated at the right hand” in Colossians 3:1.¹⁸ Given how other ancient authors can be seen referencing Scripture in their writings without formal indication, it is not beyond the possibility that Ignatius utilized similar methods in his writings.

Ignatius and the Use of Allusion

Given Ignatius was traveling toward his own martyrdom, he likely did not have any physical copies of the Scriptures in his possession. Therefore, he would have had to rely solely on his memory when referencing certain passages. This helps explain why there are so few verbatim quotations. However, this did not hinder Ignatius from continuing to utilize Scripture, as an authoritative source, in his letters. There are other forms in which ancient authors referred to Scripture, one of them being allusions. Lookadoo identifies allusions in the writings of Ignatius to be the use of language similar to that which is found in Scripture.¹⁹ For instance, Olavi Tarvainen considers *Ephesians* 15.1 to be an allusion to Psalm 33:9 in which the Lord speaks existence from silence.²⁰ Similarly, William Ralph Inge considers that since there are so many allusions to 1 Corinthians in the writings of Ignatius, he must have had Paul's letter memorized by heart.²¹

Ignatius and the Use of Imagery

Aside from direct citations and allusions, Ignatius also employs the use of images as a way of referencing Scripture. Tarvainen makes this connection with Ignatius' discussion on right and wrong doctrine infiltrating the church. In *Trallians* 6.1, Ignatius calls false teachers, foreign weeds. Tarvainen relates Ignatius botanical imagery regarding false teachers with Jesus' teaching in Matthew 15:13 where he makes the claim that not every plant is planted by the Father and will be uprooted.²² In a similar vein, Tarvainen points out how Ignatius' imagery of the shepherd, sheep, and wolves in regard to false teachers is an association with Jesus teachings about false teachers in Matthew 7:15; 10:6, and Luke 10:3.²³ Ignatius made use of various other images including specific images found in Scripture which are associated with Christ.

THE BIBLICAL INFLUENCE OF IGNATIUS' CHRISTOLOGY

Ignatius had a Christocentric view of theology and biblical interpretation.²⁴ It was through a Christocentric lens that he was able to read Scripture and articulate the person and work of Christ. In the sections that follow, I will discuss how Ignatius utilized citation, allusions, and imagery from Scripture to articulate his Christology. This will be shown through his

discussions of the names of Christ, the Son's unity in the Godhead, and the incarnational narrative.

The Names of Christ

Jesus as High Priest

In his letter to the Philadelphians, Ignatius makes the comment, “And the priests *were* good, but the high priest *is* even better: he has been entrusted with the Holy of Holies, who alone has been entrusted with the hidden things of God.”²⁵ This remark comes on the heels of his comment made about Jesus and his gospel *being* the archives. What Ignatius is doing is utilizing OT priestly imagery to describe the role of Christ as the great High Priest of the Church. One of the roles of the high priest was that each year on Yom Kippur they had to enter into the Holy of Holies in the temple in order to make atonement sacrifices for the nation of Israel (Lev 16:1–34). Rather than pointing out the role of Christ in atonement, Ignatius is more concerned that the high priest went into the Holy of Holies alone.

It was Christ alone who acted as the high priest of the Church to stand before God and be “entrusted with hidden things from God.”²⁶ Schoedel comments that these “hidden things” are likely exegetical secrets as in *Letter of Barnabas* 6.10 wherein the Lord places “wisdom and understanding of his secrets in us.”²⁷ However, while exegetical secrets might partially be in view, Lookadoo sees a correlation between Jesus as the high priest and Ignatius’ previous discussion about Judaizers and the “archives.” Jesus is being entrusted with secrets about himself as God’s revelation. Jesus is playing the high priestly role in that he is not holding these secrets from himself, but making them known to creation through his life, death, and resurrection. In other words, Jesus knows the secrets of the Father because he is one with the Father and reveals them through his incarnation.²⁸

Ignatius is doing also something similar to that of the author of Hebrews in order to show how Jesus is a high priestly figure, greater than those of the Levitical priesthood. However, the way in which the author of Hebrews and Ignatius discuss Jesus as a high priest have their distinctions. Ignatius is concerned with the high priest’s role of entering the Holy of Holies alone in order to hear the secret things of God. The author of Hebrews does not mention this particular role of a high priest but rather focuses on other

aspects of a high priestly role fulfilled in Christ such as offering himself as an atonement sacrifice (Heb 9:11 – 14).²⁹ While it is unclear if Ignatius had the book of Hebrews in mind when writing *Philadelphians* 9.1, what is clear is the high priestly imagery sourced from Scripture wherein Christ came as a greater high priest than those who had come before Him.

Jesus as the Door

In the same passage, *Philadelphians* 9.1, Ignatius also refers to Christ as the door. He writes, “He [Jesus] is the door of the Father through which Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and the prophets and apostles and the church enter. All of these are brought into the unity of God.”³⁰ Robert M. Grant sees Jesus’ association with being named “the door” to be an allusion to John 10:7 and 9 in which Jesus claims himself to be the door in which sheep enter into the fold of the Father. Grant also sees parallels with John 14:6 in which Jesus claims to be the only way to the Father.³¹ Schoedel on the other hand considers this a use of this image of a door as possible parallel to John 10:7, 9; but other ancient sources also used this door imagery such as *Shepherd of Hermas* Sim 9.12 – 15 and *1 Clement* 48.2 – 4. There is also the possibility that it was prompted by Psalm 117:20 LXX which states, “This is the Lord’s gate, the godly enter through it.”³² Given Jesus being referred to as the door in proximity to also being called a better high priest, Shoedel also sees a likely connection between *Philadelphians* 9.1 and Hebrews 9:3; 10:20 in which the “door” is a reference to the temple “curtain” in which Christ enters into the presence of the Father on our behalf as mediator.³³

