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THE DOCTRINE OF GOD AND EXEGESIS  
IN IRENAEUS OF LYONS

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Faculty of  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

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by  
Perry Glenn Garrett  
May 2026

**APPROVAL SHEET**

THE DOCTRINE OF GOD AND EXEGESIS  
IN IRENAEUS OF LYONS

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For Tanna, *dilectus meus*.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....	vii
PREFACE.....	x
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Thesis.....	4
Argument.....	7
Survey of Literature.....	10
Significance.....	19
Biography of Irenaeus of Lyons.....	21
Writings.....	27
Irenaeus’s Polemical Context: Gnosticism.....	29
Irenaeus and Canon.....	35
Conclusion.....	42
2. IRENAEUS’S PRESENTATION OF THE DOCTRINE OF GOD AND EXEGESIS AMONG HIS OPPONENTS.....	44
Introduction.....	44
Irenaeus as a Source for Gnostic Theology.....	47
Heresiological Polemics and Identity-Shaping Discourse.....	48
Coherence and Dependability.....	49
The Doctrine of God among Irenaeus’s Gnostic Opponents.....	51
Divine Transcendence.....	51
Divine Complexity.....	56

Chapter	Page
Exegesis among Irenaeus’s Gnostic Opponents .....	61
A Shared Canon? .....	62
Exegetical Foundations.....	64
Exegetical Principles .....	67
Conclusion .....	75
3. IRENAEUS’S DOCTRINE OF GOD.....	77
Introduction .....	77
The First Principle.....	78
Monotheism .....	80
God the Father.....	84
God the Creator .....	89
<i>Creatio Ex Nihilo</i> .....	90
Irenaeus’s Theology Proper .....	93
God Is Infinite.....	97
God Is Simple .....	113
Conclusion .....	125
4. THE INTERSECTION OF IRENAEUS’S DOCTRINE OF GOD AND EXEGESIS .....	127
Introduction .....	127
Harmony of Scripture.....	128
Irenaeus’s Methods for Interpreting Scripture .....	132
Recapitulation .....	134
Scripture Interprets Scripture.....	145
Exegesis and the <i>Regula</i> .....	151
The Church as Proper Exegetical Context .....	165
5. INSTANTIATING THE INTERSECTION OF IRENAEUS’S DOCTRINE OF GOD AND EXEGESIS .....	172

Chapter	Page
The Relationship between “Signs” and “Things” .....	172
τύπος and εἰκὼν .....	175
θεὸς and Κύριος.....	182
The Inspiration of Scripture .....	195
Prosopological Exegesis .....	198
Definition of Prosopological Exegesis .....	198
Scholarly Treatments .....	201
Prosopological Exegesis in Irenaeus .....	204
Conclusion .....	213
6. CONCLUSION .....	216
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	228

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
<i>ANF</i>	<i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i> . Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, A. Cleveland Coxe, and Allan Menzies. 9 vols. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1885–1897
<i>1 Apol.</i>	Justin Martyr, <i>First Apology</i>
<i>2 Apol.</i>	Justin Martyr, <i>Second Apology</i>
<i>Autol.</i>	Theophilus, <i>To Autolytus</i>
Barnard	Justin Martyr. <i>The First and Second Apologies</i> . Translated by L. W. Barnard. Ancient Christian Writers 56. New York: Paulist, 1997
BDAG	Danker, Frederick William, Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilber Gingrich, <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000 (Danker-Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich)
Behr	Irenaeus of Lyons. <i>On the Apostolic Preaching</i> . Translated by John Behr. Popular Patristics 17. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997
1 Clem.	1 Clement
<i>Comm. Isa.</i>	Jerome, <i>Commentariorum in Isaiam libri XVIII</i>
<i>Dial.</i>	Justin Martyr, <i>Dialogue with Trypho</i>
<i>Did.</i>	Alcinous, <i>Didaskalikos</i>
<i>Doctr. chr.</i>	Augustine, <i>De Doctrina Christiana (On Christian Teaching)</i>
<i>Epid.</i>	Irenaeus of Lyons, <i>Epideixis (Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching)</i>
Falls	Justin Martyr. <i>Dialogue with Trypho</i> . Edited by Michael Slusser and Thomas P. Halton. Translated by Thomas B. Falls. Selections from the Fathers of the Church 3. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003
<i>Frag. 24</i>	Xenophanes, <i>Fragment 24</i>
Gos. Truth	Gospel of Truth

<i>Haer.</i>	Irenaeus of Lyons, <i>Adversus haereses (Against Heresies)</i>
Herm. Mand.	Shepherd of Hermas, Mandate(s)
<i>Hist. eccl.</i>	Eusebius of Caesarea, <i>Historia ecclesiastica (History of the Church)</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JECS</i>	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
<i>Leg. 3</i>	Philo, <i>Legum Allegoriae III (Allegorical Interpretation 3)</i>
LSJ	Liddell, Henry George, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> . 9th ed. with revised supplement. Oxford: Clarendon, 1996
LXX	The Septuagint
<i>NPNF</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 2</i>
OrChrAn	Orientalia Christiana Analecta
<i>SBJT</i>	<i>Southern Baptist Journal of Theology</i>
SC	Sources chrétiennes. Paris: Cerf, 1943–
<i>Strom.</i>	Clement of Alexandria, <i>Stromateis (Miscellanies)</i>
SVC	Supplements to <i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
<i>Tim.</i>	Plato, <i>Timaeus</i>
Unger	Irenaeus of Lyons. <i>Adversus haereses (Against Heresies)</i> . Book 1, translated by Dominic J. Unger. Ancient Christian Writers 55. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1992; Book 2, translated by Dominic J. Unger and John J. Dillon. Ancient Christian Writers 64. New York: Paulist, 2012; Book 3, translated by Matthew C. Steenberg and Dominic J. Unger. Ancient Christian Writers 65. New York: Paulist, 2012; Books 4 and 5, translated by Dominic Unger and Scott Moringiello. Ancient Christian Writers 72. New York: Paulist, 2024
<i>Vir. ill.</i>	Jerome, <i>De viris illustribus (On Illustrious Men)</i>
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

*ZNW*

*Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der  
älteren Kirche*

## PREFACE

All feats are the consequence of many contributors. This work is no different. These contributors have not merely served as instruments for, and deposits toward, the completion of this dissertation but have served as instruments in the hands of the Potter who has effectually shaped me throughout the process of writing, on occasion through dark nights of the soul, with great care and patience.

First, I want to recognize the unique contribution of friends and colleagues alongside of whom I have grown to value the process of “becoming” before the God who alone is “being.” While these friends are too numerous to name, those who made the transition to SBTS with Dr. Presley (and therefore have been sources for endurance in my research) are Jared Lee, Winston Hottman, Zachary Hedges, and Sam Crites. Additionally, Leland Brown was a welcomed help for encouragement during preparation for comprehensive exams. Finally, Ben Robin and John Sarver were engaging interlocutors, who provided gracious and stimulating perspectives that challenged me throughout the program.

Second, the welcome SBTS offered to me and a few others after having begun a PhD at another institution has made this journey sweeter. Moreover, the academic and spiritual rigor required throughout the process has summoned me to new heights of scholarly engagement and intellectual humility.

Third, I owe far more than can be expressed to Dr. Stephen Presley, my *Doktorvater*. His support and indefatigable exhortations to plod have nudged me to the finish line. The words of Steven Pressfield are indelibly imprinted on my soul as a result of admonitions from Dr. Presley: “There’s a secret that real writers know that wannabe writers don’t, and the secret is this: It’s not the writing part that’s hard. What’s hard is

sitting down to write. What keeps us from sitting down is Resistance.” Dr. Presley delivered the hard truth, week after week and month after month, that my success in research and writing depended on my tenacity to overcome the enemy of Resistance.

Fourth, I would be remiss if I did not mention my church family. The commitment of First Baptist Church Powell to my research and efforts have proven to be as great as my own. Their investment and trust in me are humbling, and I cannot think of a group of people for whom I would rather give an account before the Chief Shepherd (Heb 13:17).

Fifth, I am appreciative of the willingness of Dr. Michael Haykin and Dr. Kyle Claunch to serve on my committee. The opportunity to benefit from their feedback is one of the many privileges of this process.

Sixth, the following work would not be near what it became without the fastidious attention to detail provided by Cheyenne Haste. Cheyenne’s command of the language, technical precision, and creativity were indispensable characteristics of an editor. However, I alone remain responsible for any remaining errors.

Most of all, I am forever grateful and unworthy of the love and longsuffering my wife, Tanna, and our children, Madeline, Titus, and Micah, have unrelentingly offered me throughout this process. There are no vocations in the world for which I am more grateful than to be Tanna’s husband and Madeline’s, Titus’s, and Micah’s father. Without them, this dissertation would not have been possible.

Finally, I am reminded of the benefit I have had of scholarship as a pastor. Since the field of my research has been a second-century pastor who sought to nurture his flock in Southern Gaul with the Word of God as interpreted properly through the *regula veritatis*, I have been able to reflect at every juncture upon the import my scholarship has for pastoral ministry. As a result, this work is not merely a contribution to the theoretical or merely academic. Additionally, I do not seek merely to investigate Irenaeus of Lyons, I also seek to imitate his faith (Heb 13:7). It is a curious happening to spend an inordinate

amount of time in focused research and reflection on an ancient figure. At the risk of being misunderstood as overly hagiographical, in the words of 1 Peter 1:8, though I have not seen or met Irenaeus, I have grown to love him.

Dr. D. Jeffrey Bingham, one of my mentors through the years, once exhorted a group of students not to seek the conclusion of a PhD program as an arrival as much as an avenue through which to continue providing Christian scholarship. In that light, it may be fitting to conclude with the words of Winston Churchill as an ambition: “This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end, but it may be the end of the beginning.”

Perry G. Garrett

Powell, Tennessee

May 2026

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Modern scholars have not always offered patristic exegesis a welcomed reception. For example, R. P. C. Hanson famously described the exegetical debate between Athanasius and his Arian opponents unbecomingly in the following words: “We gain an impression sometimes of ignorant armies clashing by night, of two blind fold men trying to hit each other.”<sup>1</sup> For Hanson and those who followed his assessment, early Christian exegesis “was a direct and unselfconscious continuation of the type of exegesis practised by ancient Judaism in its later period.”<sup>2</sup> In some respects, my work demonstrates that early Christian exegesis generally, and Irenaeus particularly, is anything but unselfconscious or unreflective.

In contrast to Hanson’s assessment, the repudiation of patristic exegesis appears to be waning and an appreciation for the contribution of the fathers is increasing. While examples abound and defy sufficient and brief mention, I provide a brief sketch below of the attempts at retrieval, which are rooted in an appreciation for the contributions of the fathers.

Rowan Greer insightfully identified the following three approaches to patristic exegesis<sup>3</sup>: (1) Describing “how the text of Scripture is assimilated by the theology of the

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<sup>1</sup> R. P. C. Hanson, “Biblical Exegesis in the Early Church,” in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 440.

<sup>2</sup> Hanson, “Biblical Exegesis in Early Church,” 412.

<sup>3</sup> Rowan A. Greer, *The Captain of Our Salvation: A Study in the Patristic Exegesis of Hebrews*, vol. 15, *Beiträge Zur Geschichte Der Biblischen Exegese* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1973), 1–6.

early Church.”<sup>4</sup> This approach generally assesses the exegesis of the fathers as eisegetical in nature. (2) There are those who opt for a more descriptive approach. (3) The third approach centers on exegetical method. Greer contends at the outset of his work that “theological principles largely explain exegetical results in the patristic period.”<sup>5</sup> Although Greer is accurate to find a direct connection between the theology of the fathers and the exegetical results of their work, my interest includes investigating the sophistication and interrelationship between theology and exegesis as inseparably connected. Theological principles indeed help to explain exegetical results. However, those theological principles undergird the text of Scripture according to Irenaeus and should therefore govern exegesis of Scripture. Additionally, Irenaeus’s doctrine of God does not permit him to play fast and loose with the text of Scripture. Rather, he demonstrates a fastidious scrutiny in his exegesis that is motivated by a proper reading of Scripture chaperoned by a proper knowledge of God.

In many respects, Irenaeus was not unique. In fact, Irenaeus perceived theological or exegetical innovation as a vice rather than a virtue—as a departure from the Great Tradition rather than progress. His was the calling of preservation and continuation of what his predecessors had traditioned to him. Rooted fundamentally in the concept of *fides quae creditur*,<sup>6</sup> Irenaeus sought to “defend the faith once and for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).<sup>7</sup> His opponents were the innovators—the newcomers—who sought to alter or “improve” what Christ had delivered through the apostles to the church. Although Irenaeus’s approach may exercise modern sensibilities obsessed with

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<sup>4</sup> Greer, *Captain of Our Salvation*, 4–5.

<sup>5</sup> Greer, *Captain of Our Salvation*, 4–5.

<sup>6</sup> *Fides quae creditur*, or “the faith that is believed,” is often juxtaposed with *fides qua creditur*, or “the faith by which it is believed,” the former accenting the content of the Christian faith and the latter accenting the subjective response to that content.

<sup>7</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Translation (ESV).

progress and change, triggering assessments of primitivism and even indolence, the reality that is Christianity animated him. Irenaeus and his opponents believed in two distinct and antithetical realities blossoming out of the metaphysical foundation of two distinct sets of first principles. As a result, although Irenaeus and his opponents often interpreted the same sacred texts, used similar language, and at times employed identical interpretive methods, they were aeons apart! Michael Legaspi has opined on a different but related issue, “I believe that the scriptural Bible and the academic Bible are fundamentally different creations oriented toward rival interpretive communities.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, I argue that, although Irenaeus and his opponents were interpreting the same texts, the Christian Bible and the gnostic Bible were fundamentally different creations oriented toward rival interpretive communities governed by fundamentally different theological metaphysics.

Frances Young has rightly recognized that for Irenaeus, “There has to be some overarching sense of what the scriptures are about, some framework which allows the interpreter to fit the pieces of mosaic together in the appropriate way.”<sup>9</sup> I argue that the exegetical framework that governs exegetical practice is a doctrine of God.

In his apt proposal for “ecclesial biblical theology,” Stephen Presley laments the “methodological diversity in biblical interpretation” today that “raises serious questions about the possibility of any unified readings of Scripture.”<sup>10</sup> Presley contends that the “next step is not to organize more seminars and debate distinctions; instead, we need to think about assumptions, to look beneath the diverse methodological symptoms and diagnose the underlying causes. When we do this, when we ask about assumptions,

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<sup>8</sup> Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 169.

<sup>9</sup> Frances M. Young, *The Art of Performance: Towards a Theology of Holy Scripture* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990), 47.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen O. Presley, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Early Church: Recovering an Ancient Vision* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2025), 6.

we move the conversation into a different realm, the realm of metaphysics.”<sup>11</sup> Presley goes on to observe, “What we believe about God influences the way we read Scripture.”<sup>12</sup> Put another way, “The theologian is exegete; the exegete is theologian.”<sup>13</sup> In fact, what we believe about God is substantial, even primary, to the exegetical task. This leads to the thesis of the present work.

### **Thesis**

In his engagement with his opponents, Irenaeus contended that the fundamental distinction between a Christian interpretation of Scripture and the interpretations propounded by his opponents germinated in the theological beliefs that governed interpretation. I argue that a Christian doctrine of God was the foundation for sound biblical interpretation. This is contrasted in Irenaeus’s polemic against a gnostic understanding of God, which guides gnostic exegesis of biblical texts reinforcing a gnostic *regula*. I demonstrate that Irenaeus’s foundational belief in only one God the Father who created all things *ex nihilo* and who is infinite and simple undergirded Irenaeus’s commitment to the unity of Scripture and chaperoned his exegesis of Scripture. There are several ways Irenaeus’s theological metaphysic and exegesis intersect, each of which bear testimony to this relationship between Irenaeus’s understanding of God and biblical exegesis. Recapitulation, Irenaeus’s methodological commitment to Scripture interpreting Scripture, the prevalence of Irenaeus’s use of the *regula* in his exegesis, the relationship between biblical signs and the reference to which the signs point, and Irenaeus’s practice of prosopological exegesis all demonstrate convincingly that the point of departure for Christian exegesis is a Christian

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<sup>11</sup> Presley, *Biblical Theology in Life of Early Church*, 18.

<sup>12</sup> Presley, *Biblical Theology in Life of Early Church*, 18.

<sup>13</sup> Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 282.

understanding of God. In the example of Irenaeus, a theological metaphysic governs the interpreter's understanding of Scripture (bibliology), the employment of exegetical methods, and the resulting exegetical conclusions. As a result, Irenaeus was not as concerned with the exegetical methods of his opponents as he was with the theological beliefs guiding those methods. In fact, criticism of his opponents' exegetical methodology is almost entirely lacking in Irenaeus's extant corpus. Moreover, given that his *magnum opus* includes sustained biblical exegesis alongside extensive criticism of the exegetical work of his opponents, this lacuna is revealing.

Some have argued that Irenaeus was a hopelessly inept theologian.<sup>14</sup> However, I maintain that he exuded a thoughtful and coherent understanding of God. Additionally, contrary to the common reductionistic construal of Irenaeus as a theologian whose interest was exclusively in the divine economy, Irenaeus is best understood as a theologian concerned with theological metaphysics (or doctrine of God) whose understanding of God provided the framework for accurate exegesis.

The relationship between Irenaeus's doctrine of God and his exegesis appears most conspicuously in his polemical work *The Refutation and Overthrowal of Knowledge Falsely So-Called*, often referred to by its Latin title, *Adversus haereses*.<sup>15</sup> In this work, Irenaeus confronted the gnostics who vied for validation and supremacy among early so-called "Christian" groups in the second century. Additional insights surface in his concise catechetical work, *The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching (Epid.)*.<sup>16</sup> In *Haer.* and

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<sup>14</sup> For example, Hans Wendt criticized Irenaeus on this account in H. H. Wendt, *Die Christliche Lehre von Der Menschlichen Vollkommenheit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1882).

<sup>15</sup> Most often, this work is referred to as *Adversus haereses* or *Against the Heresies*, the title Eusebius uses to refer to the work (*Hist. eccl.* 2.13.5; 3.18.2; 3.23.3; 3.28.6).

<sup>16</sup> Donovan's guide remains invaluable; see Mary Ann Donovan, *One Right Reading?* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1997). Additionally, John Behr has produced a concise and helpful summary of themes in *Haer.*; see John Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity*, Christian Theology in Context (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), chaps 2 and 3.

*Epid.*, key hermeneutical and theological distinctions between this early Christian bishop and his heretical opponents surface.

Irenaeus's doctrine of God helped to comprise the beautiful mosaic of the King contained in the Scripture properly arranged.<sup>17</sup> In his polemic against the gnostics, Irenaeus did not aim at gnostic interpretations of obscure biblical texts nor did he focus his argument against common, gnostic exegetical methods such as alphanumeric interpretation.<sup>18</sup> According to Irenaeus, the methods were appropriate when chaperoned by the correct doctrine of God. As he states, "The numbers themselves and all created things must be harmonized with the existing system of truth. For a rule does not come from numbers, but numbers from a rule; neither does God [come] from created things, but created things come from God."<sup>19</sup> Stated another way, a sound doctrine of God (part and parcel with "the existing system of truth") provides the necessary foundation and framework for proper biblical interpretation.

By evaluating the relationship between the doctrine of God and exegesis in Irenaeus, this study contributes to an ongoing dialogue regarding the relationship between theology and biblical exegesis. Moreover, the church faces the ever present need to receive and interpret God's word. This study incorporates Irenaeus as a voice in the present discussion regarding ecclesial renewal through exegetical and theological engagement.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See *Haer.* 1.8.1.

<sup>18</sup> Some have argued that Irenaeus avoided some exegetical methods due to his polemical context. For example, Presley posits that Irenaeus's scant use of prosopological exegesis, a common exegetical method among early Christian interpreters, may be due to his battle against the gnostics who employed such methods to substantiate their heretical theology. Stephen O. Presley, "Irenaeus and the Exegetical Roots of Trinitarian Theology," in *Irenaeus: Life, Scripture, Legacy*, ed. Paul Foster and Sara Parvis (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 165–72. Consistent with the thesis of this study, Presley contends that Irenaeus recognized that employing certain methods required theological assumptions.

<sup>19</sup> *Haer.* 2.25.1 (Unger, 82). Unless otherwise noted, all English translations are taken from Unger.

<sup>20</sup> Ecclesial renewal among Protestants has become a topic for much consideration. Several years ago, Daniel H. Williams made a proposal for renewal, which included among other things, a return to

## Argument

To substantiate that a Christian doctrine of God, according to Irenaeus, provided the fundamental framework governing Christian exegesis, I summarize in this chapter the three streams of scholarship germane to my thesis. These three streams include scholarship focused on Irenaeus the theologian, the growing interest and recovery of premodern exegesis, and the relationship between theology and exegesis. Additionally, I provide a biographical sketch of the life and ministry of Irenaeus alongside an introduction to his works, both extant and nonextant. Situating the thesis of my work within the life of Irenaeus guards against reductionistic models of Irenaeus merely as a heresiologist. There was far more to Irenaeus than his polemical context. However, his polemical engagement with aberrant movements was one of the framing influences of his ministry. For this reason, I include a summary engagement with Gnosticism, scholarly treatments of Gnosticism, and Irenaeus's own understanding of this polymorphic aberration that proves defiant to broad stroke summaries.

In chapter 2, I summarize and evaluate Irenaeus's presentation of his gnostic opponents, specifically their doctrine of God and exegesis. I propose that while Irenaeus's opponents revered some of the same sacred texts as did Irenaeus, they granted revelatory pride of place to their doctrine of God and accompanying protological construct revealed through esoteric teaching. The gnostics rejected the fundamental theological metaphysic undergirding Scripture in favor of adopting a rival doctrine of God. Consequently, the gnostics imported their doctrine of God into the biblical text rather than embracing the theological metaphysic of the biblical text.

In *Haer.* 1.1–8, Irenaeus provides an extensive summary of gnostic protology, including their attempt to vindicate their system by an appeal to Scripture. Irenaeus's theological concerns with the gnostics do not remain at the level of the doctrine of God

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the early church. Daniel H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1999).

but instantiate at the level of exegesis. Irenaeus’s treatment of various examples of gnostic exegesis is insightful in *Haer.* 2.20–28. According to Irenaeus, clear passages of Scripture should aid the interpreter with less clear passages such as parables and alphanumeric details.<sup>21</sup> This posture is contrary to his opponents who “interpreted” Scripture from “nonscriptural works” (ἐξ ἀγράφων ἀναγινῶσκοντες).<sup>22</sup>

As indicated above, I observe that Irenaeus and his opponents interpreted many of the same sacred texts. This is not to discount the plethora of gnostic texts that appeared in the second century, some of which Irenaeus was doubtless aware.<sup>23</sup> However, the difference between Irenaeus and his opponents was not fundamentally at the level of canon and the texts they recognized as authoritative, but in the arrangement of the concepts, names, and ideas expressed in those texts under a governing system of a doctrine of God. The gnostics ostensibly revered the same Scriptures but approached those Scriptures with a theological metaphysic foreign to Scripture.<sup>24</sup>

In chapter 3, having summarized Irenaeus’s presentation of the doctrine of God and exegesis among the gnostics, I argue that Irenaeus demonstrated coherence as a theologian whose primary interest was not merely the divine economy but included a Christian theological metaphysic in response to the gnostics. Irenaeus contends that God is the first principle or foundation upon which all truth is predicated. Additionally, I show that the only true God is Father in relation to the Logos as Son. Although divine sonship is properly unique to the Logos, Irenaeus describes a filial sonship that becomes ours

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<sup>21</sup> *Haer.* 2.27; cf. 3.12.9.

<sup>22</sup> *Haer.* 1.8.1 (SC 264:112).

<sup>23</sup> For example, Irenaeus describes the Valentinians admitting Gospels in addition to the four received Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (*Haer.* 3.11.9).

<sup>24</sup> Elaine H. Pagels has worked extensively to demonstrate that the gnostics, an epithet with which she is not comfortable, revered many of the same texts but interpreted them differently than Irenaeus. Elaine H. Pagels, *The Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis: Heracleon’s Commentary on John*, SBL Monograph 17 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973); Pagels, “‘The Mystery of the Resurrection’: A Gnostic Reading of 1 Corinthians 15,” *JBL*, no. 2 (1974): 276–88; Pagels, *The Gnostic Paul: Gnostic Exegesis of the Pauline Letters* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

through the Son. I also demonstrate that Irenaeus's theological metaphysic included belief that the only true God and first principle of truth—the Father of the Logos—is the Creator of all things. Contrary to the gnostic conception of relational distance between God and creation, God the Father and Creator enjoys an immediate relationship with creation. He created, not through angelic intermediaries but through his own Word and Wisdom—the Son and the Spirit. Moreover, Irenaeus defends *creatio ex nihilo* as a part of a Christian doctrine of God. After all, *creatio ex nihilo* provides an instantiation of the ontological distinction between the Creator and creation.

Moreover, in chapter 3, I contend that Irenaeus's metaphysical awareness finds its center in divine infinitude and simplicity with their various theological corollaries. Irenaeus prizes the theological maxim that God contains all things and he alone is uncontained. The gnostics compromise this theological reality. Additionally, God is not composed of parts and therefore does not emit but is atemporal and immutable.

In chapter 4, I investigate the intersection of Irenaeus's doctrine of God and exegesis, demonstrating that Irenaeus's concern had less to do with exegetical method and more to do with a proper doctrine of God. I evaluate the centrality of Scripture's harmony as the place from which the Christian interpreter must begin. Irenaeus's doctrine of God produced a doctrine of Scripture that assumed coherence and harmony. If there is only one God who has spoken by means of the Scripture, Scripture's message from beginning to end is consistent when interpreted rightly. Additionally, I identify various exegetical methods prominent in Irenaeus, including recapitulation, interpreting Scripture with Scripture, and the rule of truth to better understand Irenaeus's hermeneutical approach. Irenaeus identifies and applies exegetical methods. However, those methods are governed by a theological metaphysic. As a result, Irenaeus's use of exegetical methods reveals his fundamental theological commitments.

In chapter 5, I identify two primary instantiations of the intersection between Irenaeus's doctrine of God and exegesis—(1) the relationship between “signs” and

“things,” and (2) prosopological exegesis. Regarding the former, the gnostic error becomes apparent as a theological departure from Christianity, resulting in erroneous exegetical conclusions which import foreign “things” into the “signs” of Scripture. The clearest example I provide is the use of the signs θεός and Κύριος. Irenaeus also embraces the exegetical method of prosopological exegesis, wielding it as an expression of his theological metaphysic. This distinguishes his exegesis from his opponents who were also inclined to this exegetical method. Both Irenaeus and the gnostics employ this interpretive tool. What distinguishes the two is not the presence of a method but different theological foundations or understandings of God. Irenaeus’s doctrine of God produces a clear demarcation between the way these instantiations materialize in the Christian interpreter of Scripture and the way they do so in the gnostic.

### Survey of Literature

Three related streams of scholarly literature are germane to this thesis. The first stream has focused on Irenaeus the polemical, theological, and pastoral figure. Until the discovery of the codices at Nag Hammadi in 1945, many believed that Irenaeus provided the most robust source for early gnostic beliefs and practices, his polemical context notwithstanding. For this reason, “at times his polemical significance has overshadowed his importance as a theologian,” according to Anthony Briggman.<sup>25</sup>

Lamentably, scholars spent years vilifying Irenaeus as a hopelessly inept theologian. The first notable scholar to criticize Irenaeus as an incoherent theologian was Hans Wendt in 1882.<sup>26</sup> In *Die christliche Lehre von der menschlichen Vollkommenheit (The Christian Doctrine of the Human Perfection)*, a work in which Wendt surveyed the developments of early Christian anthropology, including what he considers to be an

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<sup>25</sup> Anthony Briggman, *God and Christ in Irenaeus*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 1.

<sup>26</sup> Wendt, *Christliche Lehre von Der Menschlichen Vollkommenheit*.

incompatible anthropology in Irenaeus, Wendt argued that Irenaeus espoused two thoughts regarding the original state of humanity. The first emphasized maturity toward perfection in which humanity's sin in the garden played a positive role. The second proposed an original perfection forfeited through humanity's sin in the garden. This second proposal evaluated humanity's fall in the garden in negative terms. Wendt regarded these two anthropologies advocated and propounded by Irenaeus as incoherent.

As a result of the rise and embrace of *Quellenforschung*, some scholars dismembered Irenaeus's work. Friederich Loofs contended that Irenaeus's work betrayed a pen that did not develop what his heart was full of, given that Irenaeus's most profound statements are plagiarisms. For example, Loofs denigrates Irenaeus with the following words:

*Irenaeus ist als theologischer Schriftsteller viel kleiner gewesen, als man bisher annahm. Das ist eine Erkenntnis, der man sich nicht entziehen kann, wenn die Ergebnisse, zu denen ich in diesem Buche gekommen bin, richtig sind. Seine Feder entwickelte nicht das, was sein Herz voll war; er war kein selbständiger Schriftsteller. In hier freierem, dort engerem, ja z. T. plagiatorischem Anschluß folgt er weite Strecken lang seinen Quellen. Und das Eigene, das er bietet, sticht gegen das übernommene auch schriftstellerisch durch seine Einfachheit, nicht selten auch durch formales Ungeschick ab. Für die Vorteile einer straffen Disposition hat er, z. T. infolge seiner Unselbständigkeit, gar kein Gefühl. Unausgeglichene Widersprüche stören ihn nicht. Hätten wir in umfangreicherem Maße, als es der Fall ist, für die drei letzten Bücher den griechischen Urtext, so würde sich selbst im Wortschatz und wahrscheinlich auch im Satzbau Irenaeus gegen seine Quellen zu seinem Nachteile deutlich abheben.<sup>27</sup>*

Loofs adds criticism of Irenaeus as a theologian. “*Noch kleiner wird Irenaeus als Theologe. Er hat tiefe und schöne Gedanken seinen Quellen, vornehmlich dem Theophilus nachgesprochen: aber sein Verständnis des Tiefsten, das er übernommen hat, ist oft ein recht oberflächliches.*” According to Loofs, Irenaeus was nothing more than a gifted plagiarist whose worthwhile contribution to theology is limited to his ability to copy the work of other more capable theologians.

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<sup>27</sup> Friederich Loofs, *Theophilus v. Antiochien Adversus Marcionem und die Anderen Theologischen Quellen Bei Irenaeus*, Texte und Untersuchungen 2, 46 (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1930), 432.

Similarly, Johannes Quasten, although describing Irenaeus as “by far the most important of the theologians of the second century,”<sup>28</sup> assessed *Haer.* as lacking “clear arrangement and unity of thought.”<sup>29</sup> According to Quasten, “Prolixity and frequent repetition make its perusal wearisome. The reason for this defect is most probably that the author wrote the work intermittently. . . . But it would appear that Irenaeus inserted additions and enlargements from time to time. Evidently, he did not have the ability to shape his materials into a homogeneous whole. The defects of form which offend the reader are the result of this lack of synthesis.”<sup>30</sup> Although not entirely down on Irenaeus or *Haer.*, Quasten evaluates the work in a way similar to others prior to his time.

The second half of the twentieth century demonstrates a turn back to a renewed appreciation of the coherence and harmony of Irenaeus as a theologian. Gustaf Wingren identified the central problem of theology for Irenaeus as “man and the becoming-man, or man and the Incarnation.”<sup>31</sup> Wingren concluded that although *Haer.* is the product of a compilation of sources, “there is a remarkable unity throughout his writings.”<sup>32</sup> Irenaeus, according to Wingren, demonstrates an unparalleled ability to collate and fuse various authorities into a harmonious whole. He concludes, “In this work of unifying theological concepts Irenaeus has no equal.”<sup>33</sup>

Philippe Bacq also contributed to the rehabilitation of Irenaeus as a theologian who demonstrated skilled arrangement, cohesion, and harmony.<sup>34</sup> Bacq’s work revealed

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<sup>28</sup> Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. 1 (Utrecht, Netherlands: Spectrum, 1950), 287.

<sup>29</sup> Quasten, *Patrology*, 289.

<sup>30</sup> Quasten, *Patrology*, 289.

<sup>31</sup> Gustaf Wingren, introduction to *Man and the Incarnation: A Study in the Biblical Theology of Irenaeus* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1959), ix.

<sup>32</sup> Wingren, introduction to *Man and the Incarnation*, xv.

<sup>33</sup> Wingren, introduction to *Man and the Incarnation*, xvi.

<sup>34</sup> Philippe Bacq, *De l’ancienne à La Nouvelle Alliance Selon S. Irénée: Unité Du Livre IV de l’Adversus Haereses* (Paris: Lethielleux, 1978).

the harmony of book 4 of *Haer*. This was especially needed since book 4 was often the portion under scrutiny for its alleged incongruous dependence on previous sources. Additionally, Bacq contended that although Irenaeus certainly relied on predecessors, he consistently left his indelible imprint on his sources.