Along similar mediatorial lines, Lookadoo draws a connection between *Philadelphians* 8.2 and 9.1 wherein the point Ignatius is trying to make is that Jesus mediates faith between the Creator and created people of God.³⁴ Ignatius sees Jesus as the one by whom the prophets, patriarchs, apostles, and now the Church enter through in order to be united to God. Lookadoo also points out that this is not the first time this kind of Johannine language has been used in association with the Philadelphian church. In Revelation, John is writing to the Philadelphians with a message from Jesus. He says, “This is the solemn pronouncement of the Holy One, the True One, who holds the key of David, who opens doors no one can shut, and shuts doors no one can open.” In Revelation, Jesus is depicted as the one who allows access through the door, and in Ignatius letter to the Philadelphians, Jesus is

the door itself. He not only invites, but controls who is allowed entrance to the Father.³⁵

While one cannot say with absolute certainty Ignatius was dependent on Johannine literature in *Philadelphians* 9.1,³⁶ the similarities are striking. At any rate, these resemblances between Johannine literature, Ignatius, as well as other ancient Christian writings show that there was common language within the Christian community dependent on the testimony of the person and work of Jesus. Ignatius is utilizing imagery from Scripture in order to show how Jesus is the way to the Father as “the door.” According to *Philadelphians* 9.1, Jesus is the high priest who reveals the Father as the revelation of the Father, and it is through Jesus as the door that the anyone can have access to the Father.

Jesus as Savior

Ignatius refers to Jesus as Savior on four occasions.³⁷ In his letter to the *Magnesians*, Ignatius addresses the church in the name of the “Jesus Christ our Savior.” The use of the term Savior in the salutation of a letter is much like that of Paul in 1 Timothy 1:1 and Titus 1:4.³⁸ Paul considers the Savior as the authority by whom he is able to write to Timothy and Titus. While Ignatius is not immediately articulating much more about the person or work of Christ other than him as Savior, he does give insight into why he refers to Christ as Savior in *Magnesians* 1.2. Ignatius is describing how he is in chains, but being delivered from captivity on earth is not what he is looking forward to. Ignatius considers his imprisonment and impending persecution as a pathway to everlasting life and union with Jesus and the Father. He considers the “abuse of the ruler of this age” to be a way of “escape” to Christ. In other words, Jesus is acting as Ignatius’ Savior through his persecution which ends in everlasting life united with God. This is not the only time Ignatius associates Jesus as Savior with the immortality of the believer.

In *Philadelphians* 9.2 and *Smyrnaeans* 7.1, Ignatius ties a correlation between faith in Jesus as Savior and immortality. *Philadelphians* 9.2 lays out one of Ignatius’ clear gospel articulations. For Ignatius, “The gospel has something distinctive: the coming of the Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ, his suffering and resurrection. For the beloved prophets preached with reference to him, but the gospel is the consummation of immortality. All

things together are good if you believe in love.”³⁹ Jesus, the Savior, has been foretold by the prophets, come, died, and resurrected. Now, those who believe in the Savior in love will receive immortality. In *Polycarp* 2.3, Ignatius calls immortality, “the prize,” because it is how we can reach God (Phil 3:14). However, one cannot receive this prize unless they are persuaded of the gospel of Jesus.

Ignatius also makes the connection between the Savior and a believer’s immortality in *Smyrnaeans* 7.1. This time however, he is contrasting those who are not true believers of Jesus as the Savior with those who are. The untrue believers refuse to participate in the Eucharist and prayer “because they do not confess the Eucharist to be the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ who suffered for our sins, which the Father raised up by his goodness.” Ignatius goes on to claim how those who do not believe in the Savior and refuse him as their gift will die. However, those who love and receive Jesus as Savior will be “risen up” in reference to their future resurrection. The basis for Ignatius’ connection between immortality and the flesh of the Savior stem from Jesus in John 6:51 – 58.⁴⁰ In this passage, many followers of Jesus depart from him after he offers that anyone who eats his flesh and drinks his blood would live forever. The same sentiment translates to Ignatius’ context nearly a century later wherein the Docetists refused to partake in the Eucharist because of their denial of Jesus’ humanity.⁴¹

The final reference of Jesus as Savior in the letters of Ignatius is found in *Ephesians* 1:1. He writes, “Welcoming in God your much-loved name, which you possess by your righteous nature according to faith and love in Christ Jesus our Savior, you are imitators of God, having rekindled by the blood of God your related task, you completed it perfectly.” In this passage, Ignatius is admiring the Ephesian church because of their righteousness which they have attained because of their faith and love in the Savior. The Ephesians have become imitators of Christ through their expression of love toward Ignatius by sending representatives to him at Smyrna to support him in his imprisonment.⁴² Jesus Christ is referred to as both Savior and God and the “blood of God” is symbolic of the love Jesus showed through his suffering on the cross. Ignatius is using Pauline language from his own letter to the Ephesians regarding the command to be imitators of Christ and the love he showed in giving his life as a sacrifice and fragrant offering to God (Eph 5:1 – 2).⁴³

Unity of the Godhead

Ignatius' Christology considers not only the person of Jesus, but also his nature regarding his unity to the Godhead. There is an ontological relation Jesus has with the Father and the Holy Spirit evident in the letters of Ignatius which he grounds in both the OT and the NT.

Jesus as the Son of God

To start, Ignatius considers Jesus Christ to be both truly human and truly God. Regarding his humanity, Ignatius make his point clear that Jesus possessed a human nature in his discourse against false teachers and those claiming to be Christians while adhering to false doctrine such as the Docetists.⁴⁴ If one was to claim to be a Christian in the first and second century, it was essential for them to believe in the full humanity of Jesus as taught by Scripture. Ignatius refers to the idea of denying Jesus' humanity as a "foreign plant," or "heresy."⁴⁵ Both terms are biblical in nature. Regarding botanical imagery, Jesus refers to those who have been sown by the enemy among the good seeds as "poisonous weeds" (Matt 13:40). In Matthew 15:13, Jesus makes the claim that "every plant that my heavenly Father did not plant will be uprooted." This kind of language is almost identical to that which Ignatius uses in *Trallians* 11.1 in which he refers to heresy as "evil offshoots" that "are not the planting of the Father." This particular reference is in regard to those who claimed that Christ's sufferings were in appearance only. Jude also called certain people who denied Christ "autumn trees without fruit ... uprooted." Therefore, Ignatius considers the full humanity of Christ and his sufferings to be essential to the gospel message of true Christianity.

Alongside Jesus' full humanity, Ignatius affirmed the fullness of his deity. In *Ephesians* 7.2, Ignatius gives another gospel presentation regarding the nature and work of Jesus making the claim that Jesus is "both fleshly and spiritual, born and unborn, God in man." This language of Christ coming to earth as a man, or in flesh,⁴⁶ is consistent with NT language found in John 1:14; 1 Timothy 3:16; 1 John 4:2 and 2 John 1:7. The apostle John in 2 John 1:7 goes as far to make that case, which Ignatius is affirming throughout his writings, that many have come denying that Christ came in the flesh, calling these people deceivers and antichrists.

Drawing upon temple imagery, Ignatius considers the omniscience and omnipresence of the Son in *Ephesians* 15.3. He claims, “Nothing escapes the notice of the Lord, but even our secrets are near him. Therefore we should do everything because he is dwelling in us, that we may be his temples and he may be our God in us, which indeed he is and he will be made known before our very eyes by which we may rightly love him.” For those who know and rightly love Jesus, he dwells within them as temples. Lookadoo points out two ways Ignatius uses the term *theos* to describe Jesus in his letter to the Ephesians. The first is “God in us,”⁴⁷ referring to the location in which Jesus dwells in Ignatius and the Ephesian church, similar to the way Paul refers to God dwells in believers as temples in 1 Corinthians 13:6. The second is “our God”⁴⁸ denoting that Jesus is the object of Ignatius and the Ephesian church’s worship.⁴⁹ This temple imagery is sourced from the OT wherein the God of Israel dwelled among his people in the temple at Jerusalem (1 Kgs 8:10–13). King Solomon goes on to attest to the omnipresence of God in 1 Kings 8:27–28 in that while he might have built God a temple to reside, the highest heaven cannot even contain God. In the OT, the temple served as a place where God resided and was worshiped. Now, according to the NT, Christ retains the omnipresent nature of God residing in those who believe and worship him as temples.

The Son and the Father

Regarding his relation to the Father, Jesus is the Son of God the Father. Ignatius refers to Jesus as the Son of God on two occasions.⁵⁰ In *Ephesians* 20.2, Ignatius is describing the one faith in which he and the Ephesian church share in. This faith is “in Jesus Christ, who according to the flesh was from the family of David, the Son of Man and Son of God.” He refers to Jesus as the Son of God to contrast his divine nature from his fleshly, human nature as the Son of David. The Christ was prophesied to be the Son of David throughout the OT (2 Sam 7:12–16; Isa 9:7; Ps 2; 110) and fulfilled in Jesus in the NT (Matt 1:20; 21:9; 22:42; Mark 12:35; Luke 1:32; 20:41; John 7:47; Rom 1:3; 2 Tim 2:8; Rev 5:5).

The NT also attests to the deity of Jesus being the Son of God (Mark 1:1; Luke 1:35; Jn 11:4: 20:31; 2 Cor 1:19; Gal 2:20; Eph 4:13; Heb 4:14; 6:6; 1 John 4:15). Throughout the gospels, Jesus identifies with the Father, calling God Father and claiming to be united with him (John 10:30).

In John's gospel, Jesus is identified with the Father as being the Word of God and the Creator. Ignatius picks up on this with his use of allusion to Psalm 33:9 in *Ephesians* 15.1. He refers to Jesus as the "one teacher who spoke and it happened" in reference to Psalm 33:9 that gives God credit for speaking the world into existence. In *Magnesians* 8:2, Jesus is called the "Word that came forth from silence, who in everything pleased the one who sent him." He is the Word who in his divinity spoke through silence in creation and in his incarnation reveals the Father who sent him. Grant considers this reference to Jesus as the Word as stemming from John 1:18 in which no one has seen the Father but the Son who reveals the Father.⁵¹ The Father's being pleased is a reference to John 8:29 wherein the incarnate Son always does what is pleasing to the Father, such as his going to the cross for the sins of humanity.