In 1979, Richard Norris, although granting the accusation against Irenaeus as an incapable logician and failed rhetorician who employed “muddled arguments,” issued a clarion call for the need to recognize Irenaeus’s fundamental concern.<sup>35</sup> “It is difficult . . . not to suppose that for Irenaeus the question of a doctrine of God, of theology in the strict and narrow sense, is the primary and most crucial issue at stake in his confrontation with the Gnostics.”<sup>36</sup> Norris observed that Irenaeus’s theology had not received its due attention among scholars. As a result, Norris posited, “It may be the case that this neglect of Irenaeus’s central concern has a tendency to introduce a serious distortion into contemporary appreciations and criticisms of his work.”<sup>37</sup> Norris rightly interpreted Irenaeus not merely as a theologian of the economy but a theologian concerned with the metaphysical reality of God.<sup>38</sup> Norris’s work has helped shift Irenaeian studies toward an interest in Irenaeus’s understanding of God and the ramifications of this understanding.

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<sup>35</sup> Richard Norris, “The Transcendence and Freedom of God: Irenaeus, the Greek Tradition and Gnosticism,” in *Early Christian Literature and the Classical Intellectual Tradition: In Honorem Robert M. Grant*, ed. Robert Louis Wilken and W. R. Schoedel, *Théologie Historique* 53 (Paris: Éditions Beauchesne, 1979), 98.

<sup>36</sup> Norris, “Transcendence and Freedom of God,” 89.

<sup>37</sup> Norris, “Transcendence and Freedom of God,” 89.

<sup>38</sup> Additionally, Norris argued in favor of Irenaeus as a theologian concerned with the reality of God in Richard Norris, “Who Is the Demiurge? Irenaeus’s Picture of God in *Adversus Haereses* 2,” in *God in Early Christian Thought: Essays in Memory of Lloyd G. Patterson*, ed. Andrew Brian McGowan, Brian E. Daley, and Timothy J. Gaden, SVC 94 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 9–36. Norris did not escape criticism. Michael Slusser proposed that Norris had overstated the centrality of transcendence in the mind of Irenaeus as the means by which God is also present. Michael Slusser, “The Heart of Irenaeus’s Theology,” in Foster and Parvis, *Irenaeus*, 133–39.

Although still focusing on Irenaeus as a theologian of the divine economy, Eric Osborn optimistically opined, “No one has presented a more unified account of God, the world and history than has Irenaeus.”<sup>39</sup> Another contribution is Michel René Barnes, whose evaluation focused on Irenaeus’s Trinitarian theology broadly and his pneumatology specifically. Barnes concluded that while Irenaeus’s descriptions demonstrate belief in the Holy Spirit’s divinity as co-creator (the very concept of spirit is a uniquely divine attribute of God, according to Barnes), Irenaeus’s pneumatology did not receive widespread embrace in the following century due to his “by-passing of a causal account of the Holy Spirit’s origin.”<sup>40</sup>

Two recent authors have propelled admiration of Irenaeus as a capable theologian whose interest included a Christian theological metaphysic. Jackson Lashier<sup>41</sup> has argued that “whereas the Apologists understand the identity and nature of God the Father according to the Middle Platonic vision of God as a transcendent and distant being unable to interact with material creation, Irenaeus alters this understanding in order to reject the unknown, transcendent, and spatially distant God featured in Valentinian theology” and provides a better way forward in Christian theology.<sup>42</sup> Irenaeus’s primary contribution, according to Lashier, consisted of a departure from the Middle Platonic understanding of the fatherhood of God (understood in the context of creation) and the transcendence of God (understood as “relative transcendence”) toward an understanding of God in filial terms as Father of the Son and divine transcendence as absolute.

Briggman has added that “far from being an obstacle that must be overcome by the

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<sup>39</sup> Eric Francis Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 9. Osborn recognizes “the unexpected jungle” the reader meets in Irenaeus. However, he concludes that Irenaeus’s coherence materializes under four major concepts—intellect, economy, recapitulation, and participation (21).

<sup>40</sup> Michel R. Barnes, “Irenaeus’s Trinitarian Theology,” *Nova et Vetera* 7, no. 1 (2009): 105.

<sup>41</sup> Jackson Lashier, *Irenaeus on the Trinity*, SVC 127 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), esp. 54–91. For the purposes of my research, chap. 2 of Lashier’s work is most relevant.

<sup>42</sup> Lashier, *Irenaeus on the Trinity*, 54.

economy, metaphysics is the foundation for key elements of Irenaeus's account of the divine economy."<sup>43</sup> Briggman's portrayal of Irenaeus surfaces not merely as the well-meaning churchman whose theology was entirely economic in orientation but as the rhetorically educated and philosophically informed theologian whose theological awareness buttressed his retelling of the divine economy.<sup>44</sup> With the rebirth of Irenaeus as a coherent and capable theology whose primary interest in the theological metaphysic that undergirds the economy, this stream of scholarship is ripe for continued evaluation of Irenaeus's doctrine of God and the role his theology played in exegesis.

The second stream of scholarship germane to the thesis of this work is a renaissance in premodern or pre-critical exegesis.<sup>45</sup> This field of research corresponds to the predominantly Roman Catholic *ressourcement* movement represented among scholars like Henri de Lubac and Jean Daniélou. Jean Daniélou's work *Sacramentum Futuri: Études sur les Origines de la Typologie biblique* first appeared in English in 1960,<sup>46</sup> with a new edition in 2018.<sup>47</sup> In this work, Daniélou identified five biblical episodes, interpreting each through the lens of typology among some of the early Christian exegetes. Additionally, de Lubac's work *L'écriture dans la tradition*, which first

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<sup>43</sup> Briggman, *God and Christ in Irenaeus*, 5.

<sup>44</sup> According to Briggman, an example of the philosophical sophistication of Irenaeus's theology is his appropriation of Stoic mixture theory to explain Christological union.

<sup>45</sup> The designations "premodern" and "pre-critical" often occur to describe the same period. However, if one understands "pre-critical" to mean lacking fastidious attention to the detail of the text, the designation fails to accurately describe early interpreters. O'Keefe and Reno have provided an informative on-ramp to the discussion concerning the nature of premodern exegesis in John J. O'Keefe and Russell R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

<sup>46</sup> Jean Daniélou, *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers*, trans. Dom Wulstan Hibberd (London: Burns & Oats, 1960).

<sup>47</sup> See Jean Daniélou, *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers*, trans. Dom Wulstan Hibberd (N.p.: Ex Fontibus, 2018). Michael Heintz contributes a new introduction for this edition.

appeared in 1968, merits mention.<sup>48</sup> De Lubac sought to recover and retrieve the commonly employed spiritual understanding of the Scriptures among Christians in the early centuries of the church. Additional contributions have surfaced contending for the retrieval of premodern exegetical models. For example, David Steinmetz weighed in by defending what he considered the superiority of pre-critical exegesis over critical and modern exegesis.<sup>49</sup> Among others, Lewis Ayres has argued against accepting the theological conclusions of Nicaea without giving equal consideration to the exegetical framework that led to those conclusions.<sup>50</sup> Still others have sought to better understand some of the pre-critical exegetical methods that bequeathed to us the Great Tradition.<sup>51</sup>

The third stream of scholarship informing the thesis of this work is the still-promising interest of the relationship between theology and biblical interpretation, which is related to the field of biblical theology.<sup>52</sup> Scholars have often assigned to this stream the epithet, “Theological Interpretation of Scripture” (TIS), which, as R. R. Reno has observed, is “the imprecise but nonetheless useful term.”<sup>53</sup> A theological interpretation of

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<sup>48</sup> Lubac’s work is also accessible in the following English ed.: Henri de Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, trans. Luke O’Neill, Milestones in Catholic Theology (New York: Crossroad, 2000).

<sup>49</sup>David C. Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” *Ex Auditu* 1 (1985): 74–82. Daniel Treier, an American evangelical theologian, helpfully engaged the Steinmetz thesis. Daniel Treier, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis? Sic et Non,” *Trinity Journal* 24, no. 1 (2003): 77–103.

<sup>50</sup> Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>51</sup> Prosopological exegesis is one example. Carl Andresen originally identified the methodological concept of prosopological exegesis in Carl Andresen, “Zur Entstehung und Geschichte des Trinitarischen Personbegriffes,” *ZNW* 52, nos. 1–2 (1961): 1–39. Rondeau amended Andresen’s characterization of Personbegriffes to *exégèse prosopologique* in Marie-Josèphe Rondeau, *Les Commentaires Patristiques Du Psautier: IIIe-Ve Siècles*, OrChrAn 220 (Rome: Pont. Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1982). Slusser contended that prosopological exegesis provided the basis for the doctrinal conclusion of the Trinity; see Michael Slusser, “The Exegetical Roots of Trinitarian Theology,” *Theological Studies* 49, no. 3 (1988): 461–76. Matthew Bates extended and elaborated Slusser’s thesis in Matthew W. Bates, *The Birth of the Trinity: Jesus, God, and Spirit in New Testament and Early Christian Interpretations of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>52</sup> Presley refers to theological interpretation of Scripture as the “modern cousin” of biblical theology. Presley, *Biblical Theology in Life of Early Church*, 5.

<sup>53</sup> R. R. Reno, *The End of Interpretation: Reclaiming the Priority of Ecclesial Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 2.

Scripture, comparable to biblical theology, seeks to read Scripture as a unified whole. Brevard Childs suggested, “Biblical Theology is by definition theological reflection on both the Old and New Testament. It assumes that the Christian bible consists of a theological unity formed by the canonical union of the two testaments.”<sup>54</sup>

The rise of this approach to reading Scripture with the aid of Christian theology in the late decades of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first century incubated under the scholarship of Yale dons Brevard Childs and Hans Frei.<sup>55</sup>

Frei rehearsed the story of the transition from “precritical” to “critical” interpretations of Scripture. According to Frei, the pre-critical reader’s focal point was the text itself while the critical reader seeks to look behind or beyond the text. Both Frei and Childs accented the unity of Scripture. As a result, Frei and Childs advocated for the use of Scripture to interpret Scripture.

Since the work of Frei and Childs, the movement denominated TIS has been represented through various authors from the breadth of Christian traditions (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant).<sup>56</sup> George Lindbeck helped frame TIS through his

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<sup>54</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (London: SCM, 1992), 55.

<sup>55</sup> Representative works that provided some of the foundational theses constructing this hermeneutical trajectory were Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974); Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 1st American ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979); Childs, *Biblical Theology of Old and New Testaments*.

<sup>56</sup> Reno has contributed as a Roman Catholic. However, Reno’s work extends beyond the parameters of Roman Catholicism, including both Protestants and Orthodox authors alongside Roman Catholics within the commentary series for which he served as editor—Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible. While the Brazos series has not gained the momentum hoped for by its early conspirators and contributors, it provides a helpful example of ways to approach Scripture theologically. For a summary of Reno’s own evaluation of the usefulness and success of the series, see Reno, *The End of Interpretation*, 153–68. A related discussion among participants in this field is biblical interpretation within an acute awareness of the Great Tradition or catholic church. The interplay, and at times tension, for Protestants between catholicity and a Protestant heritage has become a topic for consideration. Michael Allen has furnished a helpful example of how to prize catholicity in a distinctively Protestant manner; see Michael Allen, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015). For a proposal from the Baptist heritage, see Matthew Y. Emerson, Christopher W. Morgan, and R. Lucas Stamps, *Baptists and the Christian Tradition: Toward an Evangelical Baptist Catholicity* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020).

contribution to a 1987 work honoring his Yale colleague (Frei).<sup>57</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer<sup>58</sup> and Daniel Treier are a couple of the Protestant representatives within the movement. Treier has provided an account of the inception and precursors of TIS as a modern scholarly movement.<sup>59</sup>

Others have attempted to move beyond theory to practice by providing examples of the way dogma should inform exegesis. David Yeago furnished a worthy and brief substantiation of theological interpretation by evaluating the relationship between Scripture and Nicene dogma by using Philippians 2 as his test case.<sup>60</sup> Craig Carter nudged further in the direction of accenting the relationship between exegesis and theology proper with the latter providing the necessary interpretative framework for the former.<sup>61</sup> Stephen Presley has proposed another step forward, bringing together a theological interpretation of Scripture or biblical theology within the context of the church as modeled by the fathers.<sup>62</sup> Presley proposes that the healthy and vital path forward amid the malaise of methodological confusion is the practice of “ecclesial biblical theology,” which the early fathers of the church modeled. Finally, R. B. Jamieson

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<sup>57</sup> George Lindbeck, “The Story-Shaped Church: Critical Exegesis and Theological Interpretation,” in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*, ed. Garrett Green (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 161–78.

<sup>58</sup> While Vanhoozer has produced much related to this approach to reading Scripture, the following is a helpful on-ramp to Vanhoozer’s thinking: Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

<sup>59</sup> Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 11–36.

<sup>60</sup> David S. Yeago, “The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis,” *Sewanee Theological Review* 45, no. 4 (2002): 371–84.

<sup>61</sup> See Craig A. Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018). Carter provides a provocative treatment of some of the ways modern interpreters of Scripture might benefit from premodern interpreters. In another work, Carter spends more time defending the adoption of a distinctively Christian metaphysic and its relationship to biblical interpretation. Carter, *Contemplating God with the Great Tradition: Recovering Trinitarian Classical Theism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021).

<sup>62</sup> Presley, *Biblical Theology in Life of Early Church*.

and Tyler R. Wittman have produced a work replete with an approach to reading Scripture theologically or with Scripture’s own theological framework.<sup>63</sup>

### Significance

Scholars commonly accept Irenaeus as one of the most influential Christian theologians and biblical interpreters in the second century. Moreover, the second century uniquely—and Irenaeus particularly—have been the topic for much discussion regarding the “development,” “articulation,” “formation,” or “invention” of Christian identity. The relationship between the second century and Christian identity has been a ripe field for scholarship. Contributors must account for the apparent diversity within early Christianity and the resulting unity of catholic Christianity into the consolidation of the subsequent centuries. According to Adolf von Harnack who left an indelible mark on historical theology and church history, the second century marks a turning point from the purity of the gospel to the gradual Hellenization that accrued around the kernel of the Christian message. According to Harnack, dogma was “a work of the Greek spirit on the soil of the Gospel,”<sup>64</sup> and the second century was a period characterized by “a work of the Greek spirit.”

Walter Bauer’s seminal work has proven to be as influential as any.<sup>65</sup> Bauer argued contrary to the classical theory of orthodoxy preceding heresy represented in Eusebius of Caesarea that heresy often preceded orthodoxy and therefore possessed just as much of a claim to antiquity and originality as did Christian orthodoxy. Since Bauer, early Christian scholars have proffered many theses and historiographies. William Arnal

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<sup>63</sup> R. B. Jamieson and Tyler R. Wittman, *Biblical Reasoning: Christological and Trinitarian Rules for Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022). Jamieson and Wittman do not use TIS to refer to their own work. However, they “offer little objection” to those who categorize their work as such (xxiv).

<sup>64</sup> Adolf Harnack, *History of Dogma*, trans. Neil Buchanan (Boston: Little, Brown, 1901), 1:17.

<sup>65</sup> Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, ed. Gerhard Krodel and Robert Kraft, trans. Georg Strecker (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

contended that the second century was the century for the invention of Christianity.<sup>66</sup> Paula Fredrickson proposed that on account of the diversity of the second century, there were several Christianities.<sup>67</sup> According to Fredrickson, what became known as Christianity was merely the historical “winner” over other “losers.” The historian should not therefore appraise any Christianity over another. Manifesting the complexity of this century, Judith Lieu appropriated the use of a laboratory metaphor as a way of evaluating the diversity and experimentation of second century Christianity.<sup>68</sup>

John Behr has provided a challenge to those who espouse these models accenting early diversity, especially those who target theologians like Irenaeus as identity-forming polemicists who excluded other Christians. Behr suggests instead that Irenaeus was more tolerant than the heretics: “It was not by exercising already demarcated parameters that ‘heretics’ were excluded. Rather, it was their self-chosen departure that provided occasions for identifying the points at issue and thereby establishing parameters and a framework for understanding what such parameters might be and how they might function.”<sup>69</sup> Various models for understanding the second century and its relationship to Christianity have been concisely collected and summarized by D. Jeffrey Bingham.<sup>70</sup> This brief survey of scholarship regarding frameworks for approaching the second century Christianity substantiates the significance of this century

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<sup>66</sup> William Arnal, “The Collection and Synthesis of ‘Tradition’ and the Second Century Invention of Christianity,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 23, nos. 3–4 (2011): 193–215.

<sup>67</sup> Paula Fredriksen, “Christians in the Roman Empire in the First Three Centuries CE,” in *A Companion to the Roman Empire*, ed. D. S. Potter, Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World (Malden, MA: Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 587–606.

<sup>68</sup> Judith Lieu, “Modeling the Second Century as the Age of the Laboratory,” in *Christianity in the Second Century: Themes and Developments*, ed. James Carleton Paget and Judith Lieu (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>69</sup> Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 207.

<sup>70</sup> D. Jeffrey Bingham, “Development and Diversity in Early Christianity,” *JETS* 49 (2006): 45–66.

generally, and Irenaeus particularly, as a highly influential second-century bishop and theologian.

Additionally, as demonstrated in the survey above, the scholarly consensus has well recovered Irenaeus the theologian. Opportunity remains for continued research in premodern exegesis. Moreover, TIS, while having benefitted from the work of scholars over the previous few decades, stands in need of continued reflection, explanation, instantiation, and critique. While scholars have issued treatments of the exegesis and theology of patristic figures, no scholar has provided a robust treatment of the ways these three scholarly tributaries meet in Irenaeus, and specifically the way Irenaeus's doctrine of God and exegesis intersect and are instantiated.<sup>71</sup>

To truly establish the significance of Irenaeus, it is necessary to situate him historically. In the following section, I provide a historical sketch of the life and writings of Irenaeus.

### **Biography of Irenaeus of Lyons**

According to the late American patristics scholar Robert Grant, "Irenaeus of Lyons was the most important Christian controversialist and theologian between the apostles and the third-century genius of Origen."<sup>72</sup> H. B. Swete lamented regarding Irenaeus,

No early Christian writer has deserved better of the whole Church than Irenaeus. His refutation of Gnosticism is perhaps the least of his claims upon the attention of the student. Gnosticism would doubtless have met its fate if Irenaeus had never written, and for the modern reader its grotesque speculations have little interest. But the great work of Irenaeus offers us far more than the polemic of a by-gone age. It is a first effort to grapple on a large scale with the problems of the rising faith, and to construct the outlines of a Christian theology. It is a storehouse of materials for the early history of the canon, the creed, and the episcopate. It contains not a few

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<sup>71</sup> Lashier and Briggman come closer than others. However, both authors concentrate on Irenaeus as an astute philosophical theologian interested in a metaphysic, in contrast to Irenaeus as a theologian of the economy. Neither say much at all about the relationship between metaphysics and exegesis in Irenaeus.

<sup>72</sup> Robert M. Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, Early Church Fathers (London: Routledge, 1997), 1.

passages of singular beauty and far-reaching insight, which are hardly surpassed in any other Christian writing, ancient or modern.<sup>73</sup>

Although less is known of Irenaeus's life than some, the life and ministry of the man merits attention and admiration.

Irenaeus provides meager information concerning his early life, which includes his relationship to the bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, among other details that help in reconstructing Irenaeus's childhood. In his letter to Florinus, of which only a portion survives on account of the work of Eusebius, Irenaeus recounts childhood memories. In the context of the letter, Irenaeus combats the false teaching to which Florinus had apparently succumbed:

These opinions, Florinus, do not reflect sound judgment—to put it mildly. These opinions are discordant with the church and consign those who share them to the greatest wickedness. Not even heretics outside the church ever dared to proclaim these opinions. Those before us who were presbyters who accompanied the apostles did not hand on to you opinions like these. When I was still a boy I saw you in Lower Asia with Polycarp, when you had high status at the imperial court and wanted to gain his favor. I remember events from those days more clearly than those that happened recently—what we learn in childhood adheres to the mind and grows with it—so that I can even picture the place where the blessed Polycarp sat and conversed, his comings and goings, his character, his personal appearance, his discourses to the crowds, and how he reported his discussions with John and others who had seen the Lord. He recalled their very words, what they reported about the Lord and his miracles and his teaching—things that Polycarp had heard directly from eyewitnesses of the Word of life and reported in full harmony with Scripture. I listened eagerly to these things at that time and, through God's mercy, noted them not on paper but in my heart. By God's grace I continually reflect on them, and, as God is my witness, if that blessed, apostolic presbyter had heard any of these opinions he would have stopped his ears and cried out, characteristically, "O good God, to what times have you preserved me that I should have to endure this?" He would have fled from wherever he was sitting or standing upon hearing such words. This is clear from the letters he sent either to neighboring churches to reinforce them or to some of the brethren to advise and exhort them.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Henry Barclay Swete, foreword to *Irenaeus of Lugdunum: A Study of His Teaching*, by F. R. Montgomery Hitchcock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914).

<sup>74</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 5.20. All English quotations of *Hist. eccl.* are taken from *Eusebius: The Church History*, trans. Paul L. Maier (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999). The great German scholar Eduard Schwartz produced the standard critical edition of *Hist. eccl.*, available as a 2-vol. LCL ed.: Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, trans. Kirsopp Lake and J. E. L. Oulton, LCL 153, 265 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926, 1932). Hereafter, all Greek citations of *Hist. eccl.* are from Schwartz's work contained in LCL.

A series of details preserved by Eusebius from this letter of Irenaeus provide insightful information regarding Irenaeus’s life. Irenaeus not only claims to have heard Polycarp, the bishop and martyr of Smyrna, but he appeals to his shared experiences with Florinus to whom he addresses the letter. Irenaeus recalls that season of his life, presumably in Smyrna, with the words, “while I was still a boy” (παῖς ἔτι ὄν). Additionally, Irenaeus claims to have seen Polycarp, who was instructed and appointed by the apostles as bishop of Smyrna: “Polycarp, likewise, not only was taught by the apostles and conversed with many of those who saw our Lord but also was appointed bishop of the Church at Smyrna in Asia by the apostles. We, too, saw him in our early age [ἐν τῇ πρώτῃ ἡμῶν ἡλικίᾳ], for he lived on a long time, and departed this life as a very old man, having most gloriously and most nobly suffered martyrdom.”<sup>75</sup> Germane to determining Irenaeus’s age when he had these experiences with Polycarp is the phrase ἐν τῇ πρώτῃ ἡμῶν ἡλικίᾳ. It is difficult to ascertain precisely what age Irenaeus would categorize under the descriptions παῖς<sup>76</sup> and ἐν τῇ πρώτῃ ἡμῶν ἡλικίᾳ. Richard Lipsius interpreted ἐν τῇ πρώτῃ ἡμῶν ἡλικίᾳ as between the ages of eighteen and thirty.<sup>77</sup> Accepting the traditional date of Polycarp’s martyrdom as AD 155/156, this would place the year of Irenaeus’s birth around AD 130. Charles Hill has proposed AD 135 as the year of Irenaeus’s birth.<sup>78</sup> Grant proposes that Irenaeus’s language permits an age as early as

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<sup>75</sup> *Haer.* 3.3.4 (Unger, 33; SC 211:38).

<sup>76</sup> While παῖς occurs in relation to descent and condition, when used in relation to age, it is often translated “child” or something comparable. LSJ, s.v. “παῖς.” More specifically, παῖς is a way to refer to someone under the age of puberty. BDAG, s.v. “παῖς.”

<sup>77</sup> Richard Lipsius, “Irenaeus,” in *A Dictionary of Christian Biography, Literature, Sects and Doctrines during the First Eight Centuries Being a Continuation of “The Dictionary of the Bible,”* (London: J. Murray, 1882), 3:253–79, 254.

<sup>78</sup> Charles E. Hill, *From the Lost Teaching of Polycarp: Identifying Irenaeus’ Apostolic Presbyter and the Author of Ad Diognetum*, WUNT 186 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 74.

fifteen, and suggests that Irenaeus was born around AD 140.<sup>79</sup> Eric Osborn places Irenaeus's birth in between AD 130 and 140.<sup>80</sup>

One tradition posits that Irenaeus was martyred in AD 202 or 203, under the persecution of Septimius Severus who reigned from AD 193 to 211. Although the martyrdom of Irenaeus is commemorated on June 28, evidence for his martyrdom is quite late and meager. Jerome is the first to mention Irenaeus's martyrdom when he refers to Irenaeus as "Bishop of Lyons and martyr."<sup>81</sup> Some have even suggested that this is a scribal gloss,<sup>82</sup> especially given that Jerome does not refer to Irenaeus in this way in the section he devotes to Irenaeus in *Vir. ill.*<sup>83</sup> Gregory of Tours (538–594) described Irenaeus as one whom Polycarp sent on his mission to Lyons, claiming that Irenaeus converted the whole city. Gregory helped to perpetuate the tradition of Irenaeus's martyrdom. After cataloguing the martyrdom of Photinus,<sup>84</sup> Gregory writes,

The most blessed Irenaeus, successor of this martyr [Photinus], and sent to the city by the blessed Polycarp, shone forth with admirable light and virtue. In a brief space of time, chiefly by his preaching, he made the whole city Christian. But on the coming of persecution the Devil maintained such wars there by the hand of a tyrant, and so great a multitude of Christians were murdered there for confessing the Lord's name, that the streets ran with streams of Christian blood, so that we are unable to tell their number or to collect their names; but the Lord hath written them in the Book of Life. This executioner, after causing divers tortures to be inflicted on the blessed Irenaeus in his presence, dedicated him by martyrdom to Christ the Lord. After Irenaeus, forty-eight other martyrs suffered death, of whom we read that Vettius Epagathus was the first.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 2.

<sup>80</sup> Eric Francis Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 2.

<sup>81</sup> *Comm. Isa.* 17.34.

<sup>82</sup> Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 14n4. The first to suggest this was the seventeenth-century Anglican scholar Henry Dodwell; see Henry Dodwell and Philippus Sidetes, *Dissertationes in Irenaeum* (Oxford: E. Theatro Sheldoniano, 1689).

<sup>83</sup> *Vir. ill.* 35.

<sup>84</sup> Photinus is more commonly referred to as Pothinus.

<sup>85</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, trans. O. M. Dalton (Oxford: Clarendon, 1927), 1.29.

While such traditions are possible, as Denis Minns has noted, “There is no evidence that Irenaeus lived beyond the reign of Victor,”<sup>86</sup> dating the death of Irenaeus by (or before) AD 199.

In the person and ministry of Irenaeus, Asia Minor, Rome, and Southern Gaul come together. Having grown up in Asia Minor, Irenaeus eventually migrated to Gaul to minister among the Celts. In Gaul he would eventually become bishop<sup>87</sup> of Lyons after the death of his predecessor Pothinus during the great persecution of Vienne and Lyons that began in AD 177. Pothinus, who was in his 90s, suffered the honorable martyr’s fate in prison. Although many details of Irenaeus’s status at this time are less than certain, some have suggested that he was bishop of Vienne when Pothinus died, after which he inherited the episcopacy of the larger Lyons.<sup>88</sup>

Prior to taking the see of Lyons, Irenaeus carried a letter from the confessors in Lyons to Eleutherus who was then bishop of Rome.<sup>89</sup> The letter is recorded by Eusebius and includes details concerning the faithfulness and perseverance of the Christian martyrs in Lyons and Vienne. Eusebius indicates, “The same martyrs warmly commended Irenaeus . . . to the Bishop of Rome.”<sup>90</sup> The commendation from the confessors in Vienne and Lyons reads,

Once more and always, Father Eleutherus, greetings in God. We have entrusted this letter to our brother and companion Irenaeus to bring to you. We beg you to hold him in high regard as one zealous for the covenant of Christ. For if we had thought that rank could confer righteousness on anyone, we would first have recommended him as presbyter of the church, which he is in fact.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Denis Minns, *Irenaeus: An Introduction* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 3.

<sup>87</sup> Irenaeus never refers to himself as “bishop.” It is possible that in Irenaeus’s context the office of bishop and presbyter were synonymous (cf. 1 Clem 44:4–5 where the author uses the terms ἐπισκοπος and πρεσβύτερος interchangeably).

<sup>88</sup> Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 4; Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 19.

<sup>89</sup> Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 4.

<sup>90</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 5.4.

<sup>91</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 5.4.

Although known to many as a fierce heresiologist, Irenaeus was a peacemaker who demonstrated theological and ecclesiastical generosity where he could within the faith. Eusebius records,

At that time, no small controversy erupted because all of the Asian dioceses thought the Savior's paschal festival should be observed, according to ancient tradition, on the fourteenth day of the moon, on which the Jews had been commanded to sacrifice the lamb. On that day it was necessary to finish the fast, no matter what day of the week it might be. In churches throughout the rest of the world, however, it was not customary to celebrate in this way, since, according to apostolic tradition, they maintained the view that still prevails: the fast ends only on the day of our Savior's resurrection [Sunday].<sup>92</sup>

Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus, defended the Quartodeciman (from the Latin *quartus deciman* meaning "fourteen") practice, celebrating Pascha on the fourteenth day of Nisan in accordance with Exodus 12:6, and concluding the fast leading up to Easter on that day no matter what day of the week on which it occurred. Although most of the churches observed Easter on Sunday, the Asiatic churches were Quartodecimans. This included Polycarp of Smyrna, Thrasesas of Eumenia, Sagaris of Laodicea, Papius of Smyrna (successor of Polycarp), Melito of Sardis, and Polycrates of Ephesus. Although to modern sensibilities the debate may seem persnickety, both sides of the issue were compelled to obey God rather than men in accordance with Acts 5:29.<sup>93</sup>

Victor did not respond to the Asia Christians' appeal sympathetically. Censoring the churches who insisted on the Quartodeciman adherence, Victor received a letter from Irenaeus reprimanding him for his unyielding excoriation of the Asiatic churches. What makes Irenaeus's appeal so significant is Irenaeus himself followed the Roman practice of observing Easter on Sunday. However, although he agreed with Victor regarding proper practice, he vehemently disagreed with Victor's reaction to the Quartodeciman Christians. Irenically, Irenaeus pleads, "Such variation in observance did

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<sup>92</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 5.24.

<sup>93</sup> The letter from Polycrates of Ephesus to Victor of Rome appeals to this verse in *Hist. eccl.* 5.24.

not begin in our own day but much earlier in the time of our predecessors, who seem to have disregarded accuracy for simplicity in establishing future practice. Nevertheless, they all lived in peace with each other, as do we, and the disagreement in the fast affirms our agreement in the faith.”<sup>94</sup> Irenaeus provides the example of Polycarp bishop of Smyrna and Anicetus bishop of Rome disagreeing in peace over various matters. One of those matters was when to observe Easter. Polycarp followed the apostle John, and Anicetus followed the tradition of the presbyters who preceded him. “Nevertheless, they communed with each other, and in church Anicetus yielded the consecration of the Eucharist to Polycarp, obviously out of respect. They parted from each other in peace, and peace in the whole church was maintained both by those who observed and those who did not.”<sup>95</sup> As Eusebius remarked, Irenaeus’s “character suited his name as a peacemaker.”<sup>96</sup>

### Writings

Although Irenaeus was not nearly as prolific a writer as later patristic authors, he authored several influential works. Eusebius includes several letters, “One he addressed to Blastus, *On Schism*, another to Florinus, *On the Sole Sovereignty or God is Not the Author of Evil*, an opinion Florinus seemed to be defending. And when the latter was enmeshed by Valentinian delusion, Irenaeus composed *The Ogdoad*, in which he also shows that he himself was in the apostolic succession.”<sup>97</sup> Eusebius adds that Irenaeus penned “a concise and very convincing treatise of his against the Greeks . . . entitled *Concerning Knowledge*. Another, dedicated to a Christian named Marcian, is the *Demonstration of Apostolic Preaching*, as well as a little book of various addresses in

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<sup>94</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 5.24.

<sup>95</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 5.24.

<sup>96</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 5.24.

<sup>97</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 5.20.

which he quotes from the epistle to the Hebrews and the Wisdom of Solomon, so-called.”<sup>98</sup> Additionally, it is possible that Irenaeus authored the letter of the churches of Vienne and Lyons.<sup>99</sup>

The two most significant works Irenaeus produced were *Haer.* and *Epid.*, neither of which are extant in their original Greek. Regarding the former, it appears that “the Greek text . . . was consulted by Photius in Baghdad in the ninth century, but was probably lost in the sacking of the city in 1258.”<sup>100</sup> A complete Latin version of *Haer.* was likely prepared about the year AD 380. There are three early Latin manuscripts extant, the earliest of which is Claromontanus (tenth or eleventh century). Leydensis and Arundelianus also remain significant textual witnesses. Erasmus published his *editio princeps* in 1526, which contains portions not represented in any of the three Latin witnesses. Only Greek fragments of the original work remain, the most significant of which are included by Eusebius, Epiphanius, and the *Sacra Parallela* attributed to John of Damascus.