The Son and the Holy Spirit

Ignatius makes mention of the Holy Spirit as being an active member of the Godhead, united with the Father and the Son. In reference to the Son, the Spirit is the one by which Jesus was conceived of the virgin Mary. Ignatius describes the humanity of Jesus being born by Mary through the seed of David, and the divinity of Jesus being born of the Spirit (Matt 1:18; Luke 1:35). According to Ignatius in *Magnesians* 9.2, the Spirit is also the one by whom the prophets spoke of Jesus as their expectant teacher, being disciples of him before he came became incarnate (Matt 2:23; Luke 24:44). In the opening of his letter to the Philadelphians, the Son and Spirit work together in appointing and establishing the ecclesiological structure of the local church.⁵² He goes on in *Philadelphians* 7.2 to implore the church to obey the Holy Spirit who instructs the church in imitation of Jesus who is of the Father which is an allusion to Pauline language of imitation (1 Cor 1:11; Phil 3:17; 1 Thess 1:6).

Finally, for Ignatius, the only true faith that flourishes is one that consists of faith and love in the Son, the Father, and the Spirit (2 Cor 13:14). He supports this idea in *Ephesians* 9.1 wherein he describes the church as the temple of the Father and individual believers as the building stones. This is yet another use of temple imagery and NT allusions to believers being stones fitted together for the sake of being constructed into God's temple (Eph 2:20–22; 1 Pet 2:5). For Ignatius, believers, having been prepared

for the building of God, are “hoisted up to the heights by the crane of Jesus Christ, which is the cross, using as a rope the Holy Spirit, and your faith lifts you up, and love is the way that leads to God.” Again, we see faith and love as the mechanism for which the believer is united to the unified Godhead of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Jesus made a way for humanity to reach God through his sacrifice on the cross and the Spirit is the one who helped humanity reach Christ through faith.⁵³ Using Pauline language, those who love God are first known and prepared by God to live according to his purposes (Rom 8:28; 1 Cor 2:9; 8:3; cf. 1 John 4:7–5:3).⁵⁴ After showing that Ignatius viewed Jesus as both human and divine, in unity with the Godhead, we will now move to discuss how his use of Scripture influenced his articulation of incarnational Christology.

Incarnational Narrative

For Ignatius, to be a Christian meant to affirm the gospel of Jesus Christ which was his incarnational narrative.⁵⁵ Michael J. Svigel argues that the early church maintained catholic unity in their “clear and distinct incarnational narrative,” asserting, “the ‘centering’ force of catholic Christianity was not merely any notion of ‘Jesus Christ,’ but the Jesus Christ who was the divine Son of God, who was born, suffered, died, rose again, and ascended to heaven in the flesh.”⁵⁶ One of the clearest examples of Ignatius’ incarnational narrative comes from *Trallians* 9.1 – 2 which states,

Therefore be deaf whenever anyone speaks to you apart from Jesus Christ, the one of the family of David, the one of Mary, he who truly was born, both ate and drank, truly was persecuted by Pontius Pilate, truly was crucified and died, being seen by those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, who also truly was raised from the dead, his Father having raised him. In the same way he also, his Father, will likewise raise up us who believe in him in Christ Jesus, without whom we do not have true life.

I will elaborate on this incarnational narrative by showing how Ignatius relied on Scriptural evidence to articulate his Christology regarding the pre-existence, birth, life, suffering and death, resurrection, ascension, and return of Christ.

Pre-Existence

Before becoming incarnate, Jesus existed eternally as God the Son. Ignatius identifies Jesus as existing before the foundations of the world because it was Jesus as God the Son who created the world by speaking it into existence.⁵⁷ In *Magnesians* 8.2, Ignatius refers to Jesus as the Son of God and the Word of God, in reference to John 1:1 (c.f. Gen 1:1), who came forth from silence.⁵⁸ Svilig holds that, by coming forth from silence, Ignatius is referring to the fact that “whenever God revealed himself to humankind throughout history, he did so by means of the Son, or Logos, who is also God.”⁵⁹ This is supported by Ignatius’ statement in *Romans* 8.2 where he calls Jesus “the unerring mouth by whom the Father has truly spoken, will make this known to you, that I speak truly.” As the pre-existent Son, Jesus created all things and reveals God to humanity.

Birth

The birth of Jesus is described as God the Son taking on flesh as the seed of David, being conceived through the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin, Mary. As the seed of David,⁶⁰ Ignatius is identifying Jesus as the true Messiah promised by God foretold by the prophets (2 Sam 7:12–16; Isa 9:7; Ps 2; 110). Ignatius makes it a point in *Trallians* 9.1 to show that Jesus was truly born to emphasize the act of God the Son taking on flesh (John 1:14). According to the various gospel accounts of Jesus’ birth narrative, Ignatius affirms the virgin birth through Mary (Matt 1:18–25; Luke 1:26–38; cf. Isa 7:14).⁶¹ For Ignatius, to be a Christian meant to affirm Jesus as the Messiah who was born of the virgin Mary, according to the Scriptures.

Life

Not only did Ignatius expect Christians to hold to the pre-incarnate existence and miraculous birth of Jesus, but they were also expected to affirm the testimony of Scripture regarding his earthly acts. In *Trallians* 9.2, one cannot speak of Christ apart from the fact that he truly ate and drank. As Svilig points out, for Ignatius, Jesus experienced a real day-to-day life in the physical world. He ate and drank like other people, living as “perfect man.”⁶² In *Ephesians* 18.2 and *Smyrnaeans* 1.1, Ignatius also references the event of Jesus’ baptism by John as a key aspect of the incarnational narrative. In *Ephesians* 18.2, Jesus was baptized “so that by his suffering he might purify

the water.” This is likely an allusion to Mark 10:38–39 (cf. Luke 12:50) wherein Jesus compares his baptism and the “cup” of wrath to self-sacrifice.⁶³ In *Smyrnaeans* 1.1, Ignatius adds that Jesus was baptized by John, “that all righteousness might be fulfilled by him,” an allusion to Matthew 3:15. It is possible that Ignatius is showing how Christ’s baptism was a prefigure of his sufferings. Like his disciples who would later be baptized as a sign of being dead to sin and brought back to life in Jesus (Rom 6:4), he was modeling this through his own baptism and fulfilled in his suffering on the cross. It is too this suffering we will now turn.

Suffering and Death

Against heretical teaching promulgated by groups such as the Docetists, Ignatius believes that true Christianity holds to the real, physical suffering of Jesus. After giving the incarnational narrative in *Trallians* 9.1–2, Ignatius addresses false teachings which claim that Jesus suffered “in appearance only.” Ignatius refers to those who hold to this view as “atheists” and “unbelievers” signifying these are not true members of the Christian faith. He makes a claim similar to that of Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:12–17 who rebukes those who do not affirm the resurrection. Like Paul who says if there is no resurrection then there is no point to the Christian faith, Ignatius claims that if Christ did not truly suffer in the flesh, then his persecution is of no cause and he dies for nothing.

Ignatius affirms his position in *Smyrnaeans* 2.1 claiming that Christ truly suffered in the flesh so that we might be saved. He then turns this heretical teaching back on those who hold to it claiming, “And just as they think, so also will it happen to them, being bodiless and ghost-like.” Rick Brannan comments, “Ignatius here, in his arguing against Docetism, puts the outcome of the Docetists back on themselves. As the Docetists believe in separation of body and spirit, Ignatius assents and agrees with them that in their eternal torment, apart from the glory of Christ, they will be bodiless and ghost-like.”⁶⁴ For Ignatius, to be Christian was to maintain orthodox Christology regarding Jesus physical suffering. The consequences of not affirming the physical suffering of Jesus meant facing eternal judgment.

The physical suffering Jesus faced, recorded by Ignatius, was crucifixion, being nailed to a tree, and ultimately, death.⁶⁵ He was sent to the cross under the order of Pontius Pilate as stated in Scripture (Matt 27:11–26;

Mark 15:1–15; Luke 23:1–25; John 18:28–19:16). Pilate being mentioned in the incarnational narrative does not only appear in the gospel accounts but also throughout the early church in the NT. Paul makes mention of Pilate's role in the crucifixion in 1 Timothy 6:13. He also professed this to Jews and Gentiles at an Antiochene synagogue in Acts 13:28. The apostle Peter likewise made mention of Pilate in the incarnational narrative (Acts 3:13; 4:27). In Acts 4:27, Peter mentions both Pilate and Herod responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. The only other account in which Herod is included is mentioned associated with the crucifixion is in Luke's gospel. Ignatius likely would have been familiar with the crucifixion account of Luke–Acts because of his mention of Herod the tetrarch in tandem with Pontius Pilate in *Smyrnaeans* 1.2.

In agreement with Scripture, Ignatius believed Jesus suffered and died for our sins.⁶⁶ Borrowing language from Paul, in *Romans* 6:1, Ignatius claimed that Jesus died on his behalf (Rom 5:8). Through faith in the death of Jesus, the believer's life will arise, and they will "escape death."⁶⁷ Jesus' death leading to the eternal life of the believer is a common theme throughout the NT. John 3:16 states that the Father sent the Son so that those who believe in him will not face death, but experience eternal life. Paul in 1 Corinthians 5:15–21 writes that Christ died so that those who believe in him would be reconciled to God through the forgiveness of their sins. For Ignatius, Christ's suffering and death cannot be divorced from the gospel and incarnational narrative of Jesus, nor can his resurrection.

Resurrection

The resurrection of Jesus was essential to the incarnational narrative of the early church as affirmed by Ignatius. Like his discussion on the suffering and death of Jesus, Ignatius makes it a point to affirm a real, physical resurrection. In *Smyrnaeans* 3:1, Ignatius uses a direct citation from Luke 24:39. He introduces his citation with the word, *ephē*. What follows is an address Jesus made to his disciples following his resurrection in which he tells them to "Take hold. Touch me and see that I am not a bodiless demon."⁶⁸ Jesus was making a point to the disciples that he had not only risen from the dead, but his bodily resurrection was real and physical. Ignatius in *Smyrnaeans* 3.3 goes on to affirm that the disciples ate and drank with the risen Jesus (Luke 24:43).

Following Luke's account of the resurrection, Jesus goes on to address his disciples claiming that all that he had done in his life was a fulfillment of that which had already been foretold by the Law, Prophets, and Psalms (Luke 24:44). Ignatius makes the same reference in his gospel presentation in *Philadelphiaians* 9.2. After affirming the suffering and resurrection of Jesus, Ignatius writes, "For the beloved prophets preached with reference to him, but the gospel is the consummation of immortality. All things together are good if you believe in love." According to Ignatius, the suffering and resurrection of Jesus was not something made up by Jesus or his followers after his death, but rather an essential component of the sovereign plan of God for human history, particularly those who believe in him.