Eusebius mentions *Epid.*, but the work remained lost until 1904, when it was discovered in a sixth-century Armenian version. Although lacking the text in its original tongue is regrettable, the Armenian translation demonstrates a remarkably Hellenistic flavor, offering what is likely a translation in close linguistic proximity to Irenaeus’s original Greek text. As Rousseau states,

*La version arméniennę de la Démonstration est, ainsi qu’on l’a vu, un produit caractéristique de l’«École hellénistique», groupe de traducteurs arméniens se signalant par une volonté de calquer le grec de la façon la plus étroite. Qu’une traduction faite selon pareille optique soit d’une médiocre qualité littéraire, rien que de normal. En revanche, pour le lecteur dont le souci serait de rejoindre à travers elle—dans toute la mesure du possible, cel ava de soi—l’original qui lui est sous-jacent, une telle traduction, pourvu que l’on s’attache à déceler les procédés qu’elle*

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<sup>98</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 5.26.

<sup>99</sup> For a defense of Irenaeus’s authorship, see Pierre Nautin, *Lettres et Écrivains Chrétiens des 2e et 3e Siècles*, *Patristica* 2, 13 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1961), 54–61.

<sup>100</sup> Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 13.

*met en œuvre, ne pourrait-elle se révéler du plus grand prix?*<sup>101</sup>

As Rousseau states, although the Armenian translation is of mediocre quality as a work of literature, it grants promising access to the original that underlies it.

Access to this Armenian version eventuated by means of three Armenian witnesses. The first is the thirteenth-century Yerevan manuscript discovered in 1904, in the library of the Church of the Mother of God in Yerevan by Dr. Karapet Ter-Mekerttschian. The second is Galata 54, which is a patristic florilegium dating to around the fourteenth century and containing fragments of *Epid*. The third is the Seal of Faith discovered by the then Bishop Karapet Ter-Mekerttschian in the monastery of Saint Stephen in 1911; it was later published by him in 1914. This manuscript dates from the thirteenth century and includes two short fragments belonging to *Epid*.<sup>102</sup>

### **Irenaeus's Polemical Context: Gnosticism**

Although Irenaeus was a peacemaker as discussed above, he vigilantly and unrelentingly combatted what he perceived was contrary to the Christian faith. His primary target as indicated in *Haer.* was Gnosticism in its many varieties.

Much has been produced regarding “gnostic” and “Gnosticism” as sweeping descriptions. Henry More coined the term “Gnosticism” in 1669.<sup>103</sup> Adolf von Harnack famously described Gnosticism as “the acute secularizing or hellenising of Christianity, with the rejection of the Old Testament.”<sup>104</sup> Harnack described catholic Christianity in the same way with the addition of the conservation of the Old Testament.

On the other hand, historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have

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<sup>101</sup> Adelin Rousseau, trans., *Démonstration de la prédication apostolique*, SC (Paris: Cerf, 1995), 406:29.

<sup>102</sup> For a discussion of the value of these three manuscripts, see SC 406:17–28.

<sup>103</sup> Bentley Layton, “Prolegomena to the Study of Ancient Gnosticism,” in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, ed. L. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 334–50, 348–49.

<sup>104</sup> Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 1:226.

dealt what has appeared to some to be a *coup d'état* to any historiographical narrative predicated on the existence of a unified early Christianity tidily distinguished from the monolithic heresy of Gnosticism. Michael Williams has notably challenged sweeping summaries such as “gnostic” and “Gnosticism.”<sup>105</sup> Considering modern developments among scholars regarding some of these groups traditionally referred to as “gnostics,” the reader does well to engage the work of Karen L. King and David Brakke. King has pressed anyone treating these groups to consider the role of Christian polemics of orthodoxy and heresy (as represented in Irenaeus and others) in coloring contemporary treatments of Gnosticism.<sup>106</sup> King is critical of any contemporary scholar “reproducing the heresy of the polemicists” and “propagating the politics of orthodoxy and heresy.”<sup>107</sup> Although King’s treatment is helpful in challenging scholarly predispositions when approaching an ancient debate between competing theological narratives, I remain unconvinced that any modern bias toward or against an ancient group is necessarily misguided. Others have provided supplements, and even needed corrections, to King’s thesis. For example, David Brakke, although willing to continue using the epithet “gnostic” as a valid social category, contends that this category should be delineated on account of the social identity markers of ancient myth and ritual.<sup>108</sup> Additionally, Alastair H. B. Logan provides a reply to King and Williams, contending that indeed there was a group (a “cult”) that arose from within Christianity properly designated “gnostics” (i.e., Sethian gnostics).<sup>109</sup> Moreover, Logan, believes that the rituals and beliefs of the gnostics

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<sup>105</sup> Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

<sup>106</sup> Karen King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2005).

<sup>107</sup> King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 54.

<sup>108</sup> David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>109</sup> Alastair H. B. Logan, *The Gnostics: Identifying an Early Christian Cult* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006).

correspond accurately with Irenaeus's testimony. Still within Logan's proposal, the term *gnostic* should be limited to describing those groups who espoused the classic gnostic myth described in *Haer.* 1.29–30, and share the pattern of initiation (the “five seals”).<sup>110</sup>

Most notably challenging the deconstructive thesis of King and others are Christoph Marksches and Einar Thomassen. Thomassen occupies the unique space of a distinguished scholar of Valentinianism as demonstrated through his work *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the Valentinians*.<sup>111</sup> Moreover, he has taken to task the “deconstructive trend of the last couple of decades” that needs to be “counterbalanced by new attempts at reconstructive historical synthesis that will detect coherence among a wider range of sources than current specialised scholarship is often disposed to acknowledge.”<sup>112</sup>

Writing with a similar tendency, Christoph Marksches has proposed a typological construct of ancient gnosis groups helpful for heuristic purposes.<sup>113</sup> Marksches offers a model for identifying gnosis groups based on eight criteria. While Irenaeus himself distinguishes various groups under his “knowledge falsely so-called” category, he believed there existed a theological lineage among these groups including self-designated “gnostics.”<sup>114</sup> Even Valentinus, while not properly a “gnostic” in the strict sense of the term according to Irenaeus, adapted various principles of the gnostic heresy (1.11.1). As a result, due to the theological lineage that existed in Irenaeus's mind, the shared characteristics as identified by Marksches, and the utility of using a single designation, “gnostic” or something comparable, remains a valid utility. As a result, I will

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<sup>110</sup> Logan, *The Gnostics*, 3.

<sup>111</sup> Einar Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the “Valentinians,”* Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 60 (Boston: Brill, 2006).

<sup>112</sup> Einar Thomassen, *The Coherence of “Gnosticism,”* Hanz-Lietzmann-Vorlesungen 18 (Boston: De Gruyter, 2021), 5.

<sup>113</sup> Christoph Marksches, *Gnosis: An Introduction* (New York: T&T Clark, 2003).

<sup>114</sup> Cf. *Haer.* 1.25.6; 1.29.1; 2.Pref.

employ the term to describe the several aberrant movements Irenaeus combatted.

Gnosticism was widespread in the first few centuries of the church extending from Alexandria, Egypt, to the Rhone valley in the west. It was a fluid movement and does not appear to have obtained lasting and fixed forms in the first few of centuries. This is not to suggest that identifiable varieties of gnostics were absent, as I discuss below. As Donovan observes, “There were many ways to be ‘Gnostic,’ yet common traits are discernible.”<sup>115</sup>

The gnostics bore a pseudo-resemblance to Christianity; however, this ostensible resemblance gnostics shared with Christians like Irenaeus were superficial at best. Fundamentally, the gnostics worshiped a different God who was higher than the Creator of the world. Irenaeus warns pointedly,

Certain people are discarding the Truth and introducing deceitful *myths and endless genealogies*, which, as the Apostle says, *promote speculations rather than the divine training that is in faith*. By specious argumentation, craftily patched together, they mislead the minds of the more ignorant and ensnare them by falsifying the Lord’s words. Thus they become wicked interpreters of genuine words. They bring many to ruin by leading them, under the pretense of knowledge, away from Him who established and adorned this universe, as if they had something more sublime and excellent to manifest than the God *who made heaven and . . . all things in them*. By cleverness with words they persuasively allure the simple folk to this style of searching, but then, absurdly, bring them to perdition by trumping up their blasphemous and impious opinion against the Creator. In this matter they just cannot distinguish what is false from what is true.<sup>116</sup>

The danger of the gnostics was not in their convincing arguments but in their targeting “the more ignorant” among the Christians. The reason the less mature were susceptible to the gnostics was because of its ostensible and superficial Christianity. Gnostics shared the same lyrics with Christianity put to a different melody.

The origin of Gnosticism is a question that has proven quite stubborn to definitively settle. Grant offers four potential answers: (1) Hellenistic philosophy, (2)

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<sup>115</sup> Donovan, *One Right Reading?*, 25.

<sup>116</sup> *Haer.* 1.Pref (Unger, 21).

Oriental religion chiefly Iranian, (3) Christianity, or (4) heterodox Judaism.<sup>117</sup> One should add a fifth possible origin for Gnosticism, a combination of all or some of these previously mentioned. Grant opts primarily for the fourth option in part by appeal to Hegessipus (as preserved in *Hist. eccl.* 4.22.4, 7). However, Hegessipus is unclear regarding the characteristics of the heresies he mentions.

Simone Pétrement remains one of the stoutest defenses of the Christian origin of Gnosticism.<sup>118</sup> Hans Jonas suggested that when considering the possible theories of origin regarding Gnosticism, “each of these theories can be supported from the sources and none of them is satisfactory alone; but neither is the combination of all of them, which would make Gnosticism out to be a mere mosaic of these elements and so miss its autonomous essence.”<sup>119</sup> Jonas goes on to propose that the Oriental origins “has an edge over the Hellenic one.” Whether Gnosticism originally germinated in a distinctively Christian context, what is apparent is Gnosticism became a close cohabitant with Christianity. This was often the case in more educated portions of society where the desire for marketplace philosophical appeal was a motivator. Marksches observes, “‘Gnosis’ [by which Marksches intends his typological construct commonly designated by others as Gnosticism] evidently came into being—as the traditions about Basilides show—in the metropolitan centres of education in antiquity, as an attempt by semi-educated people to explain their Christianity at the level of the time.”<sup>120</sup> Similarly, although opting for an origin within a “strange mixture of Oriental religion and Greek

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<sup>117</sup> Robert M. Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 13.

<sup>118</sup> Simone Pétrement, *A Separate God: The Origins and Teachings of Gnosticism*, trans. Carol Harrison (Harper San Francisco, 1990). The work was originally published in French as *le Dieu séparé: les origines du gnosticisme* (Paris: Cerf, 1984).

<sup>119</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Beacon, 2001), 33.

<sup>120</sup> Marksches, *Gnosis*, 83.

philosophy,” Quasten suggests that “many highly educated men became converts to” Christianity and “added some Christian doctrines to their Gnostic views.”<sup>121</sup>

Identifying what gnostics believed merits an entire monograph. Much help has been provided by Marksches, who identifies the following eight shared motifs among gnosis groups: (1) The experience of a completely other-worldly, distant, supreme God; (2) the introduction of further divine figures, or the splitting up of existing figures into figures closer to human beings than the remote supreme God; (3) the estimation of the world and matter as evil creation; (4) the introduction of a distinct creator God within the Middle Platonic tradition, sometimes described as ignorant and other times as evil; (5) a mythological drama in which a divine element falls as a divine spark and is housed in certain human beings; (6) knowledge gained only through a redeemer figure from the other world; (7) the redemption of humans through the knowledge of God or the divine spark within them; (8) a dualistic tendency.<sup>122</sup> Rather than contending for a single religion, Marksches is comfortable using his epithet to identify a typological construct that defies a single monolithic religion but shares common characteristics.<sup>123</sup> Additionally, according to Marksches, the “great systems” of gnosis (Marcion and the Marcionites, Valentinus and the Valentinians, and the so-called Barbelo-gnostics), which provide clarifying evidence of these motifs, confirm earlier accounts that would otherwise remain uncertain.<sup>124</sup>

Irenaeus addresses the variegated streams of Gnosticism and the unique idiosyncrasies of many of those streams in *Haer.* For example, although his primary concern is with the Valentinians as demonstrated in *Haer.* 1–11, Irenaeus deals directly with the followers of Ptolemaeus and Colorbasus (1.12), the teaching of Marcus and the

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<sup>121</sup> Quasten, *Patrology*, 256.

<sup>122</sup> Marksches, *Gnosis*, 16–17.

<sup>123</sup> Marksches, *Gnosis*, 19.

<sup>124</sup> Marksches, *Gnosis*, 85.

Marcosians (1.13–22), the heresiarch Simon Magus and Menander (1.23), Saturninus and Basilides (1.24), the teaching of Carpocrates (1.25) and Cerinthus alongside the Ebionites and Nicolaitans (1.26), Cerdo and Marcion (1.27), the Encratites (1.28), the Barbeliotes (1.29), the Ophites (1.30), and the Cainites (1.31). Although Irenaeus discovers a relationship between each of these heretical groups, his polemical context does not prevent him from ascertaining the unique characteristics of each. With this level of distinction and nuance present in *Haer.*, it seems clear, as Quasten argues, that “Irenaeus relies on his own extensive reading of Gnostic treatises”<sup>125</sup> to develop his work.

Having established the historical context of Irenaeus alongside the portions of accessible biographical material, I will turn my attention to identifying and summarizing Irenaeus’s understanding of the canon of Scripture. After all, before seeking to understand the particularities regarding Irenaeus’s exegesis and the intersection between his doctrine of God and biblical interpretation, it is necessary to identify the body of literature Irenaeus was interested in exegeting.

### **Irenaeus and Canon**

In order to evaluate Irenaeus’s understanding of the canon of Scripture, I propose a couple of preliminary considerations. First, conspicuous parameters regarding what was canonical and what was not were not as developed in the second century as they would become later in church history, especially after the Protestant Reformation. This is not to suggest that the concept of canon or which documents were considered Spirit-inspired Scripture did not exist in the minds and writings of the early church. As I will demonstrate, Irenaeus reveals an understanding of a functional canon of Scripture. Moreover, his understanding included the belief that some documents were canonical, and therefore authoritative for the church, and other documents were not. However, the

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<sup>125</sup> Quasten, *Patrology*, 290.

need for precisely delimiting the church's understanding of the canon of Scripture was not as great during Irenaeus's day and took time. Put another way, the lines between Spirit-inspired Scripture and other early documents that provided helpful edification for the church were not as obvious. Second, I have found Michael Kruger's distinction between an ontological definition of canon and a functional definition of canon to be useful when considering early Christian understandings.<sup>126</sup> Kruger's distinction enables us to affirm the existence of a real canon that is progressively being realized and functioning in the minds, lives, and liturgies of the early Christians.

Irenaeus understood the canon to consist of the Old Testament (or what he often refers to as "the prophetic writings," distinguishing them from the apostolic writings, which came to be called the New Testament). The form of the Old Testament accepted by Irenaeus was the LXX. In *Haer.* 3.21.2, Irenaeus rehearses the story of how God miraculously superintended the process of translation by the seventy Jewish elders under the reign of Ptolemy. In the surrounding context, Irenaeus is defending an interpretation of Isaiah 7:14, which understands the promise to be that a virgin (παρθένος) would conceive and give birth to a son. According to Irenaeus, Theodotian of Ephesus, Aquila of Pontus, and the Ebionites claimed that the promise was not that a virgin would conceive but that "a young girl" (νεᾶνις) would conceive and bear a son.<sup>127</sup>

In his defense of the LXX, Irenaeus retells how Ptolemy "wished to put them [the translators] to the test, for he feared lest they should confer among themselves and in the translation hide the truth that is in the Scriptures."<sup>128</sup> When all the translators had

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<sup>126</sup> See especially Michael J. Kruger, *The Question of Canon: Challenging the Status Quo in the New Testament Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), chap. 1.

<sup>127</sup> In Hebrew, the promise consists of an אִשָּׁה עֹלָמָה conceiving and bearing a son. The Hebrew word may be ambiguous regarding sexual activity, leaving open the possibility of the glosses "young woman" or "virgin." However, in the context of Isaiah, as Irenaeus points out, it is difficult to see how a young woman conceiving a son is much of a sign from God. This is perhaps why the translators of the LXX chose παρθένος as the translation for אִשָּׁה עֹלָמָה in Isa 7:14. Matt 1:23 quotes Isa 7:14 in connection to Jesus's birth. Matthew's quotation uses παρθένος.

<sup>128</sup> *Haer.* 3.21.2 (Unger, 98).

completed their work, they gathered together to compare the translations, each of which was done without the consultation of the other translators. According to Irenaeus, “God was glorified and the Scriptures were recognized to be truly divine, for all of them read exactly the same things with the same words and names from beginning to end, so that even the Gentiles who were present acknowledged that the Scriptures were translated through the inspiration of God.” According to Irenaeus, the apostles “preached all the prophetic writings [*prophetica omnia . . . adnuntiauerunt*], just as they are contained in the translation of the elders [the LXX].”<sup>129</sup>

Moreover, in *Epid.*, Irenaeus provides a perusal through the Old Testament, interpreting the prophecies contained therein according to the apostolic witness as expressed in what became known as the New Testament. According to Behr, Irenaeus had “two interrelated projects” in *Epid.*:

First, to demonstrate or unfold the content of Scripture, the Old Testament, as it pertains to the revelation of Jesus Christ as preached by the apostles; second, to recognize the scriptural authority of that preaching by demonstrating that the apostles’ proclamation of what has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ, shaped as it is by Scripture, was indeed so prophesied.<sup>130</sup>

Additionally, Irenaeus contends that there are, and can only be, four Gospels. After stating that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John carry apostolic authority, Irenaeus asserts,

It is not possible that there be more Gospels in number than these, or fewer. By way of illustration, since there are four zones in the world in which we live, and four cardinal winds, and since the Church is spread over the whole earth, and since *the pillar and bulwark* of the Church is the Gospel and the Spirit of life, consequently she has four pillars, blowing imperishability from all sides and giving life [*vivificantes*] to men, From these things it is manifest that the Word, who is Artificer of all things and *is enthroned upon the Cherubim and holds together all things*, and who was manifested to men, and gave us the four-fold Gospel, which is held together by the one Spirit. Just as David, when petitioning His [Christ’s] coming, said, *You who are enthroned upon the Cherubim, shine forth*. For the Cherubim, too,

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<sup>129</sup> *Haer.* 3.21.3 (Unger, 99; SC 211:408).

<sup>130</sup> John Behr, trans., introduction to *On the Apostolic Preaching*, by Irenaeus, Popular Patristics 17 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), 17.

had four faces, and their faces are images of the dispensation of the Son of God. For the first one, he says, was like a lion, symbolizing His powerful, sovereign, and kingly nature. The second was like a calf, symbolizing His ministerial and priestly rank. The third animal had a face like a man, which manifestly describes His coming as man. The fourth is like a flying eagle, manifesting the gift of the Spirit hovering over the Church.<sup>131</sup>

Although Irenaeus's reasoning is unlikely to convince those with modern predispositions and who do not already accept the four-fold Gospel and its unique apostolic authority, a few facets of his argument are notable. First, Irenaeus has a concept of parameters that delimit authoritative apostolic revelation from that which is not. In stating that there can only be four Gospels, Irenaeus betrays some, albeit perhaps undeveloped, view of canonicity. It need not be the case that Irenaeus is seeking to convince others of four Gospels who do not already accept these canonical boundaries. In fact, Irenaeus's arguments read more like a demonstration of *fides quaerens intellectum* than they do an *apologia* to those without Christian faith. Second, Irenaeus believes that the same God who gave these apostolic texts to the church is the God who fashioned all things. As a result, the canon is consonant with creation because it is sourced in the same God. Third, the God who inspired the Old Testament is the God who inspired the Gospels. Irenaeus recognizes continuity between the two testaments as rooted in the one God who superintended both.

In addition to the Gospels, Irenaeus quotes from Acts, the letters of Paul, 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation (i.e., the Apocalypse of John). The tempered perspective of Paul Parvis is helpful. Parvis writes,

Irenaeus does not yet have a New Testament canon, in the strict sense of a closed list containing all (and only) the inspired books, but he emphatically does have a collection of authoritative books, books he refers to as "scripture," a collection that looks very much like our developed New Testament canon containing four Gospels, Acts, the letters of Paul, 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> *Haer.* 3.11.8.

<sup>132</sup> Paul Parvis, "Who Was Irenaeus? An Introduction to the Man and His Work," in Foster and Parvis, *Irenaeus*, 13–24, 20.

Eusebius seeks to catalogue the early fathers with respect to the canonical Scriptures.<sup>133</sup> According to Eusebius, Irenaeus reveres Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John alongside 1 John, 1 Peter, and Revelation. Eusebius records that Irenaeus not only knew but also received (οὐ μόνον δὲ οἶδεν, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἀποδέχεται) the Shepherd of Hermas.<sup>134</sup> Eusebius adds that Irenaeus made use of the Wisdom of Solomon in addition some anonymous apostolic presbyter (ἀποστολικοῦ τινος πρεσβυτέρου). According to Eusebius, Irenaeus also makes use of Justin Martyr and Ignatius. Finally, Eusebius includes a lengthy quotation from Irenaeus regarding the divine origin of the LXX. This does not necessitate the conclusion that Irenaeus granted equal canonical status or divine authority for the church to every writing he designated γραφή. It seems that Irenaeus finds enough elasticity in the appellation (γραφή) to apply to uniquely authoritative Scripture and other writings that provide edification for the church. As Denis Farkasfalvy has cautioned, “The term γραφή . . . is often used in the *Adv. haer.* in a general sense, meaning simply ‘writing’; Irenaeus calls his own book also ‘graphe.’”<sup>135</sup> Regarding Irenaeus’s citing the Shepherd of Hermas as γραφή, Farkasfalvy continues, “The form of quotation from Hermas hardly permits any conclusion about its special authority.”<sup>136</sup> After all, Irenaeus elsewhere refers to his own writing as γραφή. Amid what appears to be a spontaneous prayer, Irenaeus prays to the Father, “Through our Lord Jesus Christ grant the gift of the Holy spirit, and grant that everyone who reads this writing [*scripturam/γραφή*] may know You, that You alone are God, and may be strengthened in You, and may separate himself from every heretical, godless, and impious doctrine.”<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 5.8.1.

<sup>134</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 5:8 (LCL, 1:456). For a discussion of whether Irenaeus understood the Shepherd as inspired Scripture, see my footnote in chap.3, s.v. “God Is Infinite.”

<sup>135</sup> Denis Farkasfalvy, “Theology of Scripture in St. Irenaeus,” *Revue Bénédictine* 78 (1968): 318–33.

<sup>136</sup> Farkasfalvy, “Theology of Scripture in St. Irenaeus,” 332.

<sup>137</sup> *Haer.* 3.6.4 (Unger, 40; SC 211:76–77).

Eusebius also records a work still extant in his day that was authored by Irenaeus which quotes some passages from Hebrews.<sup>138</sup> Although Irenaeus's relationship with Hebrews has been a locus for scholarly treatment and debate, Bingham makes a convincing case for the presence of subtle allusions to Hebrews within *Haer.* Bingham expresses that although Irenaeus may not have accepted Hebrews as a Pauline document, Irenaeus "appears to be dependent in important degrees upon its language and teaching."<sup>139</sup> Although Bingham concedes that Irenaeus scarcely cites Hebrews, Hebrews is "present in allusion in significant ways" and "informs important, paradigmatic theological theses in Irenaeus's response to his opponents."<sup>140</sup>

As I will argue in subsequent chapters, Irenaeus's differences with the gnostics have less to do with what texts are divinely authoritative and more to do with how to interpret those texts. However, there are some differences regarding the identity of Christian Scripture (in the fullest sense of the word) between Irenaeus and his opponents. After all, he feels the need to defend four—and only four—canonical Gospels as indicated above.<sup>141</sup> Irenaeus informs the reader that "the followers of Valentinus, living without any fear whatever, put forth their own writings and boast of having more Gospels than there really are."<sup>142</sup> Irenaeus goes on to mention the Gos. Truth as one of the Valentinian writings. In *Haer.* 1.20.1, Irenaeus warns that the gnostics "adduce an untold multitude of apocryphal and spurious writings, which they have composed to bewilder foolish men and such as do not understand the letters of the Truth."

This polemical tension between Irenaeus and the gnostics has led some to

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<sup>138</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 5.26.

<sup>139</sup> D. Jeffrey Bingham, "Irenaeus and Hebrews," in Foster and Parvis, *Irenaeus*, 65–79, 68.

<sup>140</sup> Bingham, "Irenaeus and Hebrews," 78.

<sup>141</sup> *Haer.* 3.11.8.

<sup>142</sup> *Haer.* 3.11.9 (Unger, 58).

conclude that the very concept of a New Testament canon appears to have been set on course by Irenaeus in response to Marcion. For example, Helmut Koester concluded, “The question of a canon of Christian Scripture . . . remained unresolved for a whole generation, until Irenaeus started on a path that would lead out of the perplexity caused by Marcion’s challenge.”<sup>143</sup> In response to the persecution experienced by the believers in Lyons and Vienne, Elaine Pagels similarly concludes that Irenaeus was “determined to consolidate these scattered believers and provide them the shelter of a community by joining them into the worldwide network Polycarp had envisioned as a ‘catholic’ church.”<sup>144</sup> According to Pagels, “Irenaeus’s vision of a united and unanimous ‘catholic church’ speaks more of what he hoped to create than what he actually saw in the churches he knew in Gaul, and those he had visited or heard about in his travels through Gaul, Asia Minor, and Italy.”<sup>145</sup> In response to the gnostics, according to Pagels,

Irenaeus helped construct the basic architecture of what would become orthodox Christianity. His instructions to congregations about which revelations to destroy and which ones to keep—and, perhaps even more important, how to interpret those they kept—would become the basis for the formation of the New Testament and what he calls its “canon of truth,” which, in turn, would become the framework for the orthodox creeds.<sup>146</sup>

Irenaeus’s apparent clarity on much of the New Testament and his defense of only four Gospels led Geoffrey Mark Hahneman to conclude, “His remarks also suggests that this must have been something of an innovation, for if a Fourfold Gospel had been established and generally acknowledged, then Irenaeus would not have offered such a tortured insistence on its numerical legitimacy.”<sup>147</sup> However, ascertaining a pivot, and

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<sup>143</sup> Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 2:10.

<sup>144</sup> Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Vintage, 2003), 135.

<sup>145</sup> Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 129.

<sup>146</sup> Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 142.

<sup>147</sup> Geoffrey Mark Hahneman, *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 101.

especially an innovation, regarding a Christian canon that eventuated on account of Irenaeus is unjustified. After all, in place of Hahenman's conclusion, and as I have mentioned above, Irenaeus might just as well have been substantiating an already widely accepted Christian belief—a belief from which the gnostics had departed. After all, heresy need not be the catalyst for creating or establishing a belief as much as it may be the catalyst for more acutely articulating a robust defense of an already accepted belief. Some of the most significant defenses of doctrines are written well after they have been established!<sup>148</sup> This is comparable to Frances Young's proposal on the development of the scriptural canon and Irenaeus's role:

Irenaeus, as of course he himself claimed, was not so much innovating as articulating and clarifying traditions that he had inherited, and this was so whether he was identifying the books that constituted the old covenant and told of its fulfillment in the new, or rehearsing a rule of faith full of traditional phrases, deeply honed in liturgy and professed in baptism, which also provided the hypothesis or hermeneutical key for those scriptures.<sup>149</sup>

Although Gnosticism, among other heretical challenges, certainly provided motivation for development particularly in specifying which books were scriptural among other advances, these developments were within the arena of articulation and increased precision rather than innovation.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have introduced the field of scholarship consisting of the three streams, which include engagement with Irenaeus, interest in premodern exegesis, and a

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<sup>148</sup> For a capable defense of the traditional view that Irenaeus continued swimming within the current of Christianity, see Kruger, *The Question of Canon*, chap. 4. A contemporary example of substantial treatments arising well after a belief becomes traditional, and in response to fresh challenges to the traditional belief, is provided in the issue of gender and sexuality. Prior to the sexual revolution, one is hard pressed to find a Christian stream defending any view of gender and sexuality that is contrary to a basic binary distinction inherent in creation. It was the rise of innovation with respect to gender and sexuality that eventuated the most substantial defenses of what had previously been a widely held assumption for nearly two thousand years!

<sup>149</sup> Frances M. Young, *Scripture, the Genesis of Doctrine*, vol. 1, *Doctrine and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2023), 108.

more conscious theological interpretation of Scripture. The thesis of this work is the intersection where these three streams meet as tributaries. Moreover, I supplied an introduction to Irenaeus, his second-century context, and his gnostic opponents, producing the historical and theological milieu for better ascertaining Irenaeus's doctrine of God and exegetical practice. Finally, I summarized Irenaeus's functional understanding of the canon of Scripture to identify which texts Irenaeus sought to faithfully exegete within a governing doctrine of God.

In the next chapter, I turn to Irenaeus's portrayal of his gnostic opponents, specifically as it relates to their theological metaphysics and resulting exegesis of Scripture.

## CHAPTER 2

### IRENÆUS'S PRESENTATION OF THE DOCTRINE OF GOD AND EXEGESIS AMONG HIS OPPONENTS

#### **Introduction**

Interest in Gnosticism has burgeoned over the previous half century. Doubtless, one of the contributing factors to this increased interest in these esoteric religious groups is the discovery of the codices at Nag Hammadi in 1945, and the subsequent translations and publication efforts of the same. One scholar who has published capably regarding the gnostics is Elaine Pagels. Pagels's research interests have included the way in which the gnostics interpreted many of the same scriptural texts Christians revered. For example, Pagels has convincingly demonstrated that gnostics approached Pauline Scripture as a primary source of gnostic theology.<sup>1</sup> According to Pagels, the fundamental difference between the gnostics and Irenaeus was one of competing "hermeneutical methods"<sup>2</sup> rather than competing sacred texts.<sup>3</sup> On this point, Pagels is correct. Moreover, Pagels's interest in ascertaining the hermeneutical methods

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<sup>1</sup> Elaine H. Pagels, *The Gnostic Paul: Gnostic Exegesis of the Pauline Letters* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Pagels, *The Gnostic Paul*, 7.

<sup>3</sup> This is not to suggest there was no distinction between the revered texts of the gnostics and the revered texts of the Christians. More times than not, the gnostics were guilty of adding to the canon of Scripture more so than taking away or replacing inspired books with others. The gnostics believed that true and ultimate knowledge was contained in the books accepted by Irenaeus. However, those widely accepted books contained these truths esoterically and therefore were further elaborated in additional gnostic oral teaching, which was eventually written down in authoritative works. This is not unlike a Christian doctrine of progressive revelation whereby Christians have argued that revelation unfolds increasingly over time throughout salvation history. Bart Ehrman's fodder for publishing some of his works was the presence of competing texts that Christians ("proto-orthodox" is the language Ehrman prefers) repudiated. For example, see Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); and Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

among the gnostics is understandable and commendable. Consequently, her thesis has justifiably shaped contemporary scholarship. On the other hand, I contend that Pagels has missed the more fundamental distinctions between Irenaeus and the gnostics by focusing narrowly on methodological distinctions rather than undergirding metaphysical commitments. Indeed, there were methodological distinctions between Irenaeus and his opponents. I will identify and explicate some of those distinctions in chapters 4 and 5. However, those methodological distinctions, when they do occur between Irenaeus and the gnostics, are the consequence of underlying theological commitments. Missing from Pagels's work is the way in which biblical texts functioned within a gnostic doctrine of God when compared to Irenaeus's doctrine of God. If Irenaeus and his gnostic opponents often interpreted the same biblical texts, what contributed to their expansive divergent and competing exegetical conclusions? To answer this question adequately and account for the disparate conclusions of the gnostics and Irenaeus, one must keep in view the inseparable relationship between the doctrine of God and exegesis of divine texts. What the ancient interpreter of sacred texts believed about God informed how the interpreter approached and read these sacred texts.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, when texts are considered divine in any sense of the term, there invariably exists a relationship between a doctrine of God (who and what God is) and an understanding of the nature of the divine text. On the relationship between a doctrine of God and exegesis within Gnosticism there is a paucity of scholarship. Pagels and others have offered interpretations of Scripture that accord with ancient gnostic systems, interpretations that rival what they term "proto-orthodox" interpretations. However, scholars have produced little to unpack the performance of

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<sup>4</sup> The work of Craig A. Carter has proven helpful to discuss the interplay between biblical interpretation and theological speculation among early Christian writers; see especially Craig A. Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018); Carter, *Contemplating God with the Great Tradition: Recovering Trinitarian Classical Theism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021).

Scripture within ancient gnostic theological systems.<sup>5</sup> In what follows, I aim to contribute to the remedy of this paucity.

In this chapter, I demonstrate that while Irenaeus's gnostic opponents revered many of the same sacred texts as did Irenaeus, they granted revelatory pride of place to their doctrine of God and accompanying protological construct (revealed through secret teaching). Consequently, the gnostics imported their doctrine of God into the biblical text. As a result, the sacred texts shared by Christians, such as Irenaeus, and the gnostics alike played a subservient revelatory role among Irenaeus's opponents. According to the gnostics, these texts were accessible and understood properly only through an extrinsic theological framework. It was the *private* teaching of the Savior that filled in the metaphysical and protological gaps left by the opaque Scriptures common between gnostics and Christians. This was especially true regarding the revelation of the Supreme Father.<sup>6</sup> Rather than assessing these competing hermeneutical conclusions between the gnostics and Irenaeus as simply the result of competing "hermeneutical systems," it is necessary to drill deeper into the fundamental theological foundations for such systems that impact the interpreter's approach to texts. In other words, the interpretations offered by the gnostics do not fundamentally occur at the level of hermeneutical systems but at the deeper level of subtextual theological commitments.

To accomplish this, I first address the challenge of utilizing Irenaeus as a trustworthy source for gnostic theology. Evaluating two competing models proposed, one represented by Karen King and the other by Einar Thomasson, I conclude that Irenaeus is

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<sup>5</sup> Consider, for example, the justifiably influential standard on Valentinianism: Einar Thomasson, *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the "Valentinians,"* Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 60 (Boston: Brill, 2006). Thomasson has produced a work that may prove influential for many decades; however, a noticeable lacuna exists in this over five-hundred page tome. Nearly absent from Thomasson's treatment is the way Valentinians engaged with, and interpreted, their sacred texts!

<sup>6</sup> Although not one of the primary points of this chapter, it is informative to note the private nature of gnostic revelation as contrasted with the public nature of Christian revelation. For a helpful distinction between the public nature of Christian revelation contained in Scripture and the private nature of gnostic revelation outside of Scripture, see John Behr, *Formation of Christian Theology*, vol. 1, *The Way to Nicaea* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 40–41.

a trustworthy historical source. Second, I reconstruct a gnostic doctrine of God from *Haer.* in which I accent two divine attributes that together help summarize the epicenter of the doctrine of God among Irenaeus's opponents. These two attributes are (1) divine transcendence and (2) divine complexity. Third, having established the doctrine of God that governs a gnostic reading of the Scriptures, I pivot to explicating the exegetical mind of Irenaeus's opponents. As mentioned above, Irenaeus's opponents revered many of the same sacred texts as did Irenaeus. As a result, I begin establishing this point.

Additionally, I locate two concepts that serve to compose the exegetical foundations among Irenaeus's opponents—(1) esoteric revelation, and (2) an extrinsic theological system. Finally, I recognize and explain two exegetical principles that inform and govern the exegetical methods among the gnostics. These two principles are (1) the principle of ambiguity, and (2) the principle of discordance.

In conclusion, I show that the gnostics granted primacy to their doctrine of God, consequently importing their theological metaphysics into the biblical text. As a result, their exegesis of biblical texts demonstrates their already existing theological commitments.

### **Irenaeus as a Source for Gnostic Theology**

My decision to employ Irenaeus as a valid historical source for his opponents is a controversial one. After all, when searching for a reliable guide to what ancient groups genuinely believed, polemicists are suspect. There are two competing models for treating Irenaeus as a source for engaging gnostic thought. On the one hand, Karen King has proposed a thesis I call "heresiological polemics and identity-shaping discourse." On the other hand, Einar Thomassen advocates a thesis of "coherence and dependability." I summarize and evaluate each of them below.

## **Heresiological Polemics and Identity-Shaping Discourse**

According to King, the epithet “Gnosticism” is a modern invention serving to reinscribe and reproduce ancient Christian polemics and biases. She describes how “modern historiography came to invent a new religion, Gnosticism, largely out of early Christian polemics intersecting with post-Enlightenment historicism, colonialism, and existential phenomenology.”<sup>7</sup> Although Irenaeus never used this term,<sup>8</sup> he represents the polemical bias operative among the early heresiologists that King desires to avoid. King functions with the operating conclusion that the second century was the century for identity making among the diverse group of early “Christianities.” Instrumental in this identity formation was polemical discourse among these groups. Irenaeus, among others, serves as a case-in-point of a heresiologist who sought to identify his own Christianity in contradistinction from other Christianities. As a result, undergirding Irenaeus’s description of these early Christian groups competing with Irenaeus for legitimacy, is a pejorative assessment of the “other.” The historian, according to King, must not privilege some perspectives over others without recognizing the syncretistic nature of all religious identity formation. King exhorts historians to reconsider the telos of their work and to recognize the pluriformity of early Christianity, and the ways in which heresiological discourse served to invent Christian identity. Irenaeus, in King’s assessment, is helpful as a source for identity shaping heresiological discourse but not as a reliable guide to understand other equally legitimate and competing religious groups.

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<sup>7</sup> Karen King, preface to *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2005), viii.

<sup>8</sup> Irenaeus begins *Haer.* identifying the followers of Valentinus and more specifically, the disciples of Ptolemaeus, as his opponents (1.Pref.2). However, he uses the title “gnostic” to refer to the source heresy, which Valentinus adapted into his own system (1.11.1). Some groups related but distinct from the Valentinians and the Ptolemaeans, self-designate as gnostics (1.25.6). Additionally, Irenaeus describes a plethora of “gnostics” who have surfaced, apparently being comfortable using the designation as a categorical title for related heretical movements (1.29.1). Ultimately, Irenaeus can employ “gnostic” for various groups, groups Irenaeus himself carefully distinguishes according to their idiosyncrasies throughout his work. He does so on account of their claim to possess religious *gnosis*, which, after assessment, is “falsely so-called” (2.Pref.1; cf. 4.6.4).

## Coherence and Dependability

On the other hand, Thomassen, a leading scholar in Valentinianism, suggests that patristic evidence broadly (and Irenaeus particularly) are helpful points of departure for understanding and reconstructing Gnosticism.<sup>9</sup> According to Thomassen, gnostic texts were typically more fluid and received various revisions over time, leaving historical products that are less reliable. Moreover, although the Nag Hammadi library provides the scholar with remarkable opportunity to further investigate gnostic groups, scholars in the field of gnosis groups do not always keep sight of the limitations of these sources. After all, the Nag Hammadi library dates to the fourth century without supplying names of authors or historical indications regarding when they may have been authored. For this reason, measured historical suspicion regarding these documents is appropriate. In Irenaeus's extant writings, one has access to an author who engaged directly and extensively with the gnostics.<sup>10</sup>

Rather than approaching texts—like *Haer.* 1.29–30 and Nag Hammadi texts such as the *Apocryphon of John* and *Tripartite Tractate*—with a hermeneutic of assumed discontinuity, Thomassen approaches these texts with a hermeneutic of continuity or “coherence.” Essential to Thomassen's broader thesis of coherence among these sources that are often treated as heterogeneous is his regard for patristic evidence (Irenaeus in particular) as a valid point of departure.

Considering Thomassen's thesis of coherence and dependability, Thomassen adeptly criticizes various deconstructive models as represented by King that fail to offer positive historical reconstructions. As one who has spent countless hours in the Nag Hammadi library, Thomassen opines, “It can hardly be satisfactory to regard the numerous theological ideas and positions attested in this material as simply individual

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<sup>9</sup> Einar Thomassen, *The Coherence of “Gnosticism,”* Hanz-Lietzmann-Vorlesungen 18 (Boston: De Gruyter, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> For example, in *Haer.* 2.17.9, Irenaeus claims frequent discussions with his opponents regarding points of disagreement.

varieties of early Christianity.”<sup>11</sup> If Thomassen is correct to suggest that there may be a genealogical relationship between the Valentinians and earlier gnostics, this would permit the possibility that a second-century heresiologist may indeed offer an accurate, albeit polemical, portrayal.

Moreover, the plausibility of the modern historian’s claim that he has ascertained a more accurate understanding of ancient religious movements than a contemporary theologian of those movements (like Irenaeus) enjoyed is highly tenuous at best and shockingly self-inflated at worst. Dismissing Irenaeus as a valid source for the theological beliefs of his contemporaries, especially given the late dates of the Nag Hammadi documents, is tantamount to what C. S. Lewis designated as “chronological snobbery,” which he has defined “as the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate of our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that count discredited.”<sup>12</sup> The historical posture Lewis describes admonishes the contemporary historian to guard against the temptation to dismiss ancient authors (especially authors contemporary to the object of study considered) in favor of modern historical perspective that itself is motivated by its own set of presuppositions.

Given the limitations of the Nag Hammadi library and the fluidity of many of the gnostic sources, the most reliable—indeed the only—access the modern historian possesses to Irenaeus’s gnostic opponents is Irenaeus. Recognizing that all historical scholarship demands honesty regarding the finitude of both the historian and the sources with which the historian works, I will utilize Irenaeus as a reliable avenue for understanding the doctrine of God and exegesis operative among his gnostic opponents.

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<sup>11</sup> Thomassen, *The Coherence of “Gnosticism,”* 5.

<sup>12</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, in *Beloved Works of C. S. Lewis*, Family Christian Library (New York: Family Christian, 1986), 114.

## **The Doctrine of God among Irenaeus's Gnostic Opponents**

According to the “typological construct” of gnosis movements issued by Christoph Markschies, a doctrine of God features prominently in identifying shared beliefs among Irenaeus’s opponents. For example, the first of Markschies’s eight ideas among gnosis movements is “the experience of a completely other-worldly, distant, supreme God.”<sup>13</sup> In what follows, I highlight two central attributes of the doctrine of God operative among Irenaeus’s opponents: transcendence and complexity.

### **Divine Transcendence**

One of the essential theological attributes of the Supreme Father within a gnostic doctrine of God is divine transcendence. On the one hand, transcendence is a requisite attribute of the Christian God, both within Irenaeus and other early Christian theologians. On the other hand, gnostic theology frames divine transcendence differently. Irenaeus conceives of transcendence through the following classical theological dictum: “God, the Fullness of all things, necessarily contains them all without limit and is not contained by anyone.”<sup>14</sup> Irenaeus understands two distinct categories of existence—(1) God the Creator of all, and (2) all that God created. This ontological distinction proves to be a demarcating framework between Irenaeus’s understanding and the understanding of his opponents. What distinguishes God from creation, according to Irenaeus, is not simply a distinction of degree but a distinction of kind, or classification. Pressing in further, even assigning a category to God misses the point. God is the all-encompassing

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<sup>13</sup> Christoph Markschies, *Gnosis: An Introduction* (New York: T&T Clark, 2003), 16. See discussion in chap. 1 of this dissertation for the remainder of Markschies’s motifs of gnosis.

<sup>14</sup> *Haer* 2.1.2 (Unger, 17). Rowan Greer understands this quotation from Irenaeus to be a kind of theological foundation from which Irenaeus builds his theology. “It will be my contention . . . that the formula ‘God contains all things, but is uncontained’ supplies a simple and concise definition of Irenaeus’ theological premise. The details of his doctrinal position may all be derived from the one formula.” Rowan Greer, “The Dog and the Mushrooms: Irenaeus’ View of the Valentinians Assessed,” in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism: Proceedings of the International Conference on Gnosticism at Yale, New Haven, Connecticut, March 28–31, 1978*, ed. Bentley Layton (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1980), 1:151, 154.

category in which and by which all things exist. Put another way, God is qualitatively, and not merely quantitatively, distinct from all of creation. He contains all and is contained by nothing. Irenaeus's opponents contended that the Supreme Father contains all within the fullness. However, apparently the Supreme Father's relationship to that which is outside the fullness is different. This distinction supplied room for ingredients of their speculative protology generally, and Sophia's passion, alongside subsequent consequences of her passion, specifically. According to Irenaeus, his opponents "assert that he [Demiurge] became Father and God of all things outside the Fullness, inasmuch as he is the Maker of all the ensouled and material beings."<sup>15</sup> When considering the distinction between Irenaeus's conception of transcendence and his gnostic opponents' conception of transcendence, the attributives "absolute" and "relative" transcendence are informative.<sup>16</sup> The gnostics embraced the latter and Irenaeus embraced the former.

According to the gnostics, creation was of the same *ousia* as the Supreme Father. Although the gap might be infinitely great between the ontology of the First Father and the ontology of creation through the gnostic doctrine of emanations and eventually the creation of the world, creation and the Supreme Father existed on the same ontological plane. Irenaeus's opponents maintained "that they have souls from the same realm as Jesus and so are similar to him, at times even better."<sup>17</sup> This appears to have contributed in some way to their belief in the transmigration of human souls.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the human soul, in this anthropological framework, is not a unique creation of the one and only God but exists necessarily by nature as an extension of the divine nature or a

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<sup>15</sup> *Haer.* 1.5.2 (Unger, 33–34).

<sup>16</sup> This distinction between "absolute" and "relative" transcendence, with the gnostics embracing the latter and Irenaeus embracing the former, is from Denis Minns, *Irenaeus: An Introduction* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 41–42. Authors that follow Minns include Jackson Lashier, *Irenaeus on the Trinity*, SVC 127 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 79–90; and Anthony Briggman, *God and Christ in Irenaeus*, *Oxford Early Christian Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 79–80.

<sup>17</sup> *Haer.* 2.32.3 (Unger, 104).

<sup>18</sup> *Haer.* 2.33.1–5.

kind of divine spark. This was in direct contradiction to Irenaeus's belief in a fundamental distinction of kind between all things created and God the Creator.<sup>19</sup> The gnostic belief in the continuity between the essence of First Father and the essence of creation helps to explain the divine doctrine of complexity, which I explicate below.

Additionally, a relative conception of transcendence surprisingly results in distance or space between the Supreme Father and creation rather than a robust doctrine of divine immanence as espoused by Irenaeus. To maintain any semblance of a doctrine of divine infinitude distinguishing the Supreme Father from finite creation, which Irenaeus's opponents appear to have maintained, an infinite series of steps between the Supreme Father and the act of creation is necessary. In this model, divine transcendence is of the relative variety.<sup>20</sup> This helps to explain why Irenaeus's opponents believed that a lesser deity (i.e., Demiurge) is the God of all outside the fullness while the Supreme Father is God over all within the fullness, resulting in relational distance between the Supreme Father and the created world. Conversely, while Irenaeus affirms an ontological gap (or distinction of essence) between God and creation, an immediate relationship between God and this world necessarily exists.<sup>21</sup> God created all things and therefore stands in a direct and immediate relationship with creation through his Word and Spirit.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Haer.* 2.34.2–3.

<sup>20</sup> The argument of *ad infinitum*, or infinite regress, is one that Irenaeus uses against his opponents (cf. *Haer.* 2.1.3; 2.35.1).

<sup>21</sup> In an article in which Anatolios contends for the influence of Irenaeus's opposition to the Valentinians on Athanasius's opposition to the Arians, he describes what he refers to as "the immediacy of relation between God and the world." Khaled Anatolios, "The Influence of Irenaeus on Athanasius," *Studia Patristica* 36 (2001): 464. To affirm Irenaeus's statement regarding an immediate relationship is not necessarily to rebuff the later Thomist denial of a "real relation" that God has with the world. Although Thomas Aquinas seizes upon different concepts than Irenaeus, it is important to note that in so doing, Aquinas sought to defend some of the same theological truths Irenaeus espoused, such as divine eternity. For Aquinas's treatment on the matter of God's relation to the world, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of English Dominican Province (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 1981), bk.1, q.13, a.7.

<sup>22</sup> *Haer.* 1.22.1.

God created through his “indefatigable Word” according to Irenaeus.<sup>23</sup> For the gnostics, although Demiurge exists in an immediate relation with material creation since he is the author of all things outside the fullness, the Supreme Father remains relationally distant. This distance is a consequence of their conception of what amounts to a circumscribed and relative transcendence.

According to Irenaeus, because God’s transcendence is absolute, he is immanent or near to creation. If God contains all things, then God is near to all that he contains. It would not be an overstatement to suggest that God is nearer to creation than creation is to itself.<sup>24</sup> For his gnostic interlocutors, transcendence is conceived of as infinite separation and even disassociation from everything outside the fullness.

Corollaries of divine transcendence in a gnostic doctrine of God include the related attributes of invisibility and incomprehensibility (or uncontainability). As Irenaeus states concerning his opponents, “They claim that in the invisible and unnameable heights there is a certain perfect Aeon that was before all, the First-Being, whom they also call First-Beginning, First-Father, and Profundity. He is invisible and incomprehensible.”<sup>25</sup> The Latin reads, *esse autem illum inuisibilem et quem nulla res capere possit.*<sup>26</sup> The theological formula was one with which Irenaeus was quite familiar,

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<sup>23</sup> *Haer.* 2.2.4 (Unger, 21).

<sup>24</sup> For an explanation of the relationship between God’s transcendence and immanence in Irenaeus, see chap. 3.

<sup>25</sup> *Haer.* 1.1.1 (Unger, 23).

<sup>26</sup> *Haer.* 1.1.1 (SC 264:28). The clause is entirely absent in the Greek text contained in Epiphanius. Rousseau contends that, since there is no correspondence for this clause in Greek and the clause duplicates the text, *n’est sans doute qu’une glose indûment entrée dans le texte* (SC 262:172n2). Unger does not agree, contending that Epiphanius dropped the clause by haplography since what follows in the text (*Cum autem a nullo caperetur et esset inuisibilis*) “seems certainly to presume something was said about that in the preceding sentence” (Unger, 133n4). Although there is reason to doubt whether *esse autem illum inuisibilem et quem nulla res capere possit* was original to Irenaeus, there is no reasonable doubt that *cum autem a nullo caperetur et esset inuisibilis* was original. Therefore, the textual critical issue has no bearing on what I have observed above regarding divine invisibility and incomprehensibility in gnostic theology.

as I discuss in chapter 3. However, what Irenaeus intended by the theological maxim and what his gnostic opponents intended was incompatible.<sup>27</sup>

The divine attributes of invisibility and incomprehensibility manifested in gnostic protology. Irenaeus's opponents claimed that from this invisible and incomprehensible Father came a series of thirty Emissions or Aeons (i.e., a Triacontad), composed of an Ogdoad (group of eight), a Decad (group of ten), and a Dodecad (group of twelve). With each successive emission, increased distance is conceptualized between the Aeon emitted and the invisible and incomprehensible Father. The first Aeon the Father emitted was Mind. According to Irenaeus, "he alone comprehended his (Father's) greatness."<sup>28</sup> Irenaeus recounts, "So they tell us that First-Father of theirs is known only to Only-begotten, that is, Mind, who was born of him. To all the rest he is invisible and incomprehensible [*inuisibilem et incomprehensibilem*]."<sup>29</sup> Subsequent Aeons did not enjoy the privilege of comprehending the incomprehensible Father and seeing the invisible Father as did Mind. According to a gnostic doctrine of God, divine incomprehensibility refers to the absence of comprehensibility among the various Aeons regarding the Supreme Father. Similarly, divine invisibility and relatedly, hiddenness, refers to the absence of awareness (sight) altogether concerning the invisible Father. In this model, the Supreme Father is incomprehensible and invisible gradationally and relative to the relational distance between the Supreme Father and the Aeons. With each subsequent Aeon emitted, the Father becomes more incomprehensible and more invisible. As a result, the gnostics conceptualized divine attributes of the Supreme Father relative to the distance of each successive Aeon. Consequently, the Supreme Father was not distinguished from the Aeons according to kind but according to degree. Rather than

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<sup>27</sup> See chap. 3 for further discussion and contrast.

<sup>28</sup> *Haer.* 1.1.1 (Unger, 23); *solum capientem magnitudinem Patris* (SC 264:30).

<sup>29</sup> *Haer.* 1.2.1 (Unger, 24-25; SC 264:36).

conceiving of transcendence, incomprehensibility, and invisibility in absolute terms, Irenaeus's opponents envisaged these divine attributes in relative terms.

According to Irenaeus, although Mind alone comprehended the Father, it was the will of the Supreme Father in conjunction with the restraint of Silence (the Father's consort) that the Aeons "desire to seek after their First-Father."<sup>30</sup> At the will of the Father, Silence prevented Mind from communicating the Father's greatness to the rest of the Aeons.<sup>31</sup> On account of the invisibility and incomprehensibility of the Supreme Father, Sophia, the thirtieth Aeon, suffered passion by desiring to comprehend the Father. According to Irenaeus,<sup>32</sup> his disputants believed that Sophia attempted to comprehend the Supreme Father's greatness and in so doing fell into passion, producing an emission without the aid of her consort (Desire). The emission from Sophia's passion would become the Demiurge, or Creator, of the world. The gradational invisibility and incomprehensibility of the Father becomes more apparent at this juncture in the protological gnostic myth. According to gnostic doctrine, Demiurge is entirely ignorant of the invisible and incomprehensible Father, even erroneously claiming that he himself is the only true God.<sup>33</sup>

### **Divine Complexity**

The second attribute central to the doctrine of God among Irenaeus's gnostic opponents is complexity. The gnostic doctrine of divine complexity becomes clear in the protological myth of divine emanations. In Marksches's typological construct of gnostic movements, the belief in protological emanations forms the second motif; these emanations result in a series of divine beings. Marksches describes this motif as "the

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<sup>30</sup> *Haer.* 1.2.1 (Unger, 25).

<sup>31</sup> *Haer.* 1.2.1.

<sup>32</sup> Irenaeus provides various depictions of the protological "fall" of Sophia.

<sup>33</sup> *Haer.* 2.9.2.

introduction . . . of further divine figures, or the splitting up of existing figures into figures that are closer to human beings than the remote supreme God.”<sup>34</sup> Although this understanding of God, or gods, betrays a divine plurality akin to forms of polytheism, Irenaeus’s opponents’ theological metaphysic of a series of divine figures was grounded in a single divine source. These figures emanated from, and were not ontologically distinct from, the Supreme Father. As a result, the gnostic conception is less like divine plurality and more akin to divine complexity. Consistent with the distinction between “relative” and “absolute” transcendence above, Marksches identifies the relative distance of the divine figures gradationally with each successive emanation in relation to the creation of humanity. Although I introduced the concept of divine emissions above, it is suitable at this juncture to consider what the gnostic doctrine of emissions assumes regarding the divine nature. In other words, the production of divine Aeons says something about the “whatness” of God in contrast to Irenaeus’s doctrine of God.<sup>35</sup>

The First Father envisioned by the gnostics is complex, that is, capable of distribution and division on account of composition. The complex essence of the Father is the theological foundation that makes protological emanations possible. It is important to note that divine complexity is not the same as divine materiality. Irenaeus’s opponents would likely reject belief that the First Father has a corporeal body. On the other hand, in the gnostic doctrine of God, the First Father is *composed* of divine attributes in such a way that his nature is capable of division through emission resulting in the existing of distinct Aeons named after divine attributes or functions. Contrariwise, Irenaeus contends throughout that God is simple—not composed of divine parts or attributes—and therefore incapable of such division. According to Irenaeus, all God’s members are of “similar

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<sup>34</sup> Marksches, *Gnosis*, 16.

<sup>35</sup> I explicate Irenaeus’s doctrine of God in contrast to the theology proper of his opponents in chap. 3.

nature, being entirely similar and equal to himself.”<sup>36</sup> As a result, the Christian theologian must speak of God as “all” his attributes. This means that God is not the sum of his attributes but is more accurately understood as “all” with reference to each attribute. Therefore, God is “all Mind, all Spirit, all Understanding, all Thought, all Word, all Hearing, all Eye, all Light,” leaving no room for God to subdivide or emanate into Mind, Spirit, Understanding, Thought, etc. This doctrine of God distinguishes God from creation since created things are the sum of their parts and therefore divisible. As Irenaeus asserts, there are certain activities that “can be spoken of in men and women, since men and women are composite in nature, consisting of body and soul.”<sup>37</sup> In other words, the human’s eye is not the ear. Moreover, the activity of hearing is not seeing and vice versa. The human soul, or immaterial *part* of humanity, is not the human body or material *part* of humanity. Created beings are composite beings. Although composite parts and attributes empower created beings, these composite parts also demonstrate a limitation of nature. The doctrine of divine simplicity as espoused by Irenaeus preserves the otherness of God and the qualitative (not merely quantitative) distinction between God and creation.<sup>38</sup>

On the other hand, although the gnostics demarcated between the First Father and creation, they did not do so on the basis of divine simplicity. Rather, the gnostics sought recourse to God’s greatness or magnitude as that which distinguished the Supreme Father from creation and from the rest of the Triacontad. However, this distinction between the Supreme Father and the Aeons, and even creation, was a difference of degree not kind. The gnostics, according to Irenaeus, conceived of the Supreme Father as distinct because of the sum of his attributes. Additionally, as mentioned above with reference to

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<sup>36</sup> *Haer.* 2.13.3 (Unger, 43).

<sup>37</sup> *Haer.* 2.13.3 (Unger, 43).

<sup>38</sup> For a greater development of the doctrine of divine simplicity in Irenaeus, see chap. 3.

divine transcendence, Irenaeus's opponents envisaged a great distance, or gap, between the Supreme Father and creation, explained through their elaborate protology manifesting in a series of divine emanations. However, while the gnostics maintained tremendous (even infinite) relational distance and distinction of substantial degree, there existed ontological overlap between the *ousia* of the Supreme Father and the *ousia* of creation. The theological grammar of the gnostics undergirds their entire system of syzygies, emanations, the waywardness of Sophia, and the resulting creation of the world through the agent of the Demiurge. In this way, the gnostics imagined continuity between the nature and operations of God and the nature and operations of humanity.<sup>39</sup> Among themselves, according to Irenaeus, debate raged regarding the order of emissions since such emissions found their analogy in *hominum adfectiones et motiones mentis et generationes intentionum et emissiones uerborum*.<sup>40</sup> Irenaeus rebutted, "They get [their notion about] an emission from human activity and rashly divine against God."<sup>41</sup> In other words, the gnostics contrived greater continuity between the affectional, mental, and verbal emissions of humanity and the emissions of God.

On the contrary, Irenaeus's conception of God did not provide the metaphysical foundations for gnostic protology. According to Irenaeus, one might accurately, although inadequately, describe God as hearing in the same way that he sees.<sup>42</sup> Such theologizing was possible on account of God's oneness and simplicity. In such a metaphysical conception, protological emanations have no basis. When the distinction between human operations and experience and divine operations is according

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<sup>39</sup> *Haer.* 2.13.10.

<sup>40</sup> *Haer.* 2.13.8 (SC 294:128).

<sup>41</sup> *Haer.* 2.13.8 (Unger, 45).

<sup>42</sup> *Haer.* 2.13.8.

to kind and not degree, parallels such as those occurring in gnostic protology lose their foundation.

One of the ways the metaphysical and theological differences between Irenaeus and his opponents manifested was in their conception of the generation, or emanation, of the Word. One might assume continuity between gnostic protology and Irenaeus's conception of the generation of the Word from the Father. However, upon a closer examination, there are fundamental differences between the Father's generation of the Word in Irenaeus and the emanation of various Aeons in gnostic protology. For the gnostics, human emanation closely resembled divine emanation. As a result, theological description such as divine emanation was virtually *univocal* in relationship to human emanation. The gnostics peered into the celestial referent of divine emanation through the terrestrial signs of human emanation. As a result, the gnostics described the generation of the Word as comparable to the generation of words by composite human beings. In contrast, since Irenaeus functioned with an *analogical* view of theological language, he recognized genuine truths from the analogy while highlighting the dissimilarity between God and humanity. For example, in describing God, Irenaeus writes,

He is above all these things, and because of that, unutterable. He may well and correctly be called a Mind that comprehends all things; but his Mind is not like [*non similis*] the mind of men and women. He may most correctly be called Light, but he is nothing like [*nihil simile*] our light. In the same manner in regard to all the other points, the Father of all things is in no way similar [*nulli similis*] to humankind's littleness. Indeed, we speak of him in such [terms] because of love; but it is understood that he is above them by virtue of his greatness.<sup>43</sup>

Irenaeus juxtaposes two concepts that inform his theological project. "We speak of him in such [terms] because of love [*dilectio*]; but it is understood that he is above them by virtue of his greatness [*magnitudo*]." God's love permits comparisons with creation, but his greatness defies ontological correspondence. One might refer to this as an

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<sup>43</sup> *Haer.* 2.13.4 (Unger, 43; SC 294:116).

understanding of divine accommodation in which God condescends to reveal to humanity while his condescension must not be confused with univocity.<sup>44</sup>

Irenaeus is not equivocating regarding the nature of God. Rather, he is highlighting the analogical nature of theological language on account of divine incomprehensibility. Descriptions of God can be accurate while not being comprehensive. It is also telling to note that Irenaeus is here recognizing the accessibility of theological language according to God's love, but the inadequacy of such language according to God's greatness. In this light, Irenaeus accents many differences between the human and composite experience of uttering words and the divine activity of eternally generating the Word. For example, the human word has an origin—a beginning. This beginning is the result of humanity's composite nature. The human begins to speak at a certain point in time, and at a later point, ceases to speak. The temporal nature of human activities characterizes and circumscribes the human experience. Indeed, the temporal limitations of the activity are the direct result of humanity's composite nature. In other words, the nature of the finite human word is necessarily derived from the composite nature and experience of the finite human being. The theological schema of the gnostics suggested far more continuity between the emanation of the human word and the emanation of the divine Word.<sup>45</sup> The gnostics understood human operations to be closely correlative with the nature and emissions of divine Aeons. Irenaeus concludes, "They throw together as plausible all human operations and activities of the mind, generations of the intentions, and emissions of words."<sup>46</sup>

### **Exegesis among Irenaeus's Gnostic Opponents**

This gnostic doctrine of God eventuated certain bibliological beliefs and

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<sup>44</sup> See chap. 3 for further discussion.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. *Haer.* 2.13.8.

<sup>46</sup> *Haer.* 2.13.10 (Unger, 46).

exegetical conclusions. In other words, what Irenaeus's opponents believed about God impacted how they understood and interpreted Scripture. In what follows, I summarize some of the distinctive bibliological and exegetical tenets among Irenaeus's opponents.

### **A Shared Canon?**

Perhaps surprisingly, it appears that the various aberrant sects Irenaeus describes in *Haer.* accepted many of the same scriptural writings as did Irenaeus. The fundamental debate between Irenaeus and his opponents was not what texts to accept as authoritative. Rather, the debate revolved around how to interpret those texts rightly. To be clear, this is not to suggest that there were no additional writings the gnostics accepted as authoritative. For example, when describing the favored sacred texts among the Ebionites, Marcionites, and the Valentinians, Irenaeus describes each of these as preferring one of the four canonical Gospels.<sup>47</sup> They did, after all, “adduce an untold multitude of apocryphal and spurious writings [*apocryphorum et perperum scripturarum*].”<sup>48</sup> However, although it appears that each of these movements generally (or at least partially) accepted the four Gospels, some of them added to the number of canonical Gospels, which is why Irenaeus contends for the acceptance of only four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.<sup>49</sup> The Valentinians, according to Irenaeus, “living without any fear whatever, put forth their own writings and boast of having more Gospels than there really are. Indeed, they have carried their boldness so far that they give the title *Gospel of Truth* to a book which they have but recently composed, and which agrees in no wise with the Gospels of the apostles.”<sup>50</sup> Some have suggested that the Gospel of Truth described here by Irenaeus is the same work discovered at Nag

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<sup>47</sup> *Haer.* 3.11.7.

<sup>48</sup> *Haer.* 1.20.1 (Unger, 76; SC 264:288).

<sup>49</sup> *Haer.* 3.11.8.

<sup>50</sup> *Haer.* 3.11.9 (Unger, 58).

Hammadi (and contained in NHC I 3 and NHC XII 2).<sup>51</sup>

On the other hand, Irenaeus generally engages his opponents at the level of doctrine and exegesis rather than at the level of the precise identity of the canon. As he states, “Not only from the words of the evangelists and apostles do they try to make proofs by perverting the interpretations and by falsifying the explanations, but also from the law and the prophets.”<sup>52</sup> This explains why lengthy portions of Irenaeus’s magnum opus deal directly with exegesis of biblical texts—texts which both Irenaeus and his opponents accept as authoritative.

The various sects, however, appeared to have favorite apostles or writings among the shared sacred texts, a canon within a canon, so to speak. This approach is consonant with the basis for their belief in esoteric revelation provided discriminately rather than ubiquitously and promiscuously. As Irenaeus observes, “These things, however, were not declared openly, because not all are capable of grasping this knowledge. They were pointed out mystically by Savior through parables to those who were able to understand them.”<sup>53</sup> This explains why some groups were drawn to particular biblical authors over others. For example, Paul appears to have been one of the favorites among some of the gnostics, as Irenaeus indicates.<sup>54</sup> Others appear to have preferred John’s writings,<sup>55</sup> which is substantiated by the early Valentinian commentary on the Gospel of John by Heracleon.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> The first to propose this was W. C. Van Unnik in *Newly Discovered Gnostic Writings; A Preliminary Survey of the Nag-Hammadi Find*, Studies in Biblical Theology 30 (London: SCM, 1960), 60.

<sup>52</sup> *Haer.* 1.3.6 (Unger, 29).

<sup>53</sup> *Haer.* 1.3.1 (Unger, 28).

<sup>54</sup> *Haer.* 1.8.2, 4–5. This is the basis for Pagels’s thesis in *The Gnostic Paul*.

<sup>55</sup> *Haer.* 1.8.5.