Ascension

Following Jesus' resurrection, he assumed his rightful place seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven. In *Magnesians* 7.2, Jesus is described as coming from the one Father, was with the one, "and returned to the one" (John 1:18; 16:28). Svilgel notes that while Ignatius does not make explicit mention of Jesus' physical movement from earth to the Father in heaven, he asserts, "Ignatius could not speak in the way he did about the living Christ without presupposing his exalted position in heaven."⁶⁹ For instance, in *Ephesians* 5.1, Jesus is described as currently being united to the church and the Father. Ignatius explains how believers are united to Christ through their future resurrection.⁷⁰ This is not the first the church at Rome have heard about their being united to Christ through their resurrection. In Romans 6:6, the apostle Paul claims, "For if we have become united with him in the likeness of his death, we will certainly also be united in the likeness of his resurrection." This concept of unity with Christ implies that Christ not only resurrected himself, but is still alive and is physically residing outside of the earthly realm.⁷¹

Return

The final component of Ignatius' incarnational narrative is the return of Christ. According to Scripture, Jesus is coming back from heaven at the end of the age to resurrect the dead and execute his sovereign judgment on the earth (John 5:26–29). Ignatius alludes to this coming judgment in *Ephesians* 11.1 wherein he claims, "These are the last times."⁷² He refers to

humanity's time leading up to the coming judgment as God's extension of patience. However, there are only two options for humanity, to "fear coming wrath" or "love the present grace." Those who avoid coming wrath will face resurrection in and with Christ.

In *Trallians* 9.2, the Father is described as raising Jesus from the dead and in the last days will also raise those who believe from the dead. While the Father is the one mentioned to raise believers in the last day, this does not leave Jesus out of the equation. According to Ignatius, the Father and Son both participated in Jesus' resurrection.⁷³ Jesus is also described as doing nothing without the Father,⁷⁴ which includes his own resurrection. Given the teaching of Scripture and Ignatius' unity between the Father and the Son, it is the Son who will execute judgment in the future and raise believers from the dead to be united with him. The one true faith in Jesus is "the medicine of immortality, the antidote that we should not die but live in Jesus Christ forever."⁷⁵

CONCLUSION

For Ignatius, Scripture was the primary source for articulating his Christology. The way in which he employed the use of Scripture to articulate his Christology was through direct citations, allusions, and imagery. Through these three forms of referencing Scripture, Ignatius articulated his Christology through discussing various names of Jesus, the unity of the Son in the Godhead, and the incarnational narrative.

Christology in the early church was not something that developed but rather was articulated by a careful interpretation of Scripture as God's authoritative revelation. As seen through his seven letters, Ignatius of Antioch's Christology was impressively articulate for the early second century. The reason being, given his placement within a Christian reading culture, he was not only familiar with both the OT and the NT but was heavily dependent on Scripture as his source of authority in articulating and formulating his Christology.

¹ There is a general consensus concerning the dating of the Ignatian letters between the years 98 – 117 AD which is during the reign of Emperor Trajan. For more on the dating of Ignatius' letters see, Michael J. Svigel, *The Center and the Source: Second Century Incarnational Christology and Early Catholic Christianity*, Gorgias Dissertations 66 (Gorgias Press LLC, 2016), 50 – 52.

² Quotations from Ignatius' seven letters are sourced from Rick Brannan, trans., *The Apostolic Fathers: A New Translation* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2017).

³ See Stanley E. Porter, "Allusions and Echoes," in *As It Is Written: Studying Paul's Use of Scripture*, Symposium Serie 50 (Society of Biblical Literature, 2008). Porter distinguishes between an echo and an allusion with an allusion being a reference to a particular text without using direct citation. The way Porter describes an echo is similar to how imagery is used in this paper, referring to particular pictorial themes mentioned in Scripture.

⁴ Contributors to *The New Testament in the Apostolic Fathers* volume have done prominent work in this field having cataloged various potential references to Scripture throughout the writings of Apostolic Fathers. They categorize each possible reference to Scripture in four classes: A, B, C, and D. Class A represents a reference that is beyond a reasonable doubt sourced directly from Scripture. Class B are references with high degrees of probability that a particular Scripture is referenced. Class C is a lower degree of probability and Class D show possibility but it there is too much uncertainty to allow any reliance. See J. Vernon Bartlet et al., *The New Testament in the Apostolic Fathers* (Clarendon Press, 1905), iii.

⁵ William R. Schoedel holds to the opinion that Ignatius "reflects scant interest in the Hebrew Scriptures." This is likely because Ignatius was only known to cite three Scriptures verbatim after being introduced with the phrase, "it is written." Schoedel admits that other allusions to Scripture can be found in Ignatius' writings, but he primarily relied on secondary sources and oral material. William R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch*, ed. Helmut Koester, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Fortress Press, 1985), 9.

⁶ Unless otherwise noted all Bible quotations come from the NET 2nd ed.

⁷ For a discussion on the nature of the Greco-Roman world existing as a reading culture and early Christianities place within their own reading culture centered around Old and New Testament texts, see Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (Yale University Press, 1995).

⁸ *Phld.* 8.2.

⁹ *Phld.* 8.2.

¹⁰ Paul J. Donahue, "Jewish Christianity in the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch," *Vigiliae Christianae* 32, no. 2 (1978), 86.

¹¹ See James Carleton Paget, "The Old Testament in the Apostolic Fathers," in *Studies on the Text of the New Testament and Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Michael W. Holmes on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. Juan Hernandez Jr. et al., New Testament Tools, Studies and Documents (Brill, 2015), 50:457 – 58. Paget links authority to prophets in *Magnesians*. 8.2; 9.2; *Philadelphians* 5.2; 9.1, 2; *Smyrnaeans*. 5.2; 7.2 and the Law of Moses in *Smyrnaeans* 5.2.

¹² See Jonathon Lookadoo, "Ignatius of Antioch and Scripture," *Zeitschrift Für Antikes Christentum / Journal of Ancient Christianity* 23, no. 2 (2019): 207.