<sup>56</sup> A copy of Heracleon’s commentary on the Gospel of John is no longer extant. However, fragments remain, primarily preserved in Origen’s commentary on John. See Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, trans. Ronald E. Heine, Fathers of the Church 80, 89 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1989, 1993). For an engagement with the fragments that remain of

## Exegetical Foundations

Although Irenaeus and his opponents shared many of the same sacred texts, their interpretation of these texts were aeons apart. Irenaeus reveals a couple of noteworthy foundations that undergirded gnostic exegesis.

### *Esoteric Revelation*

One of the foundational principles for understanding gnostic exegesis is their esotericism. The various sects Irenaeus opposed posited that Jesus did not reveal the truth about the Supreme Father and the complex protological system publicly. Rather, he chose to reveal it to a select few. Moreover, it appears that several gnostic groups claimed special revelatory awareness for some apostles over others. Perhaps this helped explain why their beliefs were not widely held by the majority of those within the apostolic scope of influence.<sup>57</sup>

The gnostics sought substantiation from the texts revered by the Christian church. For example, when describing one of these sects—the Marcosians—Irenaeus refers to Matthew 11:25–27 and Luke 10:21–22 as “the highest proof” and “crown of their system [*regulae*].”<sup>58</sup> In these texts, Jesus prays to the Father, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding, and revealed them to babes; yea, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knew [*cognouit*]<sup>59</sup> the Father except the Son, neither [did anyone know] the Son except the Father, and anyone to whom the Son might reveal him.” According to Irenaeus, the Marcosians “assert, he

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Heracleon’s commentary, see Elaine H. Pagels, *The Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis: Heracleon’s Commentary on John*, SBL Monograph 17 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973).

<sup>57</sup> Cf. *Haer.* 1.3.1.

<sup>58</sup> *Haer.* 1.20.3 (Unger, 77; SC 264:292).

<sup>59</sup> The Latin verb occurs in the perfect tense. The Greek here is the 3ms aorist ἔγνω (SC 264:292). Interestingly, neither Gospel text uses the aorist tense, which would most closely parallel the Latin perfect. According to Matthew, Jesus prays in the present tense that no one ἐπιγινώσκει the Father except the Son. In Luke, the verb is the related γινώσκει.

clearly showed how before the Son's coming no one knew the Father of Truth."<sup>60</sup> While the Maker or Demiurge "was always known by everyone," the Supreme Father was not. This provides the Marcosians opportunity to distinguish between the God revealed throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and the Father revealed in the Gospels through the advent of Jesus. Of course, such a claim cannot be substantiated on the basis of a theological *regula* intrinsic and conspicuous in the shared biblical texts.

This is not to suggest that the gnostics omitted the Hebrew Scriptures from their sacred texts. According to Irenaeus, "They select passages from the Scriptures in order to prove that Our Lord announced another Father beside the Creator of the universe, who, as we have already mentioned, they impiously say was the product of Degeneracy."<sup>61</sup> The passages Irenaeus goes on to cite are taken from the Hebrew Scriptures, which Irenaeus merely calls "Scripture."<sup>62</sup>

On the other hand, Irenaeus argues that the gnostics were beholden to pagan philosophies. For example, in *Haer.* 2.14.1–8, Irenaeus shows parallels between gnostic protology and philosophers such as Thales, Democritus, Epicurus, Plato, Empedocles, Aristotle, and Pythagoras. According to Irenaeus, the gnostics create a patchwork of pagan philosophical ideas and peddle their patchwork as unique revelation when in fact it is merely a repackaging of many marketplace philosophies. Moreover, this is one of the reasons for the appeal of their beliefs, according to Irenaeus. Comparable to a hunter who lures his prey in through customary food, the gnostics attempt to entice outsiders through what is common and customary among the pagans.

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<sup>60</sup> *Haer.* 1.20.3 (Unger, 77).

<sup>61</sup> *Haer.* 1.19.1 (Unger, 75).

<sup>62</sup> Irenaeus's opponents apparently appeal to passages that intimate the absence of Israel's knowledge of God (e.g., Isa 1:3; Hos 4:1; Ps 14:2–3 [13:2–3 LXX]; Exod 33:20; Dan 12:9–10).

### *Extrinsic Theological System*

The second foundation upon which Irenaeus's opponents explicated scriptural texts was their extrinsic theological system. Although the gnostics used and appealed to passages of Scripture, they failed to properly ascertain the intrinsic system, or *regula*, of Scripture. Irenaeus's opponents imported a foreign doctrine of God and foisted their understanding of God onto the biblical text. "Such is their system [*cum sit igitur tale illorum argumentum*] which neither the prophets preached, nor the Lord taught, nor the apostles handed down."<sup>63</sup> For Irenaeus, the gnostics failed to recognize the harmonious message presented by all of Scripture, which Irenaeus summarizes as the message of the prophets, the teaching of the Lord, and the tradition of the apostles. Rather than seek a unifying hypothesis within Scripture, they derive their theological system from non-scriptural sources (ἐξ ἀγράφων).<sup>64</sup> Irenaeus highlights his fundamental concern regarding the exegesis of his opponents: "They disregard the order and connection of the Scriptures [τὴν μὲν τάξιν καὶ τὸν εἰρμὸν τῶν γραφῶν] and, as much as in them lies, they disjoint the members of the Truth. They transfer passages and rearrange them."<sup>65</sup> Whereas Irenaeus argued for a doctrine of God that was fundamental to, and ascertainable from, the Scriptures, the gnostics operated within a theological system that was alien to the biblical text.

Consequently, the gnostics were able to quote from selected passages of Scripture which Irenaeus recognized as authoritative while rearranging their proper order. Irenaeus's famous illustration in *Haer.* 1.8.1 is that of a mosaic, which, when properly arranged pictures a king. The gnostic arrangement (or mosaic) is that of a dog or a fox composed of the same tesserae but reordered from their proper arrangement to provide an entirely different image from Scripture's testimony. This tactic was especially dangerous

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<sup>63</sup> *Haer.* 1.8.1 (Unger, 41; SC 264:112).

<sup>64</sup> *Haer.* 1.8.1 (Unger, 41; SC 264:112).

<sup>65</sup> *Haer.* 1.8.1 (Unger, 41).

for the one who was unfamiliar with the original image of the king inherent in the Scripture.

Additionally, Irenaeus provides the analogy of a Homeric cento to illustrate the gnostic abuse of Scripture.<sup>66</sup> He explains,

After having entirely fabricated their own system, they gather together sayings and names from scattered places and transfer them, as we have already said, from their natural meaning to an unnatural one. They act like those who would propose themes which they chance upon and then try to put them to verse from Homeric poems, so that the inexperienced think that Homer composed the poems with that theme, which in reality is of recent composition.<sup>67</sup>

In the example of a Homeric cento, the verses are from Homer's original composition but the order and arrangement are foreign to Homer's intended arrangement. As a result, the words of Homer appear in connection to other words, producing a meaning alien to the original composition. This, according to Irenaeus, is comparable to the exegetical approach of his opponents. In the end, "They wrest each of the sayings from the Truth. They misuse the names and transfer them to their own system [*suam argumentationem*/τὴν ἰδίαν ὑπόθεσιν]."<sup>68</sup> The failure of the gnostics rests in their extrinsic hypothesis. As Presley observes, "The Gnostics begin with the wrong metaphysic and end up in the wrong place; they create meanings that do not reflect the God revealed in Scripture."<sup>69</sup>

### **Exegetical Principles**

The exegetical foundations of gnostic esotericism and a theological *regula* and hypothesis extrinsic to the Scriptures provided the substructure for gnostic exegetical

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<sup>66</sup> For a brief discussion and survey of scholarly treatments regarding Irenaeus's use of the Homeric cento as an illustration of Valentinian exegetical patchwork, see D. Jeffrey Bingham, "Paideia and Polemic in Second-Century Lyons: Irenaeus on Education," in *Pedagogy in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Karina Martin Hogan, Matthew Goff, and Emma Wasserman (Atlanta: SBL, 2017).

<sup>67</sup> *Haer.* 1.9.4 (Unger, 47).

<sup>68</sup> *Haer.* 1.9.2 (Unger, 46; SC 264:140–41).

<sup>69</sup> Presley, *Biblical Theology in Life of Early Church*, 48.

principles and practice. Irenaeus accents two of these principles, which manifest in the exercise of a plethora of exegetical methods. These two principles are the principle of ambiguity and the principle of discordance.

### *Principle of Ambiguity*

On account of their unscriptural hypothesis, Irenaeus's opponents sought refuge in the less lucid biblical texts. Rather than seeking to interpret the unclear texts through the lens of the clear texts, the gnostics practiced the inverse. Irenaeus observes,

The sound and safe and religious and truth-loving mind will readily apply itself to the things God placed within the power of men and granted to our knowledge. It will make progress in them because by daily exercise it will make easy for itself the acquisition of knowledge. These are the things that come under our eyes and are expressed in the Sacred Scriptures clearly and unambiguously [*aperte et sine ambiguo ipsis dictionibus posita sunt in Scripturis*] by the words themselves. And so the parables may not be adapted to ambiguous matters. That way both he who interprets them will interpret them safely, and the parables will be explained by all in a similar manner.<sup>70</sup>

Irenaeus operated with the exegetical paradigm that the clear portions of Scripture are to interpret the unclear portions. Within the Scriptures, there are statements made *aperte et sine ambiguo*. These clear and unambiguous portions serve as an aid for the exegete. Moreover, the truths which composed the *regula veritatis* served to provide clear exegetical parameters for the interpreter of Scripture. This exegetical approach helped to keep intact what Irenaeus refers to as the *veritate corpus*. Mary Ann Donovan explains, "The Irenaeian approach explains unclear passages in the Scriptures via the clear passages and in conformity with the rule of faith, always bearing in mind that speculation into the why of God's actions is not for humankind."<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> *Haer.* 2.27.1 (Unger, 85).

<sup>71</sup> Mary Ann Donovan, *One Right Reading?* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1997), 53. Although Donovan is correct to observe Irenaeus's penchant for the clearer portions of Scripture alongside the rule of faith, I am not convinced that Irenaeus was averse to speculation "into the why of God's actions." For further engagement with Donovan and William Schoedel on the matter of theological speculation, see chap. 4.

On the other hand, the gnostics were apparently inclined to those portions of Scripture that were less clear and could be widely interpreted without the proper theological system and parameters. Concerning the Supreme Father, “they themselves furnish testimony that nothing has even been openly said about him [*Quoniam enim manifeste nihil dictum est de eo*].”<sup>72</sup> The gnostics “wish to explain ambiguous scriptural passages [*ambiguas . . . Scripturas*]” through their system.

According to Irenaeus, his opponents found fertile soil for their heretical speculations in the parables. The gnostic beliefs “were pointed out mystically by Savior through parables [*per parabolas/διὰ παραβολῶν*] to those who were able to understand them.”<sup>73</sup> The various gnostic sects plucked out words, sayings, and parables from the harmonious melody of Scripture and adapted these portions to their theological errors.<sup>74</sup> The parables, according to Irenaeus, were among the ambiguous passages that needed to be carefully studied for their proper meaning.<sup>75</sup> However, his opponents relied heavily on such passages to support their inventions. As Irenaeus cautions,

Since, however, the parables can be given many interpretations, what lover of the Truth will not acknowledge that for these individuals to affirm that God is to be discovered by means of parables, while forsaking what is certain and indubitable and true [*certum et indubitatum et uerum*], this behavior is characteristic of people who very rashly hurl themselves into danger and act as if they are irrational? And does this not amount to building one’s house not on solid and strong rock in the open but on the uncertainty of shifting sand? That makes the overthrow of such a building easy.<sup>76</sup>

According to Irenaeus, gnostic exegesis was predicated on ambiguous passages of Scripture like parables rather than the more certain and true texts that form the foundation of Christian doctrine. As a result, the gnostics built their theological house on the

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<sup>72</sup> *Haer.* 2.10.1 (Unger, 35; SC 294:86).

<sup>73</sup> *Haer.* 1.3.1 (Unger, 28; SC 264:50).

<sup>74</sup> *Haer.* 1.8.1.

<sup>75</sup> *Haer.* 2.10.1.

<sup>76</sup> *Haer.* 2.27.3 (Unger, 86–87; SC 294:268).

foundation of exegetical sand.

Another example of how penchant for the ambiguous portions of Scripture permitted theological speculations contrary to Scripture's clear teaching was their use of alphanumeric exegesis.<sup>77</sup> Irenaeus's opponents were especially drawn to hypothesizing regarding letters, numbers, and syllables to fortify their doctrine of God and accompanying protological system. Irenaeus observes regarding the Marcosians, "Well do I know, my friend, that as you run through these things, you will have a good laugh on such would-be-wise foolishness of theirs. They really deserve our pity, these men who by means of the alphabet and numbers so coldly and violently tear to pieces so great a religion."<sup>78</sup> This exegetical approach, according to Irenaeus, was arbitrary and destructive to the truth and harmony of Scripture.

The gnostics seized upon various passages of Scripture that included the number twelve to substantiate the passion of their twelfth Aeon.<sup>79</sup> Some of the gnostics apparently pointed to Jesus's betrayal by Judas—the twelfth apostle—as evidence for the fall of twelfth Aeon into passion. Additionally, gnosis groups posited that Jesus's earthly ministry only lasted twelve months after his baptism, typifying the passion of Sophia.<sup>80</sup> The woman with the hemorrhage for twelve years, who Jesus healed when she touched the hem of his garment, also served as a kind of parable, illustrating the greater reality of

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<sup>77</sup> By "alphanumeric" interpretation I mean a broad methodological category of interpretation in which the interpreter pays close attention to letters, numbers, and syllables as signs pointing to greater realities or referents. Alphanumeric interpretation includes what is commonly called "gematria" in Hebrew interpretation or "isopsephy" in Greek. However, alphanumeric exegesis encompasses more than merely assigning numerical value to letters.

<sup>78</sup> *Haer.* 1.16.3 (Unger, 70).

<sup>79</sup> *Haer.* 2.20.1.

<sup>80</sup> In *Haer.* 2.22.3, Irenaeus capably demonstrates that Jesus's ministry lasted much longer than twelve months given the number of Passovers the Gospel of John includes (John 2:13; 5:1; 11–12). Although Irenaeus is correct to point out the implausibility of Christ's ministry from his baptism to his death only lasting twelve months, he appears to be misled by an early Christian tradition that Christ's ministry lasted well into his forties (cf. *Haer.* 2.22). For a treatment of Irenaeus's timeline and its possible relationship to a tradition in Papias, see John Chapman, "Papias on the Age of Our Lord," *JTS* 9, no. 33 (1907): 42–61.

the passion by the twelfth Aeon.<sup>81</sup> “The very fact that they attempt to adduce proofs at times from numbers, at times from syllables of names, at times from letters of syllables, at times by numbers that are represented by the Greek letters—that demonstrates their machination and unstable fabrication to be false.”<sup>82</sup>

Employing alphanumeric interpretation to substantiate a system is “inconsistent and entirely stupid,” according to Irenaeus.<sup>83</sup> After all, “if anyone would so wish, he could construct from the Scriptures not only an Ogdoad, a Decad, and a Dodecad, but any number, and assert this to be a type of the error devised by him.”<sup>84</sup> To demonstrate the inconsistency and arbitrariness of this exegetical method to undergird a doctrine of God rather than the inverse—a doctrine of God undergirding the exegetical method—Irenaeus uses the frequency of the number five, both in Scripture and in creation as a numerological “proof” for a theological system.<sup>85</sup> Instead, one should “attempt to confirm neither unstable tenets nor silly talk by such useless labor.”

### *Principle of Discordance*

In addition to the exegetical principle of ambiguity, the gnostics operated with a principle of discordance. In other words, whereas Irenaeus assumed continuity and harmony within the testimony of Scripture and creation (both products of the only true God), his opponents assumed discontinuity and dissonance within these testimonies. The former was predicated upon belief in the existence of only one true God while the latter was predicated on the belief in the existence of a plethora of Aeons emitted from First

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<sup>81</sup> Taken from the following passages in the Gospels: Matt 9:20–22; Mark 5:25–29; Luke 8:43–44.

<sup>82</sup> *Haer.* 2.24.1 (Unger, 77).

<sup>83</sup> *Haer.* 2.24.3 (Unger, 79).

<sup>84</sup> *Haer.* 2.24.3 (Unger, 79).

<sup>85</sup> *Haer.* 2.24.4.

Father. Moreover, the exegetical principle of discordance among the gnostics grew out of the belief that one of the Aeons had gone awry by suffering passion, resulting in the production of the Demiurge of this world.

Although the gnostics claimed to revere many of the same Scriptures as Irenaeus, they rejected the lucidness and coherence of the truth provided in these Scriptures. “Indeed, when they are exposed by means of the Scriptures, they turn round and make accusations against the Scriptures themselves, as if these were not correct or were not authentic and stated things variously [*quia varie sint dictae*/ὡς ποικίλως εἰρημένων], and that the truth cannot be found in them by those who are ignorant of the tradition.”<sup>86</sup> The unwritten and revelatory tradition received esoterically by the gnostics provided the necessary harmony in contrast to what they considered to be the disharmony of Scripture. Scripture spoke ὡς ποικίλως.

This discordance was the consequence of various divine beings contributing to Scripture’s content. “In fact, they maintain that the apostles mixed with the Savior’s words matter from the law, and that not only the apostles but the Lord Himself gave discourses derived at times from the Demiurge, at others from the Intermediate Region, and at yet others from the Highest Authority.”<sup>87</sup> In other words, only the gnostic interpreter was capable of unraveling the cacophony of voices contained within Scripture and ascertaining which portions proceeded from the Supreme Father. The gnostics did not approach Scripture as completely trustworthy revelation from the one and only God. Rather, portions of it were sourced in the Supreme Father while other portions were sourced in lesser celestial beings or Aeons.<sup>88</sup> Perhaps the most informative example of

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<sup>86</sup> *Haer.* 3.2.1 (Unger, 31; SC 211:24–26).

<sup>87</sup> *Haer.* 3.2.2 (Unger, 31).

<sup>88</sup> The gnostics apparently practiced a kind of “prosopological” exegesis, which grew out of their doctrine of God. See chap. 5 for a further engagement with this exegetical method and its relationship to the doctrine of God in Irenaeus.

this exegetical principle is a gnostic reading of YHWH's claim to be the only true God (e.g., Isa 45:5–6, 21; 46:9):

But these heretics, because they assert that the Creator is the fruit of degeneracy and call him ensouled who is ignorant of the power that is above him, and who they claim lies when he says: *I am God, and there is no other God*, though they themselves are the liars who attach all sorts of wickedness to him, by fabricating according to their opinion him who is not above this one who is, expose themselves as blasphemers of him who really is God and, to their own condemnation, as fabricators of him who is not God.<sup>89</sup>

For the gnostics, the claim to exclusivity must come from ignorance at best, and evil at worst, since no Aeon can claim exclusivity, and certainly not the inferior Creator of this world. Negatively evaluating the Demiurge of this world as ignorant or worse was commonplace among the gnostics.<sup>90</sup>

This principle of discordance was pronounced as it related to the Old Testament and its relationship to the New Testament.<sup>91</sup> Irenaeus's opponents appealed to passages to accentuate the divide between these two testaments.<sup>92</sup> One such passage was Matthew 11:27/Luke 10:22, where Jesus states, "No one knows the Son except the Father, nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and any one to whom the Son

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<sup>89</sup> *Haer.* 2.9.2 (Unger, 35).

<sup>90</sup> This evaluation of the Creator of this world appears in various Nag Hammadi documents, such as *Tripartite Tractate*, *Apocryphon of John*, *Hypostasis of the Archons*, and *On the Origin of the World*. For a discussion of gnostic engagements with the exclusive claims of YHWH in the Old Testament, see M. David Litwa, "I Am God and There Is No Other: The Boast of Yaldabaöth," in *Desiring Divinity: Self Deification in Early Jewish and Christian Mythmaking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 47–64.

<sup>91</sup> I recognize that the stratification of "Old Testament" and "New Testament" as a way of distinguishing between portions of Scripture is anachronistic as it relates to Irenaeus. For Irenaeus, both categories were simply parts of "the Scriptures." Irenaeus generally refers to the former as the prophetic books and the latter as the apostolic witness.

<sup>92</sup> The relationship the gnostics maintained to what is now considered the Old Testament is difficult to identify with precision. For example, although various gnostic groups rejected portions of the Old Testament as ultimately authoritative, this does not mean that they rejected those portions as unscriptural. Moreover, depending on the particularities of their gnostic system, the gnostic interpreter concluded that Old Testament Scripture was sourced in various divine and human agents. As a result, there were grades of authority assigned to the passage of Scripture predicated on the divine source from which the revelation came. As indicated above, passages like 45:5–6, 21 and 46:9 were divinely sourced but not in the Supreme Father. Rather, to properly interpret these passages, gnostics prioritized their esoteric revelation and extrinsic theological framework to properly understand these texts. On the other hand, there were some groups, like those who followed Cerdo and Marcion, that overtly rejected most or all the Old Testament as sourced in a malevolent god distinct from the Father of the Lord Jesus (*Haer.* 1.27.1–2).

chooses to reveal.”<sup>93</sup> Irenaeus comments, “Both Matthew and Luke wrote the same thing, and Mark did too. John passed up this passage.”<sup>94</sup> However, the gnostics apparently wrote the passage differently. In place of the present tense, “knows,” Irenaeus’s opponents wrote the aorist, “knew.” Irenaeus protests,

Now these men who wish to be wiser than the apostles write it thus, No one knew [*cognovit/ἔγνων*] the Father except the Son, nor the Son except the Father, and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal; namely they interpret it as if the true God had not been known by anyone before our Lord’s coming. They assert, too, that the God who was heralded by the Prophets is not the Father of Christ.<sup>95</sup>

Irenaeus’s opponents contended that the Supreme Father was unknown prior to the coming of Christ. As a result, the Old Testament writings, although containing some esoteric truths obfuscated by the morass of revelations from the Demiurge largely lacked revelation regarding the Supreme Father. The New Testament, on the other hand, or portions of it, alongside the private instructions Christ offered to some of the disciples, testified to the greater realities concerning which previous generations were unaware.

This principle of discordance is perhaps most conspicuously present among the followers of Marcion. Although Irenaeus aptly describes the various heretical sects with their own idiosyncratic distinctives, he recognizes the Marcionites to be members of the same theological family tree as the gnostics broadly, and the Valentinians specifically. Irenaeus’s scrupulous sophistication in evaluating the distinctives present within each sect alongside his recognition of an overall homogeneous relationship between the early heretical sects becomes apparent in his evaluation. For example, he writes,

Since, therefore, the exposé and refutation of all the heretical sects is different and multiform, and since we have resolved to give an answer to everyone according to its own standard, we have deemed it necessary first of all to give an account of their source and root, in order that you may know their most sublime Profundity, and

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<sup>93</sup> *Haer.* 4.6.1 (Unger, 23).

<sup>94</sup> Interestingly, Mark’s Gospel does not appear to have included this statement. Either Irenaeus’s copy of Mark’s Gospel contained this saying of Jesus or Irenaeus was simply working from memory and mistakenly thought Mark included it.

<sup>95</sup> *Haer.* 4.6.1 (Unger, 23; SC 100:438–39).

understand the tree from which such fruits came forth.<sup>96</sup>

Irenaeus views the various heretical sects listed in *Haer.* 1.23–31 as “mothers and fathers and ancestors” of the Valentinians.<sup>97</sup> The followers of Marcion in particular severed the Old Testament writings from the New Testament writings—the teaching of the prophets from the teaching of the Lord Jesus. This severance was so severe that the two collections bore testimony to different gods. Irenaeus recognizes that the teaching of Marcion was radical even when compared to other heretics.<sup>98</sup> However, Marcion’s strict bifurcation between the Old Testament and the New Testament (or portions of the New Testament) provides an example of the exegetical principle of discordance. Similarly, Irenaeus’s opponents approached Scripture with a predisposition to imagine discontinuity and incongruence in place of continuity and congruence. As indicated above, such discontinuity was the product of a theological paradigm or doctrine of God extrinsic to the biblical testimony. After all, as Irenaeus thoroughly demonstrated, the writings of the New Testament themselves bear witness to the continuity with the writings of the Old Testament.

### Conclusion

The distinctions between Irenaeus and his opponents were not fundamentally at the level of which texts were revered as sacred or inspired. Moreover, although the exegetical practices and methods of Irenaeus undoubtedly differed from his opponents, these distinctions simply reflect a more fundamental divergence. In fact, Irenaeus appears to employ some of the same methods as his opponents.<sup>99</sup> Rather, I have argued that the

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<sup>96</sup> *Haer.* 1.22.2 (Unger, 81). Although the modern historian may take exception to Irenaeus’s broad categorization of these sects in relation to one another, it is helpful for my purposes to identify Irenaeus’s perspective.

<sup>97</sup> *Haer.* 1.31.3 (Unger, 103).

<sup>98</sup> *Haer.* 1.27.4.

<sup>99</sup> For example, prosopological exegesis appears both in the gnostics and Irenaeus, as I discuss in chap. 5.

fundamental demarcations between Irenaeus and his opponents occurred at the level of a different theological metaphysic, or doctrine of God, producing distinctions of exegetical foundations, principles, and conclusions. The doctrine of God operative among Irenaeus's opponents included the centrality of a doctrine of relative divine transcendence alongside divine complexity, manifesting in a complex protology whereby various Aeons emanate from a First Father. While revering many of the same texts, the gnostics embraced incalculably different exegetical foundations upon which they interpreted these texts. These foundations included (1) the priority of esoteric revelation, and (2) an extrinsic theological system that Irenaeus's opponents superimposed onto the biblical text, resulting in interpretations alien to the hypothesis of Scripture. Moreover, Irenaeus's opponents approached the same biblical texts revered by Irenaeus with (1) a principle of ambiguity demanding the need for superior revelation to elucidate the otherwise ambiguous biblical texts, and (2) a principle of discordance in which various portions of Scripture are incompatible due to their different divine sources. This incompatibility becomes most conspicuous in the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, the former largely originating from the inferior and ignorant Demiurge and the latter largely from the Supreme Father. With this portrait of Irenaeus's opponents in view, in the next chapter I focus on Irenaeus's theological metaphysic.

CHAPTER 3  
IRENÆUS'S DOCTRINE OF GOD

**Introduction**

In chapter 1, I situated the treatment of Irenæus's doctrine of God and exegetical practice within three streams of scholarship—(1) Irenæan studies, (2) the resurgence of appreciation for pre-critical exegesis, and (3) an interest in interpreting Scripture theologically. Additionally, I introduced the historical climate and polemical context of Irenæus and his gnostic opponents to better appreciate the relationship between Irenæus's doctrine of God and exegesis. In chapter 2, I proposed that while Irenæus and the gnostics revered many of the same sacred texts, the gnostics granted pride of place to their gnostic doctrine of God and protological myth. The gnostics imported a foreign doctrine of God into Scripture. Additionally, I highlighted two primary theological attributes that formed a kind of theological center for the gnostics. These attributes are (1) divine transcendence, and (2) divine complexity. The gnostics approached many of the same texts as did Irenæus. However, they interpreted Scripture with a theological foundation characterized by a belief in esoteric revelation and a theological system extrinsic to Scripture. I recognized two exegetical principles that directed the exegetical practices among Irenæus's opponents, namely, the principle of ambiguity and the principle of discordance.

In this chapter, I maintain that the fundamental response of Irenæus to the theological and exegetical errors of his gnostic opponents was to revisit and reconstruct a Christian doctrine of God, which was summarized in the various iterations of the *regula veritatis*. In his presentations of the *regula*, Irenæus is interested in summarizing who God is. A right conception of God is the *sine qua non* of all Christian theological and

exegetical activity. The gnostics rejected the one true God and therefore, perverted Scripture's true meaning. Irenaeus identifies the only God as Father and Creator. Additionally, God the Father and Creator possesses the attributes of infinitude and simplicity. The gnostics rejected the latter through their protological construct and compromised the former. After all, Irenaeus demonstrates that a Christian doctrine of God maintains belief in the absolute transcendence of God *and* the immediacy of relationship between God and creation. Moreover, I argue that the former entails the latter.

To identify and explain Irenaeus's doctrine of God, I begin by explicating Irenaeus's first principle by examining a series of texts taken from *Haer.* and *Epid.* These texts yield a few characteristics of Irenaeus's conception of God. First, I show that Irenaeus understands God as primary, and therefore the beginning from which, and in which, all things exist. Second, I show that according to Irenaeus, there is only one God. Third, I explain that Irenaeus speaks of this only God as Father in relation to whom the divine Word is Son. Fourth, I note Irenaeus's repudiation of a gnostic doctrine of God by affirming that God the Father is the God who created all things. After unpacking these characteristics of Irenaeus's understanding of God, I devote the second portion of this chapter to identifying and expounding Irenaeus's theological center, which as I mentioned above, consisted of divine infinitude and divine simplicity.

### **The First Principle**

"It is necessary, then, that we begin with the first and greatest principle [*a primo et maximo capitulo*], with the Creator God who made heaven and earth and all things in them, whom these individually blasphemously call the fruit of degeneracy."<sup>1</sup> Irenaeus's first principle throughout is God the Father and Creator of all things. In *Haer.*

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<sup>1</sup> *Haer.* 2.1.1 (Unger, 17; SC 294:26). An explanation of the gnostic concept, "fruit of degeneracy," occurs in chap. 3.

2.1.1, God the Father and Creator of all things is *a primo et maximo capitulo*.<sup>2</sup> According to Irenaeus, the Christian is to believe in God the Father and Creator of all things *primo omnium*, or *πρῶτον πάντων*.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Irenaeus asserts, “Correctly, then, has the writing [*scriptura/γραφῆ*]<sup>4</sup> expressed itself that says, First of all believe [*Primo omnium crede/ Πρῶτον πάντων πιστευσον*] that there is one God [*unus est Deus/εἷς ἐστὶν ὁ θεός*], who established all things and adorned them,<sup>5</sup> having created all things out of nothing that they might have existence.”<sup>6</sup> In like manner, Irenaeus insists, “For it is necessary that things that have come into being have received their origin of their being from some great cause; and the origin of all is God [*Initium autem omnium Deus est*], for He Himself was not made by anyone, but everything was made by Him.”<sup>7</sup> Irenaeus infers from the origin of all things in God, “And therefore it is proper, first of all [*primo*], to believe that there is One God [*unus Deus*], the Father [*est Pater*], who has created and fashioned all things, who made that which was not to be, who contains all [*omnia capiens*] and is alone uncontainable [*solus est incapabilis*].” Belief in one God the Father who has created all things is proper, *primo*.

As these descriptions indicate, belief in God the Creator serves as a chief article and fountain of Christian faith. The theologian’s belief regarding the first principle sets the trajectory for the rest of the theological system. Faith in God as Creator is the

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<sup>2</sup> Rousseau and Doutreleau translate the Latin with the French, *le point premier et le plus fundamental* (SC 294:27).

<sup>3</sup> SC 100:628–29.

<sup>4</sup> See discussion in footnote below (s.v. “God Is Infinite.”) regarding Irenaeus’s reference to Herm. as *γραφῆ*.

<sup>5</sup> The Greek fragment preserved by Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 5.8.7) stops here.

<sup>6</sup> *Haer.* 4.20.2 (Unger, 58; SC 100:628).

<sup>7</sup> *Epid.* 4, (Behr, 42; SC 406:88, 90); Irenaeus appears to be quoting Herm. Mand., which states, *Πρῶτον πάντων πιστευσον ὅτι εἷς ἐστὶν ὁ θεός, ὁ τὰ πάντα κτίσας καὶ καταρτίσας, καὶ ποιήσας ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος εἰς τὸ εἶναι τὰ πάντα, καὶ πάντα χωρῶν, μόνος δὲ ἀχώρητος ὢν* (1.1). The Greek is excerpted from Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 504.

fountainhead of all other beliefs. While Irenaeus includes two other primary articles of faith within his Trinitarian theological framework, namely the Word or Son and the Spirit, it is God the Father who occupies the space as the *primum capitulum*<sup>8</sup> of Christian faith, and the first within the τάξις of the Christian faith.

Irenaeus's engagement at the level of exegetical method occurs on the basis of this chief article of the Christian faith. After all, the exegete's first principle invariably governs the employment of exegetical methods. As Irenaeus will go on to say, exegetical methods always occur within an underlying theological system.<sup>9</sup> Irenaeus's theological system began with God the Father who created all things. To establish the wrong κεφάλαιον is to establish the wrong overall theological system from the beginning. The gnostics went astray from this first article. They misidentified the first principle, resulting in theological and exegetical errors galore.

### **Monotheism**

While diversity existed among early Christians, as integral to their faith as any theological supposition was the belief in only one God. Larry Hurtado has provided a helpful historical summary of monotheism in earliest Christianity, a Christianity that blossomed within ancient Jewish monotheism.<sup>10</sup> Hurtado seeks to explain the persistent

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<sup>8</sup> SC 406:92. Behr includes the Greek κεφάλαιον from Rousseau's retrotranslation (Behr, 43). However, the Greek retroversion may demand too much of Irenaeus's point. After all, if his point is that the Father is the central, primary, or the main article of the Christian faith, something like κεφάλαιον would be accurate. However, if Irenaeus's point is less about primacy and more about order or τάξις, κεφάλαιον is misleading. Moreover, while my primary interest is not in Irenaeus's Trinitarianism per se, Irenaeus is unequivocally Trinitarian. In other words, although there exists a distinction regarding the eternal relations of origin between the Father, Son, and Spirit, there exists no distinction of nature resulting in ontological subordination of the Son or Spirit to the Father. As Irenaeus states, "The Father is Lord and the Son is Lord, and the Father is God and the Son is God, since He who is born of God is God, and in this way, according to His being (ὑπόστασις) and power & essence (οὐσία), one God is demonstrated (*Epid.* 47; Behr, 71). For more robust treatments regarding Irenaeus's understanding of the Trinity, see Jackson Lashier, *Irenaeus on the Trinity*, SVC 127 (Leiden: Brill, 2014); Michel R. Barnes, "Irenaeus's Trinitarian Theology," *Nova et Vetera* 7, no. 1 (2009).

<sup>9</sup> *Haer.* 2.25.1.

<sup>10</sup> Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*, 3rd ed., Cornerstones (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015).

maintenance of monotheism among early Christians alongside their commitment to worship Jesus as divine. He argues early Christians maintained both their inexorable commitment to monotheism amid veneration for the exalted Jesus because they “drew upon important resources in ancient Judaism and also developed a somewhat distinctive ‘mutation’ or innovation in this monotheistic tradition.”<sup>11</sup> How early Christians maintained their monotheism is somewhat immaterial for my purposes at this juncture. That early Christians like Irenaeus were passionately monotheistic suffices.

On the other hand, attempting to summarize Irenaeus’s interlocutors with a single theistic epithet is daunting. The gnostics unequivocally claimed to be monotheists. However, they were not monotheists *in the way Irenaeus was*. As Irenaeus states, “It is true, nearly all heretical sects, many as they are, speak of one God; but they alter Him by their evil-mindedness.”<sup>12</sup> Although the gnostics claimed to be monotheists, their monotheism was vastly different from Irenaeus’s. After all, they failed to properly identify the Creator of the cosmos as the one God but instead suggested that the Creator was an inferior deity to the Supreme Father. Rather than monotheism, henotheism (the worship of a single supreme God although positing the existence of many divine beings) may be a more appropriate descriptions of the gnostics. They revered a supreme God, but their commitment to protological emanations from the Supreme Father resulting in a series of divine Aeons is closer to a theistic model composed of a supreme God above all other gods.

Additionally, Irenaeus’s monotheism was inextricably bound to his commitment to divine simplicity as I demonstrate below. Although the various gnostic sects in Irenaeus’s day affirmed faith in a single and ultimate monad (a single divine being), this monad emitted a series of divine emanations or Aeons (often known as the

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<sup>11</sup> Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Haer.* 1.22.1 (Unger, 81).

pleroma). Additionally, the gnostics believed that each of these emanations shared in the same divine nature as the Supreme Father. Consequently, the lower Aeons existed on the same ontological plane of existence as the Supreme God. This explains Irenaeus's insistence that there is only one God. The description of the Philonic scholar Cristina Termini applies here, namely that there was grave error in failing to recognize "the difference between the first cause and the various beings that make up the material cosmos, even the most perfect among them such as the heavenly bodies."<sup>13</sup> The gnostics distinguished the first cause from the various beings. However, they confused these beings, or Aeons, with the Supreme Father since they posited a distinction of degree, not of kind or category. Jackson Lashier is justified in his description that

Irenaeus refuted his 'Gnostic' opponents by constructing a means of reading those texts later known as the Old and New Testaments as one cohesive narrative, a narrative that found its unity in the saving purpose and actions of the *one* God manifested in an economy of salvation encompassing both creation and redemption. Such a reading rejected the many gods of the 'Gnostic' *Pleroma* as well as the dualist system upon which all 'Gnostic' theologies were built.<sup>14</sup>

Whereas the gnostics understood the divine and creation to exist along the same ontological continuum, Lashier has rightly observed that Irenaeus maintained a strict "Creator/creature divide."<sup>15</sup>

As Irenaeus states regarding God the Creator in *Haer.* 2.1.1, "there is nothing either above him or after him."<sup>16</sup> Contrariwise, Irenaeus rejects the gnostic belief that the Creator of the world is "the fruit of degeneracy," or more broadly the product of a

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<sup>13</sup> Cristina Termini, "Philo's Thought within the Context of Middle Judaism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Philo*, ed. Adam Kamesar (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 95–123, 97.

<sup>14</sup> Lashier, *Irenaeus on the Trinity*, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Lashier, *Irenaeus on the Trinity*, 208. Minns suitably describes Irenaeus's opponents in this way: "The Gnostics understood all reality to be a continuous whole. Despite the vast distance between them, God and matter stand in the same continuum, the same chain of being. Denis Minns, *Irenaeus: An Introduction* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 41.

<sup>16</sup> *Haer.* 2.1.1 (Unger, 17).

sequence of emanations. Irenaeus rebuffs other beings or emanations who share in the divine nature. As I indicated above, a theory of divine emanations compromises Christian monotheism as Irenaeus envisaged. God alone exists properly as God and therefore is qualitatively (not merely quantitatively) distinct from all other forms of existence. The gnostics, on the other hand, described the divine nature as quantitatively different from all other forms of existence through recourse to their protological theory of emanations.

Another way Irenaeus expresses this absolute distinction between God and all else is by the theological conviction that “God contains all and is alone uncontainable.”<sup>17</sup> Similarly, “God comprehends all things but is comprehended by no one.”<sup>18</sup> What God provides for all things is not reciprocated by all things for God. In this understanding, the one true God did not create Adam because he was in need or because Adam could in some way contribute to God. Rather, God “is rich, perfect, without any need.”<sup>19</sup> According to Irenaeus, God the Creator is the ground of all being. While I will share more of this under the section below regarding divine infinitude, God does not exist alongside other forms of existence. Moreover, God does not merely exist over or above other forms of existence. Rather, God is the sphere or location in which all things exist. As a result, he is not the first point within a linear series of points. Rather, he is the framework within which existence itself is possible. As Irenaeus asserts in protest against the gnostics, “he alone contains *all things*, and he himself gives existence to *all things*.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> In the Latin, God *omnia capiens, solus est incapabilis*, which Rousseau translates, *qui contient tout et est seul à ne pouvoir être contenu* (SC 100: 90–91).

<sup>18</sup> *Haer.* 4.20.2.

<sup>19</sup> *Haer.* 4.14.1 (Unger, 58).

<sup>20</sup> Emphasis added.

## God the Father

Irenaeus's gnostic opponents were fond of the epithet "Father" to refer to the Supreme God from whom all Aeons emanated. Additionally, Irenaeus indicates that his opponents would also apply "Father" to various other emanations. However, there were a couple of significant differences between the way Irenaeus and the gnostics employed the paternal title. First and preeminently, the one to whom Irenaeus applied the designation was not the same God the gnostics referred to. According to Irenaeus, God the Father was also the Creator and Sustainer of creation. The gnostics often reserved the title to one who was relationally distant from creation. As a result, Irenaeus's opponents would describe the Supreme God as Father or another one of the Aeons sourced in the Supreme Father. Either way, the gnostics assigned the title to one who was relationally distant from creation. Second, while the gnostics appear to have used the title to describe divine fecundity in accordance with their doctrine of emissions,<sup>21</sup> Irenaeus consistently used Father to denote the unique relationship God has with the Son or Word and those who have received filial adoption through the divine Son.

Until recently, scholars had produced a scant amount of material investigating Irenaeus's understanding of the fatherhood of God. This is surprising given its place within the first article of the *regula fidei*.<sup>22</sup> Over the previous few years, some have sought to fill this lacuna by focusing their research on God as Father in Irenaeus of Lyons. A couple of representative examples are Peter Widdicombe and Jackson Lashier.<sup>23</sup> Both Widdicombe and Lashier identify a distinction between Irenaeus's

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<sup>21</sup> The gnostics ascribe language like, "the Father of all who were to come after him" (*Haer.* 1.1.1 [Unger, 23]) to the Supreme Father (cf. 1.13.3; 1.15.2–5, 5; 1.30.1–2; et al.).

<sup>22</sup> *Epid.* 6.

<sup>23</sup> Peter Widdicombe, "Irenaeus and the Knowledge of God as Father: Text and Context," in *Irenaeus: Life, Scripture, Legacy*, ed. Paul Foster and Sara Parvis (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 141–49; Jackson Lashier, "God the Father," in *Irenaeus on the Trinity*, 54–91. Additionally, Widdicombe has worked to explicate divine fatherhood in other patristic authors. For example, see Peter Widdicombe, *The Fatherhood of God from Origen to Athanasius*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994); and Widdicombe, "Fatherhood and the Conception of God in Early Greek Christian Literature," *Anglican Theological Review* 82, no. 3 (2000): 519–36.

understanding of divine fatherhood and that of the earlier Christians, most notably the second-century apologists. However, while Widdicombe finds the seeds of a robust understanding of God as Father in Irenaeus, he proceeds with caution, contending that Irenaeus does not exhibit a connection between the divine nature and his use of “Father.” In Widdicombe’s view, Irenaeus does not believe that anything about who God is essentially is signified through the use of Father. Lashier, on the other hand, contends that Irenaeus’s use of Father includes the unique intra-Trinitarian relationship between Father and Son, a relationship within which there are two distinct personalities within the one divine being.<sup>24</sup> Widdicombe’s cautious scholarship results in a far more tempered thesis, namely that the epithet “Father” came through the revelation of the incarnate Son. Moreover, for Widdicombe, Irenaeus is “mainly concerned throughout his theology” with “the economic activity of God.”<sup>25</sup>

While Widdicombe’s contribution has helped propel scholarship in this area, Lashier’s thesis more closely summarizes Irenaeus’s concerns. Irenaeus’s primary interest was not the divine economy as opposed to the essence or substance of God. Gnostic protology focused within the sphere of divine ontology. Terrestrial realities signaled celestial and divine realities. Moreover, as more recent contributors (e.g., Barnes, Lashier, and Briggman) have demonstrated, Irenaeus was a philosophical theologian whose metaphysical concerns undergirded his understanding of the divine economy. To be sure, contrary to the gnostics, Irenaeus was unwilling to speculate about God where Scripture was silent. For example, he refused to explain the Son’s generation from the Father because Scripture did not offer such an explanation.<sup>26</sup> In fact, Scripture

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<sup>24</sup> Lashier, *Irenaeus on the Trinity*, 75.

<sup>25</sup> Widdicombe, “Irenaeus and Knowledge of God as Father,” 149.

<sup>26</sup> *Haer.* 2.28.6.

expressly stated that no one could understand the Son's generation.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, there were certain observations one could make regarding the nature of the generation of the Son by the Father. For example, Irenaeus was unequivocal that the generation of the Logos/Son does not indicate a temporal beginning of the Son. This example and others reveal that Irenaeus was deeply interested in properly understanding who God is according to Scripture. In this sense, he traverses much further than Widdicombe observed. According to Irenaeus, there is discontinuity between the uttered word of compound human beings and the uttered word of the simple God. The heretics go awry when they "transfer the generation of the uttered word of humankind to the eternal Word of God, and mark a beginning and an origin in the uttering [of the Word] as they do in their own word. . . . Life and Incorruptibility and Truth. These, and like perfections, were not emitted according to a process of development, but they are names of perfections that are always with God."<sup>28</sup> Further, the Logos is with God in the beginning but does not have a beginning. In *Haer.* 4.14.1, Irenaeus speaks of the Word being with God in the beginning as a distinct personality who "was wont to glorify his Father"<sup>29</sup> before creation. Similarly, Irenaeus writes, "In the beginning the Word was with God, and that through Him all things were made."<sup>30</sup> Moreover, although he became incarnate at a point in time,

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<sup>27</sup> τὴν γενεὰν αὐτοῦ τίς διηγήσεται (Isa 53:8 LXX). Irenaeus contended that the generation of the Son was beyond the grasp of finite human beings.

<sup>28</sup> *Haer.* 2.13.8–9 (Unger, 46).

<sup>29</sup> *Haer.* 4.14.1 (Unger, 41).

<sup>30</sup> *Haer.* 3.18.1 (Unger, 87). Some have argued that Irenaeus did not embrace the eternal nature of the Logos/Son in his polemic. Chief among advocates of this position is Antonio Orbe, *Hacia La Primera Teologia De La Procecion Del Verbo*, Estudios Valentinianos, vol. 1 (Rome: Apud Aedes Universitatis Gregoriana, 1958), 117–27. According to Orbe, *Epid.* 43 reveals Irenaeus's belief that the Son began to exist. The debate hinges on the Armenian verb ելաւիւիւ. The question is which Greek verb lay behind ելաւիւիւ? Orbe believed it was γίνομαι. Rousseau has argued that it could just as well have been ὑπάρχω, which would not denote a beginning for the Son but merely that the Son was with the Father. Adelin Rousseau, "La doctrine de saint Irénée sur la préexistence du Fils de Dieu dans Dém. 43," *Le Muséon* 89 (1971): 5–42. Moreover, given what Irenaeus claims regarding the eternal nature of the Logos/Son elsewhere, ὑπάρχω is more likely. Similarly, *Haer.* 3.18.1 likely yields the Greek ὑπάρχων ἀεὶ πρὸς τὸν Πατέρα behind the Latin *existens semper apud Patrem* (SC 211:343). Consonant with Rousseau, Behr opted for ὑπάρχω in his translation of *Epid.* 43 (Behr, 43).

“the Son of God did not begin to exist then, having been always with the Father”  
[*Ostendimus enim quia non tunc coepit Filius Dei, existens semper apud Patrem*].<sup>31</sup> To  
always be with the Father is to exist eternally with the Father for the Father is without  
beginning or end.

This understanding of Irenaeus also distinguishes him from the typical Middle  
Platonic sense of the fatherhood of God in which Father was synonymous with Primary  
Cause or Creator of the world. For example, as Plato records in *Tim.* 28c regarding  
whether the world was always in existence or created,

Created, I reply, being visible and tangible and having a body, and therefore,  
sensible; and all sensible things are apprehended by opinion and sense and are in a  
process of creation and created. Now that which is created must, as we affirm, of  
necessity be created by a cause. But the father and maker of all this universe is past  
finding out; and even if we found him, to tell of him to all men would be  
impossible.<sup>32</sup>

In *Timaeus*, “father” and “maker” are ways of communicating the same relationship God  
has with creation. This is not the case for Irenaeus. As Lashier states, “Irenaeus uses  
‘Father’ primarily to indicate the unique relationship between the First and Second  
Persons—the Father and the Son—and, secondarily, to indicate the *potential*, salvific  
relationship between God and his creation as a result of the Son’s revealing work.”<sup>33</sup> This  
is not to suggest that Irenaeus saw no relationship between God as Father and God as  
Creator. As Widdicombe has aptly asserted, “The creator God of the Old Testament and  
the Father of Christ of the New Testament were one and the same.”<sup>34</sup> The gnostics, on the  
other hand, taught that the Lord Jesus “announced another Father beside the Creator of

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<sup>31</sup> *Haer.* 3.18.1 (Unger, 87; SC 211:342).

<sup>32</sup> Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), 716.

<sup>33</sup> Lashier, *Irenaeus on the Trinity*, 73–74.

<sup>34</sup> Widdicombe, “Irenaeus and Knowledge of God as Father,” 141–149, 141.

the universe.”<sup>35</sup> Whereas Irenaeus spoke of God the Father and God the Creator as references to the same God, the two titles were not synonymous but communicated different aspects of the same essential reality—God. God the Father communicated a relation within the Trinity and God the Creator communicated a work of God in the economy.<sup>36</sup> For example, in *Haer.* 2.6.1, Irenaeus describes the Father as Father uniquely in relation to the Son. Quoting Matthew 11:27 and Luke 10:22, Irenaeus asserts, “No one knows the Father except the Son, and the Son except the Father, and those to whom the Son may reveal.” Additionally, Irenaeus refers to God as Father in texts where he is summarizing the *regula*.<sup>37</sup> In these texts, God as Father occurs alongside God as Creator. However, as indicated above, identity of referent (God) should not be confused with identity of epithet (Father and Creator). Perhaps the most lucid text where Irenaeus employs the title Father to describe (in part) the unique relationship God the Father has with the Son is *Haer.* 4.6.6. According to Irenaeus, “The Word reveals God the Creator . . . and by the Son, the Father who begot the Son” is manifested. This manifestation was eventuated by the Law and the Prophets. “For the Father is what is invisible of the Son, while the Son is whatever is visible of the Father.”<sup>38</sup> Finally, according to Irenaeus, God is Father “to the faithful . . . since ‘in these last times’ He opened the testament of the adoption as sons.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *Haer.* 1.19.1 (Unger, 75).

<sup>36</sup> Although Irenaeus does not employ these conceptual categories, distinctions between the divine *opere ad intra* and *opere ad extra* get close to what Irenaeus communicates in his polemic.

<sup>37</sup> See *Haer.* 2.1.1; *Epid.* 4, 6.

<sup>38</sup> *Haer.* 4.6.6 (Unger, 25). This is not to suggest that the Son is inherently visible while the Father is inherently invisible. This would contradict Irenaeus’s understanding of the true deity of the Son alongside divine simplicity. Irenaeus describes the Son as “whatever is visible of the Father” in economic contexts. In other words, the Son reveals the Father to the world, and the Father reveals himself to the world through his Son.

<sup>39</sup> *Haer.* 4.6.6 (Unger, 25).

## God the Creator

The central error of Irenaeus's opponents was the failure to identify the Supreme God with the Creator of the cosmos. Irenaeus summarized this principal error of the gnostics by ridiculing their attempt to manifest "something more sublime and excellent . . . than the God *who made heaven and . . . all things in them*."<sup>40</sup> "These [heretics], while seeking to explain the Scriptures and parables, introduce another, greater God above the god who is Creator of the world."<sup>41</sup> As I explained in chapter 2, the gnostics contended that the creator of this world was a lesser and ignorant deity who was far removed from the supreme God. Irenaeus, on the other hand, began "with the first and greatest principle, with the Creator God who made heaven and earth and all things in them."<sup>42</sup> It is this one true Creator God that Irenaeus's opponents blasphemed, rejecting him as "the fruit of degeneracy." Opposing the heretical postulations of the gnostics who imagined a series of divine beings eventually resulting in the creation of the world through the will of another, God alone "made all things by his own counsel and free will."<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Irenaeus states in *Epid.*, "First of all . . . believe that there is One God . . . who has created and fashioned all things."<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, Irenaeus is not merely interested in speaking of God the Creator. He simultaneously describes God the Father and Creator apophatically as *infectus* (ἀγένητος), *incapabilis* (ἀχώρητος), *invisibilis*<sup>45</sup> or "uncreated, uncontainable,

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<sup>40</sup> *Haer.* 1.Pref.1 (Unger, 21).

<sup>41</sup> *Haer.* 2.10.2 (Unger, 36).

<sup>42</sup> *Haer.* 2.1.1 (Unger, 17).

<sup>43</sup> *Haer.* 2.1.1 (Unger, 17).

<sup>44</sup> *Epid.* 4 (Behr, 42).

<sup>45</sup> *Epid.* 6 (SC 406:90, 92).

invisible.”<sup>46</sup> The God who made all things is essentially and qualitatively distinct from all that he made. As indicated above, the Creator is separate from, and other than, creation.

### ***Creatio Ex Nihilo***

Inherent in Irenaeus’s understanding of God, his relationship to the world, and the nature of creation is what has historically been referred to as *creatio ex nihilo* or creation “out of nothing.”<sup>47</sup> For example, Irenaeus claims that God *fecit ex eo quod non erat ut essent omnia*.<sup>48</sup> All things began to exist at a point in time. Of course, “all things” is a way to refer to the entire created order and not a reference to the one who comprehends and contains all things. Irenaeus takes for granted the necessity of the temporal beginning of creation. This assumption sprouts out of an understanding of the finitude of all creation. Within this assumption, Irenaeus highlights a distinction between God the Creator and mortal human beings. Human builders may create in the sense that they form or model a structure out of already existing matter. However, at the more fundamental or foundation level, human builders create nothing but only take what already exists and arrange the material into a new form. The mortal human being can create according to what Matthew Steenberg calls “extant potentiality.”<sup>49</sup> As a result, Irenaeus reasons that while humans possess the ability to fashion what already exists, their “creating” is quite different from God’s creating. The former cannot “make anything

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<sup>46</sup> *Epid.* 6 (Behr, 43).

<sup>47</sup> For a discussion of early advocates of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, see John Cochrane O’Neill, “How Early Is the Doctrine of Creatio Ex Nihilo?,” *JTS* 53, no. 2 (2002): 449–65. O’Neill contends that creation *ex nihilo* was already a creedal statement by the time of the New Testament. For a robust treatment of the doctrine within early Christianity, see Gerhard May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of “Creation out of Nothing” in Early Christian Thought* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994).

<sup>48</sup> *Haer.* 4.20.2 (SC 100:628).

<sup>49</sup> M. C. Steenberg, *Irenaeus on Creation: The Cosmic Christ and the Saga of Redemption*, SVC 91 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 38.

out of nothing.”<sup>50</sup> God, on the other hand, is capable of inventing “the matter of his work, since previously it did not exist.”

Regarding scholarship on Irenaeus’s understanding of creation *ex nihilo*, Antonio Orbe,<sup>51</sup> Jacques Fantino,<sup>52</sup> and Steenberg<sup>53</sup> are notable contributors. While there are doubtless other sections germane to this discussion, Fantino has catalogued the following passages as primary to understanding Irenaeus’s conception of creation *ex nihilo*: *Haer.* 2.10.2; 2.10.4; 2.30.9; 5.3.2–3; 5.18.1.<sup>54</sup> Indisputable is that fact that Irenaeus promoted a doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. The more pertinent question for my purposes is why he accented this understanding of creation over and against the gnostics. While there are potentially several answers to this question, primary among them must be the inherent goodness of creation and the immediate relationship God the Father and Creator of the world enjoyed with creation. Rather than creation being the product of an ignorant or malicious demiurge, Irenaeus demonstrated that creation was the handiwork of the only true, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent God. Moreover, Irenaeus rebuffs the Middle Platonic concept “that the Creator made the world out of existent matter.”<sup>55</sup> Further, this concept was often accompanied by necessity according to elemental nature and the resulting rejection of God conferring immortality upon mortals, or incorruptibility upon that which is corruptible. As a result of the gnostic embrace of these pagan concepts, Irenaeus’s opponents rejected the future bodily resurrection of humans. Irenaeus understood this to be a rejection of God’s undetermined will and power whereby

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<sup>50</sup> *Haer* 2.10.4 (Unger, 37).

<sup>51</sup> Antonio Orbe, “San Ireneo y La Creación de La Materia,” *Gregorianum* 59, no. 1 (1978): 71–127.

<sup>52</sup> Jacques Fantino, *La Théologie d’Irénee: Lecture Des Écritures En Réponse à l’exégèse Gnostique, Une Approche Trinitaire* (Paris: Cerf, 1994), 265–337.

<sup>53</sup> Steenberg, *Irenaeus on Creation*, 38–49.

<sup>54</sup> Fantino, *La Théologie d’Irénee*, 310–11.

<sup>55</sup> *Haer.* 2.14.4 (Unger, 49).

he is able both to create out of nothing and confer immortality upon mere mortals. Irenaeus provides three examples in Scripture that validate this understanding.<sup>56</sup> First, there is the example of people living hundreds of years: “Their bodies attained length of days, and they participated in life, so long as God willed that they live.”<sup>57</sup> God’s powerful will permitted it to be so. Second, there is the example of mortals assumed into heaven. “Enoch, for example, because he *was pleasing to God*, was transferred in the body in which he pleased him. . . . And Elijah, while he was in the substance of the created order, was assumed.”<sup>58</sup> Third, Irenaeus notes the example of God’s preservation in dire circumstances like Jonah or Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael, who were cast into the furnace and preserved by the presence of God’s Son. His conclusion is simply this: “So, neither the nature of any created thing nor the weakness of the flesh will be stronger than God’s will. For God is not subject to created things; no, they are subject to God, and all serve his will.”<sup>59</sup> What is impossible with men is possible with God.

Secondly, pertinent to Irenaeus’s polemical context, he was doggedly committed to *creatio ex nihilo* because it served as a basis for distinguishing the whatness of God from the whatness of creation. The uncreated Creator was infinite and simple. On the other hand, creation was finite and complex. Creation out of nothing provided substantiation for distinguishing God from “all things,” the One who contains all things from that which is contained by God, Creator from creation, the infinite and simple God from finite and complex creation.

According to Steenberg, Irenaeus developed the previous understanding of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* held by second-century apologists, Justin and Theophilus.

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<sup>56</sup> *Haer.* 5.5.1–2.

<sup>57</sup> *Haer.* 5.5.1 (Unger, 137).

<sup>58</sup> *Haer.* 5.5.1 (Unger, 137).

<sup>59</sup> *Haer.* 5.5.2 (Unger, 138).

Whereas previous understandings appear to have been that God created the material substance or content out of nothing and through that substance formed individual entities, Irenaeus defended a view that posited “unique creation ex nihilo.”<sup>60</sup> In other words, rather than creating primordial material which would constitute creation, God created “the actual, individual entities of the cosmos from a state of non-existence.”<sup>61</sup> Similarly, Lashier comments, “God does not generate the Son and the Spirit in order to form eternal, unformed matter (as the ‘Gnostics’ held), nor does he first make unformed matter, which the Son then forms into being. God the Father, through the Son and Spirit, creates beings directly.”<sup>62</sup>

Additionally, God does not merely create all things, he preserves the existence of all things. As Irenaeus states, “He thus bestows on them the beginning of existence and thereafter continued existence.”<sup>63</sup> This understanding of ongoing existence as a provision by God and in God is communicated in part through Irenaeus’s theological mantra of God containing all things and being uncontained. The ongoing governance and sustaining presence of God is just as essential as the original act of divine creation *ex nihilo*. As all things came into being through God, so all things continue to depend on God for existence.

### **Irenaeus’s Theology Proper**

The heart of Irenaeus’s theology has been variously identified as a topic of ongoing debate among scholars. Related to the broader thesis of my work, it is necessary to demonstrate that Irenaeus’s first principle, which I have identified as belief in only one God who is Father in relation to the Son and Creator of all things, functioned as

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<sup>60</sup> Steenberg, *Irenaeus on Creation*, 48.

<sup>61</sup> Steenberg, *Irenaeus on Creation*, 48.

<sup>62</sup> Lashier, *Irenaeus on the Trinity*, 10.

<sup>63</sup> *Haer.* 2.34.2 (Unger, 109).

Irenaeus's fundamental argument against the gnostics. However, beyond the polemical function of Irenaeus's doctrine of God, it is necessary to properly identify the constitution of Irenaeus's understanding of God, beginning with his theological center.

Scholars have made various proposals, each with their own merits. I find it heuristically helpful to categorize these proposals into two general orientations.<sup>64</sup> These two orientations are (1) economic theology, and (2) metaphysical theology. Regarding the former, some of the more recent defenders that Irenaeus's theological center was essentially economic are Michael Slusser<sup>65</sup> and Widdicombe.<sup>66</sup> Slusser summarizes Irenaeus's theological center as consisting of *magnitudo* (or transcendence) and *dilectio* (or love). In Slusser's conceptualization, Irenaeus's view of divine transcendence does not differentiate him from his opponents. In fact, he holds to essentially the same view regarding the infinitude of God. Where Irenaeus's theology differs from the theology of the gnostics is in the dialectic between divine infinitude and love. The Supreme God of the gnostics does not possess the latter. In Slusser's reconstruction, God's infinitude, or transcendence, is overcome by his love expressed in the incarnation of the Son. Slusser proposes, "Irenaeus' real agenda goes beyond metaphysics and portrays God in terms of love and will."<sup>67</sup>

While Slusser's thesis is tempting, it fails in a couple key areas. First, it does not account for the priority of a theological metaphysic within Irenaeus. For example, it fails in the area of Irenaeus's understanding of the divine Logos/Son and Wisdom/Spirit, as Lashier has defended. Moreover, it fails to discover the relationship between

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<sup>64</sup> Categorizing scholarship regarding the central concern of Irenaeus in this way is not unique to me. For example, Lashier and Briggman have both helpfully done so: Lashier, *Irenaeus on the Trinity*, 4–12; and Anthony Briggman, *God and Christ in Irenaeus*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 4–5.

<sup>65</sup> See Michael Slusser, "The Heart of Irenaeus's Theology," in Foster and Parvis, *Irenaeus*, 133–39.

<sup>66</sup> See Widdicombe, "Irenaeus and Knowledge of God as Father."

<sup>67</sup> Slusser, "The Heart of Irenaeus's Theology," 135.

*magnitudo* and *dilectio* in Irenaeus, a relationship which finds more of a complementary relationship between the two attributes rather than positing a mere dialectic.<sup>68</sup> Second, and perhaps more germane to *Haer.*, it fails to read Irenaeus in his polemical context against the gnostics who strayed, not merely in omitting divine *dilectio* but whose focus was almost entirely metaphysical. I discussed this in chapter 2, explaining the fundamental gnostic metaphysic expressed in their protology against which Irenaeus labored. Irenaeus's rebuttal of the gnostics therefore needed to be more foundational than economic, although divine economy and ontology must never be severed. In other words, the God who is is the God who has manifested himself in relation to the world. Irenaeus drilled deeper than economy—what God has done in relation to the world—to a theological metaphysic: who God eternally is.

The second orientation rightly interprets Irenaeus as concerned fundamentally with metaphysics. Norris,<sup>69</sup> Lashier<sup>70</sup> and Briggman<sup>71</sup> are helpful representatives of this trajectory. Lashier advocates an interpretation of Irenaeus as one who is committed to the right understanding of the nature of God. He writes, "In order to understand fully the nature of Irenaeus' reading of scripture, one must grasp his Trinitarian understanding of God."<sup>72</sup> Briggman argues against what he calls "the minimization of the metaphysical

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<sup>68</sup> Slusser is aware of such attempts: "A good case can be made that only a strong doctrine of divine transcendence can make divine immanence possible." Slusser, "The Heart of Irenaeus's Theology," 135. However, he rejects this understanding in the end. Slusser's principal passages are the following: *Haer.* 2.13.4; 2.17.11; 3.24.2; 4.20.1–3.

<sup>69</sup> Richard A. Norris, *God and World in Early Christian Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1965); Norris, "The Transcendence and Freedom of God: Irenaeus, the Greek Tradition and Gnosticism," in *Early Christian Literature and the Classical Intellectual Tradition: In Honorem Robert M. Grant*, ed. William R. Schoedel and Robert Louis Wilken, *Théologie Historique* 53 (Paris: Éditions Beauchesne, 1979); Norris, "Who Is the Demiurge? Irenaeus' Picture of God in *Adversus Haereses* 2," in *God in Early Christian Thought: Essays in Memory of Lloyd G. Patterson*, ed. Andrew B. McGowan, Brian E. Daley, and Timothy J. Gaden, SVC 94 (Boston: Brill, 2009), 9–36.

<sup>70</sup> Lashier, *Irenaeus on the Trinity*.

<sup>71</sup> Briggman, *God and Christ in Irenaeus*.

<sup>72</sup> Lashier, *Irenaeus on the Trinity*, 6.

dimension” of Irenaeus’s thought.<sup>73</sup> In agreement with Slusser, Briggman recognizes that Irenaeus did not merely author a metaphysical response to his opponents. However, Slusser minimizes the importance of metaphysics for Irenaeus and even mischaracterizes metaphysics as an obstacle to be overcome. Briggman convincingly argues for a corrective portrait of Irenaeus, not merely as a well-meaning churchman whose theology was economic in orientation, but as a rhetorically educated, philosophically informed theologian whose metaphysical awareness buttressed his retelling of the divine economy.<sup>74</sup> While Briggman’s portrayal is a refreshing and much needed contribution, he places the accent on Irenaeus the philosophical theologian rather than, and at times over and against, Irenaeus the biblical theologian.<sup>75</sup> Briggman further contends that Irenaeus’s two primary theological propositions are (1) God is infinite, and (2) God is simple. While Briggman includes a third proposition—God is spirit, this statement appears as a way of stating what Briggman’s other two propositions have already included. According to Briggman, “Irenaeus’ comments in *Haer. 2* on spirit are fleeting in comparison to the extended and repeated arguments by which he establishes the infinity and simplicity of the divine being. This suggests that spirit is not the fundamental concept for his thinking

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<sup>73</sup> Briggman, *God and Christ in Irenaeus*, 5.

<sup>74</sup> Norris proposed decades ago that Irenaeus’s primary concern in his debate with the gnostics was a doctrine of God. Norris, “Transcendence and Freedom of God,” 89. Additionally, Michel René Barnes has also contributed to an increased awareness of Irenaeus’s theology proper in “Irenaeus’s Trinitarian Theology,” 67–106. More Recently, Lashier has provided a monograph recovering Irenaeus as a capable Trinitarian theologian in juxtaposition to Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, and Theophilus of Antioch; see Lashier, *Irenaeus on the Trinity*.