¹³ Paget, "The Old Testament in the Apostolic Fathers," 459.

¹⁴ Jonathon Lookadoo, *The High Priest and the Temple: Metaphorical Depictions of Jesus in the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament 473 (Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 64.

¹⁵ While Ignatius utilizes direct citation of Scripture far less than allegory and imagery, this does not denigrate the fact that he knew Scripture and had it in mind as a referent as he wrote his letters. Rather he was so embedded in a Christian reading culture that despite not having physical copies of texts, the words of Scripture still flowed through his writings because he had taken the Scripture he had heard and read to memory and let the words of Scripture transform his worldview and speech. See Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church*, 10 – 41.

¹⁶ Lookadoo, "Ignatius of Antioch and Scripture," 211.

¹⁷ See Clayton N. Jefford, "Authority and Perspective in the Didache," in *The Didache: A Missing Piece of the Puzzle in Early Christianity*, ed. Jonathan A. Draper and Clayton N. Jefford, Early Christianity and Its Literature 14 (SBL Press, 2015), 52 – 55. Jefford lists cross references between the *Didache* and Scripture to show how the author the *Didache* was likely utilizing Scripture as his source material.

¹⁸ Paul Foster, *Colossians* (Black's New Testament Commentaries; London: T&T Clark Bloomsbury, 2016), 52 – 60 cited in Lookadoo, "Ignatius and Scripture," 210.

¹⁹ Lookadoo, "Ignatius and Scripture," 213.

²⁰ Olavi Tarvainen, *Faith and Love in Ignatius of Antioch* (trans. Jonathon Lookadoo; Pickwick Publications, 2016), 31.

²¹ William Ralph Inge, “Ignatius,” in *The New Testament in the Apostolic Fathers*, by J. Vernon Bartlet et al. (Clarendon Press, 1905), 67.

²² Tarvainen, *Faith and Love*, 25–26.

²³ *Phild.* 2.1–2. See Tarvainen, *30.

²⁴ See Lookadoo, *The High Priest and the Temple*, 7.

²⁵ *Phild.* 9.1, emphasis original.

²⁶ *Phild.* 9.1.

²⁷ *Letter of Barnabas*, 6.10. See Brannan, *The Apostolic Fathers*.

²⁸ See Lookadoo, *The High Priest and the Temple*, 74.

²⁹ For more comparative analysis of *Philadelphians* 9.1 and the book of Hebrews, see Lookadoo, *The High Priest and the Temple*, 74–77.

³⁰ *Phild.* 9.1.

³¹ Robert M. Grant, *The Apostolic Fathers: A New Translation and Commentary: Ignatius of Antioch* (Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1964), 4, 107.

³² Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch*, 210.

³³ See note 20 in Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch*, 210.

³⁴ See Lookadoo, *The High Priest and the Temple*, 87.

³⁵ Lookadoo, *The High Priest and the Temple*, 90.

³⁶ For more discussion on whether Ignatius was dependent on Johannine literature when writing his letters, see Inge, “Ignatius,” 81–83 and note 118 in Lookadoo, *The High Priest and the Temple*, 91.

³⁷ *Eph.* 1.1; *Magn.*, Sal.; *Phild.* 9.2; *Smyrn.* 7.1.

³⁸ Robert M. Grant also sees allusions to Pauline salutations, commenting, The expression “Christ Jesus our Savior” (*Eph.* 1.1; cf. *Smyrn.* 7.1) is fairly common in Paul’s epistle to Titus 1:4; 2:13; 3:6 (cf. 2 Tim. 1:10). Grant, *The Apostolic Fathers: Ignatius of Antioch*, 57.

³⁹ Schoedel does not see any evidence of low-Christology here in *Philadelphians* 9.2. He states, “The title “savior,” to be sure, is rare in Ignatius. But when it does occur, it does not stand opposed to any devaluation of Christ’s high dignity (*Eph.* 1.1; *Mag.* inscr.). On the contrary it once appears in an anti-docetic context (*Sm.* 7.1).” Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch*, 211.

⁴⁰ See Grant, *The Apostolic Fathers: Ignatius of Antioch*, 120.

⁴¹ See Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch*, 240.

⁴² See Grant, *The Apostolic Fathers: Ignatius of Antioch*, 31.

⁴³ These are just but a few of the names of Jesus mentioned in the letters of Ignatius which find their basis in Scripture. Other names found throughout his writings include: Christ (*Eph.* 2:1), Physician (*Eph.* 7.2), Teacher (*Eph.* 15.1), Lord (*Phild.* 1.1), and Shepherd (*Phild.* 2.1).

⁴⁴ While much scholarship has tried to blur the lines between “orthodox Christianity” and “lost Christianity,” it is obvious these lines were not blurred for Ignatius. He considered clear boundaries between what a Christian was and was not primarily based on their Christology. Those who denied the humanity of Christ, such as the Docetists, were not Christian in the eyes of Ignatius. Some have considered this to be a pitfall of Ignatius, showing him to be intolerant of varying viewpoints within Christianity. For Walter Bauer, Ignatius was likely in the minority because speaking with authority like a dictator making demands and is viewed as being frantically concerned of losing power. See Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, ed. Gerhard Krodel, trans. Robert A. Kraft (Fortress Press, 1971), 62–63. For Judith Lieu, terminology such as “orthodoxy” in conversations regarding the early church is anachronistic and we ought to avoid imposing our modern conceptions of orthodoxy back into the first and second centuries. See Judith Lieu, *Neither Jew Nor Greek?: Constructing Early Christianity*, 2nd ed., Cornerstones (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 147. However, other scholars have shown that there was a unifying factor of orthodoxy in early Christianity and that “unifying factor among ‘catholic’ Christians was *faithfulness to the incarnational narrative* in which the one Creator God sent His divine Son/Logos to become incarnate as a fleshly human being, who died for the sins of humanity, rose bodily from the dead, and ascended bodily to heaven.” Svigel, *The Center and the Source*, 20.