<sup>75</sup> For example, “In *Against Heresies 2*, Irenaeus presents his understanding of the divine being using Scripture but especially reason and philosophical theology.” Briggman, *God and Christ in Irenaeus*, 102. While one appreciates the needed awareness of Irenaeus’s philosophical awareness, one wonders if Irenaeus would be comfortable with the interpretation that he presents his understanding of God *especially* through reason and philosophical theology. Moreover, “[Irenaeus’s] propositions concerning divine infinity and simplicity are founded upon philosophical formulas and reasoning” (103). To be fair, Briggman never pits Irenaeus’s philosophical theology against his biblical theology. However, I will seek to demonstrate that the two are inseparable and virtually indistinguishable.

about the divine being but is rather a biblical and philosophical concept that suits his identification of God as infinite and simple.”<sup>76</sup>

I find Briggman’s two theological propositions to be helpful as a description of a portion of what Irenaeus considered fundamental to a Christian theological metaphysic. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I employ these two propositions, providing an exposition of several conceptual corollaries and texts within Irenaeus’s corpus related to these central attributes of God.<sup>77</sup>

### **God Is Infinite**

To trace Irenaeus’s understanding of the infinitude of God, it is requisite to first identify Irenaeus’s definition. Helpfully, Irenaeus provides a clear definition through his theological maxim, which occurs in its unabridged form for the first time in *Haer.* 2.1.2.<sup>78</sup> In this section, Irenaeus rejects the possibility of another *pleroma* or “fullness.” After all, in the gnostic schema, Sophia’s “fall” or desire to know the unknowable Father, and that which issued from that desire (including the emanation of the Demiurge who created the world) all took place outside the Pleroma.<sup>79</sup> Irenaeus’s summary of divine infinitude occurs in the statement, “God, the Fullness of all things, necessarily contains them all without limit and is not contained by anyone.”<sup>80</sup> The Latin translations employ a couple of different verbs throughout *Haer.* to communicate this often-repeated theological maxim. Here the formula appears, *omnia circumcontinere et circumcontineri*

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<sup>76</sup> Briggman, *God and Christ in Irenaeus*, 101. For Briggman’s take on the Holy Spirit in Irenaeus, see Anthony Briggman, *Irenaeus of Lyons and the Theology of the Holy Spirit*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>77</sup> I am indebted to Briggman for much of what follows concerning these two propositions that lie at the center of Irenaeus’s theology.

<sup>78</sup> Technically, the first occurrence of the maxim is *Haer.* 1.15.5, but I have chosen *Haer.* 2.1.2 since it is the first unabridged occurrence as a positive theological assertion.

<sup>79</sup> *Haer.* 2.4.2.

<sup>80</sup> *Haer.* 2.1.2 (Unger, 17).

*a nemine*. Elsewhere the translations employ *capere* in place of *continere*. Essentially, the two versions of the formula communicate the same reality: God contains all things and is contained by nothing. God is the all-encompassing reality in which all things exist. He does not participate in a reality greater than himself. Moreover, he is not a participant or partaker of a category of existence or metaphysical plane of reality. As a result, he is not enclosed, circumscribed, or contained by anything, but he encloses, circumscribes, and contains all things. In *Haer.* 2.1.2, this containing all things and being uncontained is true of God *in immenso*.

The maxim is not unique to Irenaeus.<sup>81</sup> He quotes Shepherd of Hermas in *Haer.* 4.20.2, where he introduces the version of the theological maxim (*omnium capax et qui a nemine capiatur*<sup>82</sup>) with the words, “Correctly, then, has the writing expressed itself that says . . . .”<sup>83</sup> God, according to Herm. Mand. 1 (26), πάντα χωρῶν, μόνος δὲ ἀχώρητος ὢν.<sup>84</sup> In this version of the maxim in Irenaeus, God is contained *a nemine*, or “by no one.” Irenaeus communicates a similar idea in *Haer.* 1.22.1, manifested in creation and the apparent relationship between creation and the Creator. Although this text does not include the contain/uncontained formula, Irenaeus affirms that God is the

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<sup>81</sup> For example, in *Autol.* 2.3, Theophilus of Antioch states that God “is by no means to be confined in a place; for if He were, then the place containing Him would be greater than He; for that which contains is greater than that which is contained. For God is not contained, but is Himself the place of all” (*ANF*, 2:95). Additionally, in *Strom.* 6.5, Clement of Alexandria asserts, “Know then that there is one God . . . incapable of being contained, who contains all things” (*ANF*, 2:489). For a helpful summary of the philosophical pedigree of this statement, see W. R. Schoedel, “Enclosing Not Enclosed,” in Grant, Schoedel, and Wilken, *Early Christian Literature*, 75–86.

<sup>82</sup> *Haer.* 4.20.2 (SC 100:628).

<sup>83</sup> *Haer.* 4.20.2 (Unger, 58).

<sup>84</sup> Scholars have discussed Irenaeus’s attribution of γραφή to Herm. For example, Steenberg has contended that Irenaeus employs γραφή to classify the Shepherd of Hermas as “Scripture.” Irenaeus Archimandrite Steenberg, “Irenaeus on Scripture, Graphe, and the Status of Hermas,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (2009): 29–66. Charles Hill, in his article in which he engages Hahnemann’s theory of assigning a fourth-century origin to the Muratorian Fragment, suggests that “Irenaeus’ use of the *Shepherd* forms an entirely plausible setting for the Fragment’s specification that it should be read but cannot be classed with the Scriptures and read in public worship.” Charles E. Hill, “The Debate over the Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 57, no. 2 (1995): 439. Notably, Irenaeus introduces the quotation with ἡ γραφή ἢ λέγουσα and not the more definitive ἡ γραφή λέγει. For a helpful engagement with the issue, see Rousseau’s contribution in SC 100.248. Rousseau concludes that Irenaeus did not regard Herm. as Scripture.

Creator of all things and there is nothing exempt from this “all.” In other words, there are fundamentally two categories of existence, namely Creator and creation—uncontained Container and contained. Comparably, God *omnia capiens, solus est incapabilis* or “who contains all and is alone uncontainable.”<sup>85</sup>

Although the gnostics doubtless professed faith in the Supreme God who contained all and was contained by nothing, their protology betrayed a failure to consistently maintain this fundamental belief in divine infinitude. The gnostics were hopelessly inconsistent in their theological affirmations. Much of Irenaeus’s argument against them consists of identifying the inherent incoherence of their system. For example, “With you who subdivide into a Tetrad, Ogdoad, Decad, and Dodecad the Father, who comprehends all things but is Himself incomprehensible.”<sup>86</sup> Irenaeus describes the sheer lunacy of subdividing the divine essence through their protological scheme. After all, if God contains all things, then into what does he emit or emanate? If he emanates into himself, what is the meaning of divine emanation?<sup>87</sup> As Norris states, the theological maxim (i.e., contains all things/uncontainable) “was known in Valentinian circles as *Haer.* 1.1.1 makes clear.”<sup>88</sup> According to Irenaeus, the gnostics affirm that the Supreme Father is invisible and *nulla res capere possit* (“nothing can contain” him).<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> *Epid.* 4 (SC 406:90; Behr, 42).

<sup>86</sup> *Haer.* 1.15.5 (Unger, 67).

<sup>87</sup> Cf. *Haer.* 2.13.5 (Unger, 44), where Irenaeus states,

If they say that Mind was emitted from Mind, they cut up and divide God’s Mind. To what, and from where, was he emitted? For whatever is emitted by someone is emitted to some receptacle. But what being, into which they claim Mind was emitted, existed prior to God’s Mind? And how large was the place that it would receive and hold Gods Mind? If, however, as an example, they speak of a ray proceeding from the sun, then just as in the one case there is the existent air as a receptacle . . . and it exists prior to the ray itself, so also in the other case let them show that there was something existent into which God’s Mind was emitted, something capable of receiving him and older than God. Next, just as we notice that the sun, which is smaller than all things we see, emits rays far from itself, so we would have to say that the First-Father emitted a ray outside of and far from himself. But what can be conceived of outside of and far from God, into which he emitted a ray?

<sup>88</sup> Norris, “Who Is the Demiurge?,” 16.

<sup>89</sup> *Haer.* 1.1.1 (SC 264:28).

Norris adds, “In using this language, then, Irenaeus is appealing to an accepted principle, one that he shares with his opponents, and one whose meaning is well established.”<sup>90</sup>

The phrase first surfaced in Philo where he explained the fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. Philo explicated the biblical text in this way:

Let us see next how a man is said actually to hide himself from God. Were one not to take the language as figurative, it would be impossible to accept the statement, for God fills and penetrates all things, and has left no spot void or empty of His presence. What manner of place then shall a man occupy, in which God is not? The prophet elsewhere bears witness of this saying, “God in heaven above and upon the earth beneath and there is none else but He” (Deut. iv. 39). And again, “Here stand I before thou (wert made)” (Exod. xvii. 6); for before every created thing God is, and is found everywhere, so that no one could possibly hide himself from God. And why should we marvel at this? Whatever should happen, we could never escape or hide ourselves from those, even among things created, that are essential elements of creation. For instance, let a man fly, if he can, from earth or water or air or sky or the world at large. A man must needs have all these round him, for no one shall ever be able to escape out of the world. Then, seeing a man is powerless to hide himself from the parts of the world or from the world itself, would he be able to escape the eye of God? By no means. Why then does it say “they hid themselves”? The bad man thinks that God is in a place, not containing but contained [μὴ περιέχοντα, ἀλλὰ περιεχόμενον]; and for this reason he imagines that he can hide from Him, fancying that God, the Author of all things, is not in that part, which he has chosen for his lurking-place.<sup>91</sup>

Adam and Eve hid from God because they foolishly imagined that “God is in a place, not containing but contained” or “not enclosing but enclosed.” The theological statement was a widely accepted summary distinguishing God from everything else in some fashion. However, what each author meant by the maxim does not indicate agreement on the meaning of the maxim. My concern here is with what Irenaeus meant by appropriation of the maxim.

I agree with Norris regarding Irenaeus’s understanding. The formula “adumbrates a difference of ontological status” in Irenaeus.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, by appropriating

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<sup>90</sup> Norris, “Who Is the Demiurge?,” 16.

<sup>91</sup> *Leg. 3.6 in Philo I*, trans. F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, LCL 226 (Harvard University Press, 1929), 302–5.

<sup>92</sup> Norris, “Who Is the Demiurge?”

the formula, Irenaeus asserts that “the categories of finite existence—spatial location, for example—do not fit God. . . . the only reality to which the style ‘God’ properly belongs is not one being among others but . . . the infinite context of all finite realities.”<sup>93</sup> The gnostics, on the other hand, “finitize” or circumscribe the uncircumscribable God to the status of a creature. According to Irenaeus in *Haer.* 2.12.1, the gnostics class “he whom no one comprehends with what is comprehended by him.”<sup>94</sup>

Here it is helpful to explicate Irenaeus’s fuller sense of divine infinitude that neither his opponents nor others who appropriated the theological maxim understood. According to Irenaeus, God is not merely unlimited with respect to his power and magnitude, he is unlimited with respect to his benevolence and love. As Norris rightly observed, “For Irenaeus as for his opponents, God is infinite, but—and in this he is something of a revisionist—in his case this epithet has positive and not merely negative connotations. It means . . . that God’s resources are unlimited and God’s goodness, inexhaustible: or, in other words, it connotes not merely God’s *difference* from the finite order but also God’s effective *presence* for and in it.”<sup>95</sup> Briggman has also adopted this reading of Irenaeus by contending that the presence or immanence of God is best understood as a theological corollary of divine infinitude in conjunction with divine transcendence. Briggman argues, “The infinite God, who contains all things, is present to those things contained by him, such that each of those things may know and partake of him.”<sup>96</sup>

I find Briggman’s arguments to be persuasive. However, as with all theses, there is room for improvement. Although Briggman accentuates Irenaeus as a

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<sup>93</sup> Norris, “Who Is the Demiurge?,” 19.

<sup>94</sup> *Haer.* 2.12.1 (Unger, 38).

<sup>95</sup> Norris, “Who Is the Demiurge?,” 22.

<sup>96</sup> Briggman, *God and Christ in Irenaeus*, 89.

philosophically informed theologian, a portrayal he capably defends, Irenaeus was even more fundamentally rooted as a biblical theologian. While Irenaeus seizes upon already existing philosophical concepts, his primary interest is faithfulness to Scripture as summarized in the “rule of faith.” As he states, if his opponents “had known the Scriptures and had been taught by the Truth, they would indeed have known that God is not like men and women.”<sup>97</sup>

There are a few sections in *Haer.* that prove especially helpful in understanding Irenaeus’s conception of divine infinitude in relation to God’s nearness or immanence; these sections are 2.2.4–5, 2.13.7, and 4.19.2–3. In what follows, I unpack each of these sections under the themes of infinitude and creation, infinitude and nearness, and *magnitudo* and *dilectio* respectively.

### *Infinitude and Creation*

Irenaeus describes the gnostic position on the creation of the world satirically. Irenaeus’s argument really begins in 2.2.1, where he described those “who claim that the world was made by the Angels or some other World-Maker apart from the counsel with the Father who is above all things.”<sup>98</sup> While diversity existed among Irenaeus’s opponents, there was general agreement that the creation of this world was not the work of the Supreme Father but the product of a lesser (ignorant or perhaps even malevolent) divine being. Irenaeus contends that such a view is incoherent, if indeed God contains all things and is uncontained. He asks, were the things made formed “among the things enclosed by him”? If not, then God does not enclose all things but is himself enclosed by something superior and outside of him. If, on the other hand, creation is among the “all things” contained by the uncontainable God, then it follows that creation itself is in some

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<sup>97</sup> *Haer.* 2.13.3 (Unger, 43).

<sup>98</sup> *Haer.* 2.2.1 (Unger, 19).

sense the product of God's will, which is the first cause of all things. Moreover, even if one asserts that the one who directly and immediately made the world was the result of a long succession of emanations far removed from the Supreme Father, then the Supreme Father must still be regarded as the first and primary cause of creation.

On the contrary, as Irenaeus states, "All beings that have been made he [God] made through his indefatigable Word."<sup>99</sup> It is here where Irenaeus brings discussion regarding the immediacy of God's relation to the world or immanence under the classification of God's immensity or infinitude. He states, "It is proper to God's preeminence [*supereminentiae*] not to be in need of other instruments for creating things to be made. His own Word [*proprium eius Verbum*] is sufficient for the formation of all things." God's immediacy of relation to the world is not accomplished in spite of his super-immensity or preeminence but because of it.

Irenaeus then draws on a cluster of biblical texts as support for this metaphysical portrait. These texts include John 1:1–3, Genesis 1, and Psalm 33:9. First, he cites "John, the Lord's disciple," who says concerning God's sufficient Word, "All things were made by him and without him was made nothing."<sup>100</sup> It is not insignificant that Irenaeus begins with John 1. After all, as a part of the cluster, the remaining verses are read considering this initial text. Moreover, Irenaeus works back from John's "beginning" to the beginning of the biblical narrative, as I will unpack shortly. Contrary to his gnostic opponents Irenaeus interprets the "all" (*πάντα*) of John's text to include "this world."<sup>101</sup> By demonstrating this in his reading of John, Irenaeus shows that the one about whom John 1 is written is also the Creator of the world. Secondly, Irenaeus refers

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<sup>99</sup> *Haer.* 2.2.4 (Unger, 21).

<sup>100</sup> *Haer.* 2.2.5 (Unger, 21). When producing a biblical citation quoted by Irenaeus, I have chosen to provide the text as it appears in the translation of *Haer.*, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>101</sup> I discovered what I perceive to be a printing error in *Haer.* 2.2.5 (Unger, 21) where the text reads, "this word of ours," which I presume should read "this world of ours."

to Genesis 1 (the multiple times God creates by speaking, “And God said”) as a demonstration of the preeminent God creating by means of his sufficient Word. These two passages are mutually informative of a cohesive picture of the metaphysical reality that explains the world Irenaeus inhabits. In other words, the world God creates in the text of Scripture is the same world in which Irenaeus lives. According to Irenaeus, God creates “this world of ours.” Further, the “all things” of John 1 and Genesis 1 are “around us.” For Irenaeus, the biblical text is reality.<sup>102</sup> Appealing to Genesis is not a departure from John 1. The two are mutually informing. Although Genesis 1 never explicitly names the Word (ὁ λόγος), Irenaeus still finds sufficient connection between the two passages. In Genesis 1, Irenaeus observes the creative activity of God the Creator in employing his speech (his word): “God said.”<sup>103</sup> The parallel between the two texts is not strictly a lexical parallel but a conceptual-theological parallel in which the God who creates does so by means of his own speech activity. John 1:3, in this reading, illuminates Genesis 1. This string of texts that form Irenaeus’s constructive theological metaphysic include Psalm 32:9 (33:9 HT).<sup>104</sup> “In like manner” indicates that Irenaeus reads this psalm alongside and consonant with Genesis 1 and John 1. Once again, it is not the appearance of the same word (ὁ λόγος) that draws Irenaeus’s attention. Rather, Irenaeus sees both a lexical parallel with Genesis 1 (“God said” and “it came to be”) and a conceptual-theological parallel with John 1. As a result, Psalm 33:9 becomes a part of this mutually informing biblical collection portraying the preeminent God who made all things through his sufficient Word.

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<sup>102</sup> I suppose this is similar to what O’Keefe and Reno intended by their description of premodern readers of Scripture: “For them, the text was woven into the fabric of truth by virtue of being scripture. . . . It was true not by virtue of successfully or accurately representing any one event or part of this divinely ordained reality. Rather, the truth rested in the scripture’s power to illuminate and disclose the order and pattern of all things.” John J. O’Keefe and Russell R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 11.

<sup>103</sup> The refrain in the LXX is “εἶπεν ὁ θεός” (Gen 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26).

<sup>104</sup> The LXX reads as follows: ὅτι αὐτὸς εἶπεν, καὶ ἐγενήθησαν, αὐτὸς ἐνετείλατο, καὶ ἐκτίσθησαν.

Irenaeus's understanding of divine infinitude as encompassing divine immanence is rooted in biblical texts. The theological presentation of the heretics "is persuasive to those who are ignorant of God and who liken him to needy human beings and to such as cannot make something directly out of matter that was prepared but need many tools for making them."<sup>105</sup> In other words, to the one who espouses a deficient theological metaphysic reducing the transcendent God to the same metaphysical continuum as creation, the gnostic presentation proves convincing.<sup>106</sup> The biblical texts themselves bear testimony against the gnostic hypothesis. This explains why Irenaeus negatively characterizes the gnostic hypothesis as "speculation."<sup>107</sup> His concern is not with theological speculation per se but with theological speculation unmoored from Scripture.<sup>108</sup>

### *Infinitude and Nearness*

In ridiculing the doctrine of divine emissions, Irenaeus observes that if the gnostics claim that these emissions occur within the Father, then the language is useless. After all, emission or emanation "is the manifestation of the one emitted outside of the one who emits."<sup>109</sup> Moreover, to be contained within the one who contains all is to be aware of the uncontainable One. In other words, either the gnostics must concede to emissions occurring outside of what is contained by the Father, or the emanations must

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<sup>105</sup> *Haer.* 2.2.4.

<sup>106</sup> Both Minns and Lashier use the categories "relative transcendence" and "absolute transcendence" to distinguish Irenaeus's view from his gnostic opponents. See Minns, *Irenaeus*, 41–42; Lashier, *Irenaeus on the Trinity*, 82n105. These appear to me to be helpful ways to distinguish Irenaeus from his opponents. After all, Irenaeus's criticism of the gnostic theology consists largely of taking human nature and operations (for example, the development of thought from mind) and applying it directly to the nature and emissions of God. Such a move betrays a relative view of transcendence rather than the absolute view espoused by Irenaeus in which God is *other than* not simply *greater than*.

<sup>107</sup> *Haer.* 2.1.3.

<sup>108</sup> Briggman has convincingly shown that Irenaeus is not opposed to theologizing. Briggman, *God and Christ in Irenaeus*, 33–51. Irenaeus is opposed to theologizing unmoored from the proper biblical metaphysic.

<sup>109</sup> *Haer.* 2.13.6 (Unger, 44).

be aware of the Father since they exist within what he contains. It is incoherent to contend both that the emanations occur within the Father who remains unknown to his contained emanations, however near or far in gradation.

Rather, as I have shown concerning Irenaeus's theological metaphysic, the uncontainable Father contains all things. Being contained or existing within the Father necessitates the nearness of the Father to all that exists. In Irenaeus's trap, which he sets for the gnostics, he offers the following conclusion from their own assessments: *omne quod est intra eum omnes similiter participabunt de Patre*<sup>110</sup> ["the all that he is exists within him, and so all will equally partake of the Father"].<sup>111</sup> Although he critiques the internal incoherence of gnostic claims to ignorance within the one who contains all things, he seamlessly moves to speaking positively of all things being contained by the Father. After all, the language that Irenaeus uses here is comparable to the positive maxim of the true Father containing all things. Additionally, to be contained by the Father is to partake of, or know, the Father in some sense. Using the analogy of water and air, Irenaeus suggests that no matter where in the water or air one makes a circle, all points are equally near to the water or air since the water or air are the context for the circle, and therefore all points. Here, Irenaeus proposes what theologians have summarized with the proposition "God is spirit" (cf. John 4:24). According to Irenaeus, to claim that God is spiritual is to claim that God fills up "the things that are within him." While God is spirit is fundamental to Irenaeus's understanding of God, it is best to understand this attribute of God as a corollary of infinitude as summarized in the theological maxim of God containing all things yet being uncontained.<sup>112</sup> It follows then

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<sup>110</sup> SC 294:120.

<sup>111</sup> *Haer.* 2.13.7 (Unger, 45).

<sup>112</sup> Although some (Barnes and Lashier) have contended that "God is Spirit" is the fundamental theological center of Irenaeus, I prefer to understand God is Spirit in relation to infinitude and simplicity, comparable to Briggman.

that “all who are in Father partake of Father equally, and ignorance can have no place among them.”<sup>113</sup>

### Magnitudo *and* Dilectio

*Haer.* 4.19–20 is perhaps the most pertinent passage in the work regarding Irenaeus’s understanding of divine infinitude in relation to its theological corollaries like incomprehensibility, transcendence, omnipotence, and especially immanence.<sup>114</sup>

Moreover, this section is one of the primary sections to which Slusser appeals to demonstrate the distinction between divine infinitude and what Irenaeus calls love or *dilectio*.<sup>115</sup> As indicated above, Slusser concedes, “A good case can be made that only a strong doctrine of divine transcendence can make divine immanence possible.”<sup>116</sup> However, Slusser moves to argue for a primary concern in Irenaeus going “beyond” metaphysics to the economy of God where Irenaeus describes God “in terms of love and will.” Slusser contends that Irenaeus has essentially the same conception of divine infinitude as the gnostics. Where he differs is concerning divine love—and therefore the way humanity can know the infinitely immense and benevolent God. Although Slusser’s contribution is helpful, I argue that he falls short of grasping the essential argument of Irenaeus, one that does not fundamentally distinguish divine infinitude (or transcendence) from divine love (or immanence) but contrasts a gnostic conception of infinitude and incomprehensibility from the love of God the Father. In other words, the distinction rests not between divine infinitude and divine love per se but in an erroneous conception of

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<sup>113</sup> *Haer.* 2.13.7 (Unger, 45).

<sup>114</sup> Briggman includes divine transcendence, incomprehensibility, and immanence as theological corollaries of divine infinitude. One could just as well include omnipotence, invisibility, and others as this section of *Haer.* makes clear.

<sup>115</sup> Three other texts play a prominent role in Slusser’s understanding, namely *Haer.* 2.13.4; 2.17.11; 3.24.2.

<sup>116</sup> Slusser, “The Heart of Irenaeus’ Theology,” 135. As an aside, I take it that transcendence is a close corollary to infinitude.

divine infinitude (i.e., the gnostic conception) and divine love. This subtle difference between Slusser's understanding, and that of those who find theological metaphysics to be at the center of Irenaeus's argument, results in a fundamentally different view of Irenaeus's conception of divine infinitude. *Haer.* 4.19–20 provides a helpful test case for this thesis.

In *Haer.* 4.19, Irenaeus appeals to the “types” manifested through the ministry of Moses and what God showed Moses while on Mount Sinai. “It is fitting,” Irenaeus states, that “earthly things that have been arranged on our behalf should be types of the heavenly realities.”<sup>117</sup> After all, the same God made both the earthly things and the heavenly realities. This is contrary to a gnostic conception of the relationship between earthly things and heavenly (or greater) realities. The gnostics fundamentally differed from Irenaeus in their theology and cosmology by positing involvement of different gods. The God who was infinite and incomprehensible, who ostensibly contained all, and was uncontained by anything, was not the God who made the earthly things. Irenaeus attributes both the earthly things and the heavenly, or greater realities, to the same God. Further, the gnostics vainly seek to rise above the only true God and Creator by investigating types of types *ad infinitum*.

Contrary to the gnostics who speculate “beyond” God the Creator, Irenaeus asserts that God the Creator is incomprehensible. After all, if heaven itself is beyond human comprehension, how much more the Creator of heaven. Here he employs the argument *minore ad maius*. The God who is incomprehensible, and is “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named,”<sup>118</sup> is the God who created all things. Through an appeal to Jeremiah 23:34, Irenaeus constructs both an understanding of divine transcendence and immanence:

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<sup>117</sup> *Haer.* 4.19.1 (Unger, 55).

<sup>118</sup> Irenaeus quotes here from Eph 1:21.

He it is who fills the heavens and looks into the depths. He is also with each one of us; for it says, I am a God at hand [*Deus enim, inquit, appropinquans ego sum*], and not a God afar off [*et non Deus de longinquo*]. Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? For his hand [*Manus enim*] grasps all things [*apprehendit omnia*]. It is his hand that enlightens the heavens; it enlightens also the things under heaven; and it searches the minds and the hearts and is present in hidden and secret parts of ourselves, yet it nourishes and conserves us visibly.<sup>119</sup>

A couple of observations prove insightful at this juncture. First, Irenaeus introduces the concept of God's hand (*manus*) at this point in the argument. He will develop this imagery in the following sections as a reference to God's Word or Son and include God's Wisdom or Spirit. It is through God's Hand or Son that he creates and sustains all things. Second, Irenaeus explains God's immensity or omnipresence in such a way that it demands his immanence in relation to "each one of us." It is because God "fills the heavens and looks into the depths" that he is "with each one of us." Irenaeus's foundational theological belief for what he describes as God's immanence or presence with us is found explicitly in 4.19.3, where he states, *quoniam magnitudo ejus non deficit, sed omnia continent*.<sup>120</sup> Irenaeus explicates divine *magnitudo* in this context with the maxim, *sed omnia continent* or "contains all things." This theological basis provides the necessary foundation for what Irenaeus infers at the conclusion of chapter 19. Because of divine *magnitudo*, Irenaeus states that God *pervenit usque ad nos et nobiscum est*. God containing all things means that he "reaches even to us, and is with us." According to Irenaeus, God's nearness or immanence is directly related to God's greatness and immensity. More specifically, divine *magnitudo* is the basis for divine immanence. God reaches to us and is present with us on account of his greatness, not in spite of it.

Although the gnostics claimed to believe that the Supreme Father contains all things, the gnostic god in fact did not.<sup>121</sup> If the Demiurge, in the gnostic heresy, created

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<sup>119</sup> *Haer.* 4.19.2 (Unger, 56; SC 100:620).

<sup>120</sup> *Haer.* 4.19.3 (SC 100:622).

<sup>121</sup> *Haer.* 4.19.3.

outside the fullness of the Father, then the Father does not contain all things and is circumscribed. The gnostics err in their conception of divine *magnitudo* and not merely in their neglect or omission of divine *dilectio*.

Irenaeus develops his argument in chapter 20 by shifting from God's greatness extended to us to our ability to know his greatness. In this context Irenaeus offers what Slusser considers to be in support of his thesis. Irenaeus argues, "It is, therefore, not possible to know God according to his greatness [*secundum magnitudinem*], because it is impossible for the Father to be measured. However, according to his love [*secundum autem dilectionem*]" it is possible.<sup>122</sup> What is Irenaeus saying, and what does this imply regarding the relationship between divine infinitude and divine immanence? First, it is imperative to interpret Irenaeus's conclusion in 4.20.1 in light of his argument in 4.19.1–3. The theological basis for Irenaeus's conclusion in chapter 20 is the inseparable relationship between divine *magnitudo* and divine immanence. Whatever Irenaeus intends in chapter 20, he cannot mean to reverse what he has just stated. Second, he introduces another concept into the discussion in chapter 20. The new concept is divine *dilectio* (or "love"). God's *magnitudo* is not merely explained in terms of God containing all things; it is also explained in the necessary and accompanying qualification, God is uncontained by anything. According to Irenaeus, for God to contain all things is for God to be present with and near all things. As stated above, divine *magnitudo* is the basis for divine immanence. His very nature, or who he is in himself, demands this conclusion. For there to exist something that God does not contain is for there to be a competing principle alongside God, and even a potential principle greater than God who contains God and/or the other coexistent principle.

On the other hand, it is one thing to speak of God's nearness, or God's relation toward humanity, on the basis of his *magnitudo*, and another thing to speak of humanity's

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<sup>122</sup> *Haer.* 4.20.1 (Unger, 58; SC 100:624).

relation toward God. For any or all of the “all things” to know the God who contains all and is near to all, God must reveal himself through his Word. Irenaeus distinguishes between *who* God is and even *who* God is in relation to us and *how* we can know *who* God is in relation to us. In other words, there is a difference between God’s ontology and the epistemological avenue for coming to know *who* God is. If humanity can know God on account of his *magnitudo*, God is “measured” (*mensurari*). Another way to say this is as follows: if the God who contains all things can be known by the “all things” on account of his greatness, he is also contained by all things. However, God benevolently provides us with the knowledge of himself through his Word. This act of God revealing himself through the Word Irenaeus calls *dilectio*. In other words, divine *dilectio* is a description here of the economy of God—God’s relationship with the cosmos through his Word (Son) and Wisdom (Spirit)—a relationship which climaxed with the incarnation of the Word. God’s love is a way for Irenaeus to speak about God in relation to us. Irenaeus states, “For it is that love which leads us to God through his Word.”<sup>123</sup> In some sense, God’s greatness (*magnitudo*) is a way of describing God beyond us or as he is in himself, although not separated from us, as indicated above. *Who* God is in relation to us is still subsumed under the category of divine *magnitudo*. On the other hand, God manifests his greatness—makes himself known—by means of his love. *Dilectio*, in this sense, is the manifestation of *magnitudo*. However, in his polemic against the gnostics, Irenaeus juxtaposes the two concepts to distinguish his view from the gnostic corruption. This is why Irenaeus describes the prophets as having seen God’s economies partially, but not seeing God himself perfectly.<sup>124</sup> They did not see God as he is in himself but God as revealed in the economies through his Word.

Irenaeus explicates this further in *Haer.* 4.20.4:

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<sup>123</sup> *Haer.* 4.20.1 (Unger, 58).

<sup>124</sup> *Haer.* 4.20.10.

There is, therefore, one God who created and shaped up all things through his Word and Wisdom. But he is the Creator who in turn gave this world to the human race. By reason of his greatness he is unknown to all his creatures—for no one has probed his depths, neither the ancients who have gone to rest, nor the people living now—but by reason of his love he is always known through him by whom he made all things.<sup>125</sup>

Here again, Irenaeus believes that for God to be known by reason of his greatness would be for God to be contained or comprehended, and therefore would compromise God's infinitude. God as he is in himself is incomprehensible. However, God in relation to the world through his Word and Wisdom provides the necessary ability for humanity to truly know God, albeit not exhaustively. Irenaeus understands that while God is near all things, he is not reduced to his nearness to all things. Although divine immanence follows from divine greatness, immanence does not comprehensively summarize God's greatness. Climactically, God reveals himself when the Lord Jesus "was made man among men, that he might join the end to the beginning, that is, man to God."<sup>126</sup>

In what follows, Irenaeus describes the conundrum between God's invisibility and ineffable glory on the one hand, and finite creatures "seeing" God on the other. According to Irenaeus, with respect to "his greatness and ineffable glory" (*secundum magnitudinem quidem ejus et inenarrabilem gloriam*) no one can see God and live.<sup>127</sup> After all, "the Father is incomprehensible."<sup>128</sup> As Irenaeus explains further, "In keeping with [his] love and kindness and omnipotence [*omnia possit*], he grants to those who love him this: to see God, which also the Prophets foretold." "Seeing" God is a gift God grants to finite creatures according to his *dilectio*, *humanitas*, and *omnia possit*. Even here, although the relationship the creature can enjoy with God is on the basis of God's love and kindness, it is also God's ability to do all things, or his omnipotence, that bestows

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<sup>125</sup> *Haer.* 4.20.4 (Unger, 59).