⁴⁵ *Tral.* 6.1. The word *hairesis* is used on numerous occasions throughout the NT to describe sects of Judaism (Acts 5:17; 15:5; 26:5), Christianity in the eyes of Judaism (Acts 24:14), and teachings that caused division in the early church (1 Cor 11:19; Gal 5:20; 2 Pet 2:1).

⁴⁶ For a discussion on the textual variant of whether *Ephesians* 7.2 should be read as *en anthrōpō theos* or *en sarki genomenos theos*, see note 19 in Svigel, *The Center and the Source*, 72–73.

⁴⁷ *Eph.* 15.3

⁴⁸ *Eph.*, *Sal.*; 18.2.

⁴⁹ Lookadoo, *The High Priest and the Temple*, 204–205.

⁵⁰ *Ephesians* 20.2; *Smyrnæans* 1.1.

⁵¹ Grant, *The Apostolic Fathers: Ignatius of Antioch*, 4, 62.

⁵² Grant, *The Apostolic Fathers: Ignatius of Antioch*, 99.

⁵³ For a discussion on temple and crane imagery in *Philadelphians* 9.1, see Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch*, 65–67.

⁵⁴ See Grant, *The Apostolic Fathers: Ignatius of Antioch*, 41.

⁵⁵ By “incarnational narrative” I am referring to the narrative arch told in Scripture of the divine Son of God who pre-existed, was born, lived, suffered, died, resurrected, ascended, and is coming back again.

⁵⁶ Svigel, *The Center and the Source*, 30.

⁵⁷ *Eph.* 15.1. C.f. *Ps* 33:9.

⁵⁸ See note 48. Jesus being said to come forth from silence is not a Gnostic reference, but rather a Scriptural one from John 1:18 wherein Jesus is described as revealing the Father, whom no one has seen.

⁵⁹ Svigel, *The Center and the Source*, 102.

⁶⁰ *Eph.* 18.2; 20.2; *Tral.* 9.1; *Rom.* 7.3; *Smyrn.* 9.1

⁶¹ *Eph.* 7.2; 18.2; 19.1; *Tral.* 9.1; *Smyrn.* 1.1

⁶² C.f. *Eph.* 7.2; 18.2; *Magn.* 11.1; *Trall.* 9.1; *Smyrn.* 4.2. See Svigel, *The Center and the Source*, 166–67.

⁶³ According to Grant, “Ignatius could have been aware that baptism was related to suffering if he considered the saying in Mark 10:38–39, in which both “cup” and “baptism” are used in reference to the self-sacrifice, first of Christ and second of his disciples. Just as the Christian dies with Christ in baptism (*Rom.* 6:3–11; *Col.* 3:3), so Christ’s sufferings were prefigured in his own baptism.” Grant, *The Apostolic Fathers: Ignatius of Antioch*, 49.

⁶⁴ See note 2 in Brannan, *The Apostolic Fathers, Smyrn.* 2.1.

⁶⁵ *Smyrn.* 1.2.

⁶⁶ *Smyrn.* 7.1.

⁶⁷ *Tral.* 2.1, c.f. *Magn.* 9.1.

⁶⁸ Compare *Smyrn.* 3.1 Λάβετε, ψηλαφήσατέ με καὶ ίδετε, δτι οὐκ εἰμὶ δαιμόνιον ἀσώματον, with Luke 24:39, ψηλαφήσατέ με καὶ ίδετε, δτι πνεύμα σάρκα καὶ όστέα οὐκ ἔχει καθώς ἐμὲ θεωρεῖτε ἔχοντα. Ignatius uses the same phrase, “Touch me and see” followed by similar implications that when the disciples touch Jesus, they will realize he has risen in the physical flesh.

⁶⁹ Svigel, *The Center and the Source*, 168.

⁷⁰ *Rom.* 4.3.

⁷¹ There are other rolls Jesus currently plays in his place in heaven. Svigel writes, As the exalted Lord, Jesus is the object of faith, hope, love, prayer and worship (C.f. *Eph.* 2.2; 4.2; 14.1; 20.1; 21.2; *Magn.* 11.1; *Rom.* insc.; *Phld.* 11.2; *Smyrn.* 1.1). And as savior, teacher, and shepherd, he is the present means of salvation and source of life (C.f. *Eph.* 3.2; 9.1–2; 11.1; 20.2; *Magn.* insc.; 1.2; 5.2; 9.1–2; *Trall.* 1.1; 6.1; *Rom.* 8.2; 9.1; *Phld.* insc.; *Smyrn.* 4.2; 8.2; 9.2; *Pol.* insc.; 3.2.). Svigel, *The Center and the Source*, 168.

⁷² C.f. 1 Cor 7:29; 1 John 2.18.

⁷³ In *Smyrn.* 2.1, Jesus is described as raising himself from the dead. In *Tral.* 9.2, the Father raised Jesus from the dead. This is not a contradiction, but rather an affirmation of unity between the Father and the Son (c.f. *Magn.* 7.1)

⁷⁴ *Magn.* 7.1.

⁷⁵ *Eph.* 20.2.