<sup>126</sup> *Haer.* 4.20.4 (Unger, 59).

<sup>127</sup> *Haer.* 4.20.5 (Unger, 60; SC 100:368).

<sup>128</sup> *Haer.* 4.20.5 (Unger, 60).

this privilege. Moreover, one's very existence occurs and eventuates in God. Irenaeus refers to this existence in the God who contains all things as "participating in God" (*participatio . . . Dei*). Participating in God amounts to seeing God and enjoying his goodness to us (*est videre Deum et frui benignitate ejus*).<sup>129</sup>

Although Irenaeus distinguished between God's *magnitudo* and his *dilectio*, it is important to interpret Irenaeus in his polemic against a gnostic doctrine of God. According to the gnostics, God was infinite and this infinitude necessitated a separation from creation and the absence of God's immediacy of relationship.<sup>130</sup> Their view of divine infinitude was fallacious. Another way of saying this is to say that the gnostic view of divine infinitude did not allow for divine love. Irenaeus's understanding, however, permitted the consonance and even mutually informing relationship between divine *magnitudo* and *dilectio*. The way Irenaeus begins the discussion in *Haer.* 4.19.1–3 establishes the theological basis for God's immanence in divine infinitude. Moreover, as I show below, Irenaeus's understanding of divine simplicity further substantiates this claim by preventing interpreters of Irenaeus from sharply distinguishing divine *magnitudo* and *dilectio*.

### **God Is Simple**

The second central characteristic that comprises Irenaeus's doctrine of God is simplicity. While the presence of divine simplicity in Irenaeus is without controversy, as with other debates surrounding Irenaeus's theology, divisions exist between scholars who contend for an exclusively economic foundation and orientation and scholars who espouse a metaphysical foundation of God *in se*. A representative of the former is John

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<sup>129</sup> *Haer.* 4.20.5 (SC 100:642).

<sup>130</sup> For the language of immediacy of relationship, I am indebted to Khaled Anatolios, "The Influence of Irenaeus on Athanasius," *Studia Patristica* 36 (2001): 463–76.

Behr.<sup>131</sup> Behr writes, “To separate theology and economy in such a manner that the former, theology, is a distinct prior step which must be undertaken before, and independently of, the latter, economy, I would suggest would compromise Irenaeus’s understanding of divine simplicity every bit as much as metaphysical concerns that worried later theologians.”<sup>132</sup> According to Behr, divine simplicity is not a settled theological concept in the mind of Irenaeus prior to the economy. Rather, divine simplicity arises from the economy. The “first principle” for Paul the apostle (and presumably Irenaeus, according to Behr), as is shown through his conversion to interpreting all Scripture through the lens of Jesus Christ, was Christ.<sup>133</sup> On the other hand, Briggman, as shown above, argues in favor of interpreting Irenaeus as a theologian concerned with God as he is in himself. For Briggman, Irenaeus was a deeply philosophical theologian and not merely a biblical theologian whose orientation was exclusively economic.<sup>134</sup> Jonatán Simons has produced a helpful engagement with divine simplicity in Irenaeus, suggesting what he calls a *via media* between the frameworks of Behr and Briggman.<sup>135</sup> Simons proposes, “I argue that Irenaeus’ claim that God is simple is both based on Scripture and is used to interpret Scripture. It is used to conceive of both God *in se* and God’s interaction with creation.”<sup>136</sup> Simons is right to see deep

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<sup>131</sup> John Behr, “Synchronic and Diachronic Harmony: St. Irenaeus on Divine Simplicity,” *Modern Theology* 35, no. 3 (2019): 428–41.

<sup>132</sup> Behr, “Synchronic and Diachronic Harmony,” 432.

<sup>133</sup> Behr, “Synchronic and Diachronic Harmony,” 434–35.

<sup>134</sup> Similarly, Osborn contends, “Without a refined theism, Christology is a keystone without an arch.” Eric Francis Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 43.

<sup>135</sup> Jonatán Simons, *Divine Simplicity in the Theology of Irenaeus*, SVC 180 (Leiden: Brill, 2023).

<sup>136</sup> Simons, *Divine Simplicity in Theology of Irenaeus*, 1. Simons helpfully shows how divine simplicity “is not an anomaly of *haer.* 2.13, but it remains central to the descriptions of God and God’s interaction with creation in Irenaeus’ theology” (Simons, 13). Moreover, Simons rightfully demonstrates that Irenaeus’s understanding of divine simplicity was not derived merely from “the philosophical paradigm” as argued by Osborn (Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 37), but was derived from a right reading of Scripture. However, Simons’s thesis stops at the level of divine simplicity both as exegetically derived and hermeneutical lens. My thesis builds upon and extends the thesis of Simons. Divine simplicity, and other

metaphysical concerns in Irenaeus that are revealed in and serve as an interpretive framework for understanding Scripture.<sup>137</sup>

Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I define and explicate the doctrine of divine simplicity in Irenaeus focusing on two primary sections of *Haer.*, 2.13.1–4 and 2.28.4–5. In the former section, Irenaeus compares and contrasts divine simplicity with human complexity. In the latter passage, he rebuts the gnostics by positing that simplicity, along with other theological beliefs, must be rooted in Scripture’s testimony.

### *Defining Simplicity*

Although theological dialogue regarding divine simplicity includes a wealth of reflection throughout church history, Irenaeus provides a helpful definition in *Haer.* 2.13.3. “[God] is simple and not composite; with all members of similar nature, being entirely similar and equal to himself.”<sup>138</sup> In Latin, *et simplex et non compositus et similibrembrus et totus ipse sibimetipsi similis et aequalis*.<sup>139</sup> Irenaeus continues to explicate this understanding of God with the following words: “He is all Mind, all Spirit, all Understanding, all Thought, all Word, all Hearing, all Eye, all Light, and the whole Source of all blessings. That is how devout people can properly speak about God.”<sup>140</sup>

Contrariwise, the gnostics conceived a God with various emissions through their protological myth. Irenaeus contended that the gnostic doctrine of divine emissions did not merely compromise God’s infinitude, it also perverted God’s simplicity.

Patterned after the mental and verbal processes of humanity, the gnostic doctrine of God

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concepts within Irenaeus’s doctrine of God, provide the necessary exegetical framework and receive instantiation in particular exegetical methods in Irenaeus, as I will show in the next chapter.

<sup>137</sup> Behr’s argument, while helpful as a corrective against approaches to Irenaeus that unmoor his theology from his reading of Scripture, fails to sufficiently deal with Irenaeus’s emphasis found especially in books 1 and 2 of *Haer.*

<sup>138</sup> *Haer.* 2.13.3 (Unger, 43).

<sup>139</sup> *Haer.* 2.13.3 (SC 294:114).

<sup>140</sup> *Haer.* 2.13.3 (Unger, 43).

fell prey to equating God, who is simple in nature, to the composite nature of creatures.<sup>141</sup> A compositional nature is inherent to finite creatures. After all, limitations inhere in finitude. A finite nature may be divided into constituent parts that together comprise the totality of a finite being. These parts are not necessarily tangible or material, although materiality is a portion of creation. Parts also include properties that constitute being. Since compositional nature is inherent to finitude and finitude is limitation, it is unfit to conceive of God as composite.<sup>142</sup>

### *Divine Simplicity and Human Complexity*

In *Haer.* 2.13.1–4, Irenaeus seeks to rebut his gnostic opponents by identifying two fundamental flaws in the gnostic doctrine of God as manifested in their protology. First, the order of emissions from First Father is internally incoherent. Second, gnostic protology necessarily demands a composite divine nature, which is contrary to the divine nature. As an aside, it is insightful to recognize that Irenaeus engages the gnostics at the level of theological metaphysic, or God as he is in himself, in response to the gnostic conception of theological metaphysic as explained through the doctrine of divine emissions.

In paragraphs 1 and 2, Irenaeus directs his rebuttal at the incoherence of the order of divine emissions. He contends,

They say that Mind and Truth were emitted by Profundity and his Thought. This is shown to be a contradiction. For Mind is itself the directing element, and, as it were, the beginning and the source of all understanding. But Thought is a particular activity, which comes from Mind and is relative to a definite object. It is impossible, therefore, that Mind was emitted from Profundity and Thought.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> *Haer.* 2.13.3; 2.28.4.

<sup>142</sup> *Haer.* 2.28.4.

<sup>143</sup> *Haer.* 2.13.1–2 (Unger, 42).

Irenaeus's argument stems from the role and order of mental emission. The mind produces and is not produced by some other mental constituent. It emits and is not emitted. Irenaeus focuses his initial criticism against the gnostic conception at the internal inconsistency of their order of Aeons. "It would have been more plausible to say that Thought was emitted as the daughter of First-Father and this Mind. Thought, really, is not the mother of Mind, as they assert; on the contrary, Mind becomes the father of Thought."<sup>144</sup> To describe Thought as the source for emission and Mind as the product of emission is backwards. In the order of mental processes, mind produces thought.

Irenaeus progresses in describing the internal activities of the mind. Such activities "are one and the same thing" and "have their origin in the mind and get their names because of development."<sup>145</sup> For example, the mind produces thought. This concept called "thought" can be described in various stages—intention, understanding, counsel, and thought—according to Irenaeus. Additionally, although this description occurs in the mind, the result "can very correctly be called a word, from which the uttered word is emitted." Illustratively, Irenaeus points to the human body, which undergoes various stages (e.g., young, mature, aged) while not experiencing a change in substance. The acts of the mind undergo a development but do not change substantially. However, this process of mental development is governed by the mind and not thought. As a result, the gnostics have predicated their system on a misunderstanding of the order of mental and verbal development.

The second criticism Irenaeus levels against his opponents is far more severe. Not only have they compromised the normative pattern of emissions, but they have also confused the divine nature with human nature—the Creator with the creature. In

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<sup>144</sup> *Haer.* 2.13.1 (Unger, 42).

<sup>145</sup> *Haer.* 2.13.2 (Unger, 42).

paragraphs 3 and 4, whether the gnostics admit the inevitable or not, divine emissions bespeak a composite divine nature:

These activities can be spoken of in men and women, since men and women are composite in nature, consisting of body and soul. But whoever asserts that Thought is emitted from God, and Mind from Thought, and from these Word, are in the first place to be convicted of applying these emissions improperly. Second, although they are ignorant of [the nature of] God, they describe men's and women's actions and passions and intentions of the mind. They apply to the Father of all things, who, they assert, is unknown to all, the actions that occur in men and women that lead to the spoken word.<sup>146</sup>

Whereas humans and other creatures are composed of parts, God is *simplex et non compositus*. The irony of the gnostic doctrine of God is that while they attempted to maintain the entire otherness of God by denying the immediate relation of the Supreme Father to creation, they ascribed the characteristics of creation to the Supreme Father thereby denying his essential otherness.

According to Irenaeus, the gnostics rejected the one true God because they had not “known the Scriptures,” nor were they “taught by the Truth.” If they had known the truth, “they would indeed have known that God is not like men and women.”<sup>147</sup>

Doubtless, Irenaeus's claim is not one that the gnostics would concede. However, he is not arguing that the gnostics overtly admitted this theological error. Rather, he argues that it necessarily follows from the gnostic doctrine of emanations that God is composite, and therefore fundamentally like created human beings. According to Irenaeus, “The Father of all things is far removed from the actions and passions that men and women experience.”<sup>148</sup>

Irenaeus is fully aware that Scripture employs anthropomorphism and anthropopathism in describing God. However, such metaphors highlight similarity on

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<sup>146</sup> *Haer.* 2.13.3 (Unger, 43).

<sup>147</sup> *Haer.* 2.13.3 (Unger, 43).

<sup>148</sup> *Haer.* 2.13.3 (Unger, 43).

account of essential dissimilarity. Scripture explicitly teaches that God is unlike humanity. Alluding to Isaiah 55:8, Irenaeus asserts that God's thoughts are not like the thoughts of humans. As later authors would contend, rather than reading biblical texts that appear to ascribe human characteristics to God univocally, Irenaeus interprets such passages analogically.<sup>149</sup> For example, we speak correctly about God as all Mind, but we do not speak comprehensively.<sup>150</sup> Such descriptions are analogical but also demand an infinite distance between the reality in God and the analogy in creation. Seizing upon Irenaeus's description elsewhere, we speak in this way because of God's *dilectio* while understanding that he is far above these descriptions because of his *magnitudo*.

Put crudely, Irenaeus seeks to protect the "godness" of God as distinct from finite creatures. God is not different from humanity in terms of degree but in terms of kind. In other words, God is not a stronger, larger, and everlasting version of humanity. God is *sui generis*. This Creator/creature distinction is central to understanding Irenaeus's theological metaphysic. For example, Irenaeus describes humanity as making progress concerning understanding of Christ from the old to the new covenants. Moreover, divine revelation itself provides increasingly clearer knowledge over time. Humanity, in Irenaeus's anthropology, is ever becoming and progressing toward maturity. God, on the other hand, is never becoming but is absolute being existing without progress or change.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> For example, Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) describes the differences of univocal, equivocal, and analogical predications contending for the necessity of the latter with reference to positive predications of God. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of English Dominican Province (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 1981), bk.1, q.13, a.5.

<sup>150</sup> *Haer.* 2.13.4.

<sup>151</sup> *Haer.* 4.11.2.

Moreover, no “part” of God is less than God or distinct from God. In fact, to speak of parts at all is to speak blasphemously. All that is in God is God.<sup>152</sup> Conversely, humans have parts that are not properly, distinctly, and wholly human. Additionally, humanity is a class of being that exists outside of, and beyond, individual humans. According to Irenaeus, this is not the case with God. God is not a class in which God participates, and every “part” of God is wholly God resulting in the impropriety of speaking about divine parts.

While God may properly and accurately be called Understanding, he is not like the understanding of humans. Again, “He may most properly be termed Light, but He is nothing like that light with which we are acquainted.”<sup>153</sup> Irenaeus is not contending against the proper use of such theological reflections or positive theological predications. After all, he employs theological language throughout *Haer.* Rather, he accents the insufficiency of such expressions to describe the vastness of God.

Before turning to *Haer.* 2.28, it is beneficial to note briefly Irenaeus’s understanding of other beliefs related to simplicity within his doctrine of God. One example is atemporality.<sup>154</sup> Divine atemporality does not merely coexist with divine simplicity. Irenaeus understands atemporality to be a corollary to divine simplicity. For God to be a simple being—not composed of parts—means that God cannot undergo a process or order within himself, as the gnostics claim. In the words of Irenaeus, “He does not have in himself anything that is more ancient or of later origin, nor does he have in himself anything that belongs to another.”<sup>155</sup> Composite beings are composed of parts

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<sup>152</sup> An extremely helpful and accessible summary of divine simplicity is found in James E. Dolezal, *All That Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2017).

<sup>153</sup> *Haer.* 2.13.4 (Unger, 43).

<sup>154</sup> I am indebted to Briggman for this observation; see Briggman, *God and Christ in Irenaeus*, 97–98.

<sup>155</sup> *Haer.* 2.13.8 (Unger, 45).

whose existence in comparison to the composition or aggregate is anterior. As a result, God is not a temporal being but is atemporal. Temporality demands succession of moments whereas God is without succession.

### *Divine Simplicity and Scripture*

In *Haer.* 2.28.3–6, Irenaeus continues to advocate the doctrine of simplicity in response to the gnostic theological mutation of divine composition. His argument proceeds in three stages. First, he defends an understanding of the harmony, clarity, and role of Scripture in theologizing, which I will note briefly in this chapter only to postpone a more thorough treatment until chapter 5. Scripture’s clarity provides parameters within which the theologian justifiably theologizes. The gnostics went beyond what has been written and by so doing, denied the truth about God. Second, the God who is, and who has revealed himself in Scripture, is simple. Third, Irenaeus unequivocally affirms the eternal generation of the Logos while distinguishing it from divine emanations within the gnostic configuration.

According to Irenaeus, while *uniuersis Scripturia spiritalibus existentibus*,<sup>156</sup> not every portion of Scripture is equally clear. This is not to suggest that the Scripture contains inherent inconsistencies. Rather, “all the Scripture given us by God harmonizes, and the parables harmonize with the things that are expressly stated, and the plain statements explain the parables.”<sup>157</sup> This harmony and proper interpretation of the Scriptures provides the Christian with appropriate boundaries within which to reason about God. However, to go beyond the Scriptures and to search for answers which God has not provided is perilous. An example of this includes the question, “What did God do before he created the world?” Irenaeus answers,

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<sup>156</sup> *Haer.* 2.28.3 (SC 294:274).

<sup>157</sup> *Haer.* 2.28.3 (Unger, 88–89).

We reply that the answer to this is in God's keeping. The Scriptures do teach us that this world was made complete by God when it began in time; but no Scripture reveals what God did before this. So the answer to this is in God's keeping; and you should not desire to discover foolish, senseless, and blasphemous emissions nor reject God himself who made all things, by thinking you have discovered the emission of matter.<sup>158</sup>

The role of Scripture is apparent for the theologian—to provide the appropriate parameters within which to consider God. The questions Scripture answers should be the questions of the interpreter. Bringing questions to the biblical text that Scripture does not answer is hazardous and potentially blasphemous. Moreover, Scripture provides “one harmonious melody that hymns praises to God who made all things.”<sup>159</sup> The gnostics, on the other hand, interpret Scripture as a discordant cacophony with competing and contradictory voices.

Irenaeus's target is the misuse of Scripture in the hands of the gnostics. Rather than merely accepting what Scripture teaches concerning God, Irenaeus's opponents speculate beyond (and behind) the text concerning a “God” who does not exist and is not revealed in the Scriptures. The gnostic understanding of divine emissions, contingent on a rejection of divine simplicity, the foundation upon which much of the gnostic doctrine of God is built, are unmoored from the Scriptures and are imported into the biblical text.

Rather than relying on what God has revealed concerning himself in Scripture, the gnostics derive their doctrine of God and protological myth from “the activities of women and men.”<sup>160</sup> However, contrary to man who is composite, “God is all mind, all intelligence, all spirit who is active, all light, and always existing the same and unchangeable, things beneficial for us to know about God, as we also learn from the Scriptures, such activities and parts cannot properly belong to God.”<sup>161</sup> As indicated

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<sup>158</sup> *Haer.* 2.28.3 (Unger, 89).

<sup>159</sup> *Haer.* 2.28.3 (Unger, 89).

<sup>160</sup> *Haer.* 2.28.4 (Unger, 89).

<sup>161</sup> *Haer.* 2.28.4 (Unger, 89).

above, Irenaeus’s understanding of God does not permit the division of God into constituent parts. God is not a being composed of mind, intelligence, spirit, light, or any other part. God is all mind, all intelligence, all spirit, all light. God is absolute in being. His existence is not dependent on anything, including parts of him. For God to possess or be composed of parts would be for God to be dependent on the existence and presence of those parts for existence.<sup>162</sup> To be fair, Irenaeus does not defend divine simplicity as much as he asserts and explains it scripturally in order to demonstrate its denial among his opponents. Divine simplicity, according to Irenaeus *utile est nobis sapere de Deo* (“is useful for us to know about God”) and *ex Scripturis discimus* (“we learn [divine simplicity] from the Scriptures.”)<sup>163</sup> As indicated above, Irenaeus operated with the foundational belief in the Creator/creature distinction, and he believed this distinction to be inherent in Scripture’s theological metaphysic.

Although it is uncertain whether Irenaeus was consciously aware of his philosophical influencers, he was comfortable adopting the language of Xenophanes of Colophon (570–475 BC). After all, Irenaeus employs the language of God being “all Mind, all Spirit, all Understanding, all Thought, all Word, all Hearing, all Eye, all Light.”<sup>164</sup> Such language indicating unity and oneness in God is first found in Xenophanes’s *Frag. 24*, where Xenophanes asserts, “All of him sees, all thinks, all hears” (οὐλος ὄραϊ, οὐλος δὲ νοεῖ, οὐλος δὲ τ’ἀκούει).<sup>165</sup> Similarly, Alcinous (ca. AD second century) asserts in *Did.*, Λέγω δὲ οὐχ ὡς χωρίζων ταῦτα, ἀλλ’ ὡς κατὰ

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<sup>162</sup> As mentioned above, Dolezal has helped to frame my understanding of divine simplicity in *All That Is in God*. What some theologians have given the moniker “classical theism,” especially as it relates to divine simplicity, is predicated on the premise that a composite exists posterior to its parts. The simpler exists necessarily before complex composition.

<sup>163</sup> *Haer.* 2.28.4 (Unger, 89; SC 294:280).

<sup>164</sup> *Haer.* 2.13.3 (Unger, 43).

<sup>165</sup> Daniel W. Graham, trans., *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy: The Complete Fragments and Selected Testimonies of the Major Presocratics*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 110–11.

πάντα ἐνὸς νοουμένου.<sup>166</sup> Or, “But I do not say this as though I were dividing these things, but as though one were considered according to all.”<sup>167</sup> For Irenaeus, however, Xenophanes was not the authority. In fact, philosophers often went astray from the truth as he demonstrates in *Haer.* 2.14.1–8. It was the gnostics who appropriated pagan philosophical systems contrary to Scripture. Scripture as summarized in the *regula* was the authority which governed the Christian and within which the theologian could theologize. Irenaeus was comfortable appealing to, or quoting, philosophers positively as long as those philosophers were consistent with Scripture.<sup>168</sup>

As stated above, Irenaeus perceives the existence of theological corollaries to divine simplicity. In this section of *Haer.*, he includes in his explanation of simplicity that God is *semper idem et similiter existens*. Divine immutability (alongside divine atemporality as indicated above) is a corollary to divine simplicity. For God to be simple—not composed of parts—is for God to be unchanging. Composite beings undergo change. The clearest of these changes is the change from the anterior existence of the parts to the posterior existence of the composition.

Related to Irenaeus’s concern for maintaining divine simplicity is the generation of the Logos in contrast to the gnostic speculation of divine emissions. According to Irenaeus, the generation of the Logos is dissimilar to human generation on the basis of the *sui generis* of God. He appeals to Isaiah 53:8 to demonstrate that the Son’s generation is incomprehensible and ineffable. “If, then, anyone should ask us, How was the Son emitted by the Father? we reply, No one can understand this emission, or generation, or calling, or manifestation, whatever name one might call his ineffable

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<sup>166</sup> *Did.* 10.3, in Alcinous, *Alkinoos, Didaskalikos Lehrbuch der Grundsätze Platons: Einleitung, Text, Übersetzung und Anmerkungen*, trans. Orrin F. Summerell and Thomas Zimmer, Sammlung Wissenschaftlicher Commentare (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 26.

<sup>167</sup> This translation is my own.

<sup>168</sup> Cf. *Haer.* 3.25.5.

generation (*generationem eius inenarrabilem*).<sup>169</sup> This ineffability grows out of the parameters of what has been revealed in Scripture, the rhetorical question in Isaiah 53:8 (“Who shall declare his generation?”), and the incomprehensibility of God. Additionally, the generation of the Logos is of a different kind than the generation of creatures since the latter is temporal and the former is atemporal. The Word of God is eternal, and therefore without beginning and origin.<sup>170</sup>

### Conclusion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that Irenaeus, rather than being a muddle-headed or incoherent theologian concerned exclusively, or even fundamentally, with the divine economy, exuded coherence as a theologian with primary interest in constructing a theological metaphysic in response to the gnostics. For Irenaeus, God, the only God, was the first principle or foundation upon which all truth is based. This only true God is Father in relation to whom the Logos is Son. Although divine sonship is properly unique to the Logos, Irenaeus describes a filial sonship that becomes ours through the Son. Irenaeus’s positive construction included belief that the only true God and first principle of truth—the Father of the Logos—is the Creator of all things *ex nihilo*. Contrary to the gnostic conception of relational distance between God and creation, God the Father and Creator enjoys an immediate relationship with creation. He created, not through angelic intermediaries but through his own Word and Wisdom—the Son and the Spirit. Irenaeus was not a theologian whose exclusive, or even fundamental, interest resided in the divine economy, as Slusser and others have contended. Rather, he was a theologian fundamentally interested in God *qua* God and a right, albeit partial, understanding of God as he is in himself, as Norris, Lashier, and Briggman have advocated. This metaphysical

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<sup>169</sup> *Haer.* 2.28.6 (Unger, 90; SC 294:282).

<sup>170</sup> *Haer.* 2.13.8.

awareness integral to Irenaeus's polemic finds its center in divine infinitude and simplicity with their various theological corollaries. God contains all things and he alone is uncontained, which the gnostic doctrine of God compromised. Additionally, God is not composed of parts, and therefore does not emit, but is atemporal and immutable. Having established Irenaeus's doctrine of God, in the following chapter, I will begin to investigate the ways Irenaeus's doctrine of God intersects with his biblical exegesis.

CHAPTER 4  
THE INTERSECTION OF IRENAEUS'S DOCTRINE  
OF GOD AND EXEGESIS

**Introduction**

In chapter 1, I situated the current work within three streams of scholarship—(1) Irenaeus studies, (2) a retrieval of pre-critical exegesis, and (3) an interest in theological interpretation of Scripture. In chapter 2, I explicated Irenaeus's presentation of the doctrine of God and exegesis among the gnostics. In chapter 3, I excavated Irenaeus's doctrine of God, a doctrine not limited to an economic orientation but rooted in a theological metaphysic. Irenaeus's polemic against the gnostics provides opportunity for the many positive theological assertions concerning God the Creator, Father, and first principle who is both infinite and simple. While the gnostics claimed belief in some of these same theological propositions, Irenaeus shows how their protological framework resists these fundamental truths about the only God who is. In this chapter, I bring Irenaeus's doctrine of God into its exegetical application further buttressing the broader thesis of this work, namely that Irenaeus's theological metaphysic chaperoned his interpretation of Scripture. As suggested, Irenaeus was not as concerned with the exegetical methods employed by the gnostics as he was the way those methods revealed a more fundamental understanding of God governing their interpretation of Scripture. I demonstrate that Irenaeus's engagement with Scripture and the exegetical methods he employed were manifestations of his doctrine of God.

I expound the relationship between Irenaeus's doctrine of God and exegesis in three stages. First, I begin with Irenaeus's confidence in the harmony of Scripture. Since all Scripture comes from the one and only God, all its parts harmoniously coexist forming

a single melody bearing testimony to the one and only God—the Father and Creator of all things. Second, I identify some of Irenaeus’s exegetical methods, which further corroborate his doctrine of God and doctrine of Scripture. The methods I consider are the recapitulation of all things in the incarnation of the Word, interpreting Scripture with Scripture, and reading all Scripture through the lens of the rule of truth, a rule that surfaces from within biblical revelation and becomes an interpretive framework providing exegetical parameters. I demonstrate that it is not so much that Irenaeus lacks a methodological interpretive strategy but that his methods, as far as they can be so-called, are more properly understood as extensions of his doctrine of God, and therefore are deeply theological in nature and application.

### **Harmony of Scripture**

According to Irenaeus, the nature of Scripture is rooted in and inseparable from the nature of the one God and his Word and Spirit. For example, he states, “We know that the Scriptures are perfect, inasmuch as they were given by God’s Word and Spirit.”<sup>1</sup> This does not mean that the interpreter experiences no difficulties in interpretation. However, such difficulties are not the consequence of any deficiency inherent in Scripture. Rather, they are the consequence of deficiencies or limitations that inhere within us. Finitude and the accompanying perpetual process of becoming, changing, and learning bring with them certain limitations that prevent humans from ever attaining exhaustive knowledge of Scripture. This experience of learning is not circumscribed to the human experience in this life but extends into eternity since finitude could never exhaust God’s infinite storehouse of wisdom and knowledge. According to Irenaeus, humanity will eternally

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<sup>1</sup> *Haer.* 2.28.2 (Unger, 87).

experience this process of developing “not only in this world but also in the next—so that God may always teach and man may always learn from God.”<sup>2</sup>

While Scripture demonstrates a degree of clarity (or perspicuity), all Scripture is not equally comprehensible. As I argue below, one of Irenaeus’s distinguishing methods for interpreting Scripture is reading Scripture in light of Scripture. Specifically, Irenaeus applies this method when he contends that the interpreter should interpret the less clear portions of Scripture in light of the clearer portions. However, inability to “find a solution for all things in the Scriptures” is the result of human imperfection, and not a result of any imperfection of Scripture. After all, Scripture’s nature is inherently inseparable from the perfect nature of God.

As an example of the limitations of humanity, Irenaeus contends that matters of this creation (“matters that are at our feet”<sup>3</sup>) are beyond the complete comprehensibility of humanity. Examples of such mysterious realities in Irenaeus’s day included the cause for the rise of the Nile, the habitat for various kinds of birds that come into Southern Gaul at certain times of the year, the ebb and flow of the ocean’s tide, and various other mysterious instances like thunder, lightning, clouds, fog, and wind, each of which provided reminders of the limitations of humanity’s knowledge. Irenaeus’s argument is not that humanity’s knowledge concerning these “mysteries” will forever remain the same. For example, modern man may very well understand and identify the causes of such occurrences. However, humanity’s knowledge is inherently limited or finite. Growth in understanding regarding these matters substantiates Irenaeus’s point: humanity is perpetually learning.

The answer to the limitation of human knowledge of matters of this creation, or matters related to the infinite God, is never to peer beyond God. This was the heretical

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<sup>2</sup> *Haer.* 2.28.3 (Unger, 88).

<sup>3</sup> *Haer.* 2.28.2 (Unger, 87–88).

error of the gnostics. Discontent with what God had revealed in Scripture, Irenaeus's opponents speculated beyond the existence of the one and only God to a series of divine emissions thereby rejecting the plain teaching of Scripture.<sup>4</sup> The gnostics went astray by abandoning the source of all truth. Contentment with remaining mystery is integral and necessary, according to Irenaeus. Embracing the presence of some amount of mystery on account of the contrast between our infinitude and God's infinitude positions the interpreter of Scripture to "keep . . . faith . . . persevere without danger [*sine periculo perseuerabimus*] and . . . find that all the Scripture [*omnis Scriptura*] given us by God harmonizes [*consonans*]." <sup>5</sup>

Some have improperly interpreted Irenaeus as rejecting all theological speculation.<sup>6</sup> However, Irenaeus's foil is not theological speculation per se but speculation unmoored from, beyond, and even contrary to the teaching of Scripture. He states, "If, for example, anyone should ask us what God did before he created the world, we reply that the answer to this is in God's keeping. The Scriptures do teach us that this world was made complete (ἀποτελεστικῶς)<sup>7</sup> by God when it began in time; but no Scripture reveals what God did before this."<sup>8</sup> To properly understand Irenaeus, it is necessary to keep his polemical context in view. The gnostics conjectured beyond, and contrary to, the plain teaching of the truth by positing the existence of a series of divine emissions. They had transgressed the theological parameters God has provided in Scripture and summarized in the rule. As a result, they denied the clear teaching of

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<sup>4</sup> Irenaeus demonstrates this at the beginning *Haer.* bk. 3.

<sup>5</sup> *Haer.* 2.28.3 (SC 294:276).

<sup>6</sup> See e.g., Adolf Harnack, *History of Dogma*, trans. Neil Buchanan (Boston: Little, Brown, 1901), 2:233n3; Robert M. Grant, "Irenaeus and Hellenistic Culture," *HTR* 42, no. 1 (1949): 56–57; William R. Schoedel, "Theological Method in Irenaeus (Adversus Haereses 2.25–28)," *JTS* 35 (1984): 31–49.

<sup>7</sup> *Haer.* 2.28.3 (SC 294:276).

<sup>8</sup> *Haer.* 2.28.3 (Unger, 89).

Scripture in favor of their vain speculations. This is the object of Irenaeus's rejection. Theological speculation that asks questions that Scripture does not answer may be dangerous. Speculation that results in the rejection of Scripture's plain teaching is damning.

Irenaeus then seizes upon what has become known throughout Christian history as the three theological virtues—faith, hope, and love—as a paradigm for the process of pursuing understanding of truth. Referencing 1 Corinthians 13:9–13, he suggests that faith, hope, and love demand an object. In other words, they are not virtuous in themselves but derive their virtue from the one in whom they are placed. Faith, hope, and love are directed ultimately at the only true God. We grant faith to our teacher who has instructed us in the rule of truth. Additionally, we love the one who is Father and has granted to us filial adoption. Further, we hope to receive more from God who possesses an infinite storehouse of knowledge, an eternal kingdom, and unlimited riches.

Read properly, Scripture becomes one harmonious melody composed of many voices hymning praise to God the Creator of all things. At various points, Irenaeus stratifies Scripture into various categories or voices. However, each of these voices contributes to the same fundamental message from and about the one and only God. For example, the preaching of the apostles (*praedicatio apostolorum*), teaching of the Lord (*Domini magisterium*), announcement of the prophets (*prophetarum adnuntiatio*), spoken message of the apostles (*apostolorum dictatio*),<sup>9</sup> and the service of the law (*legislationis ministratio*) “all harmonize with what we have said and prove that there is one and the same God of all things, which praise the Father and not various gods.”<sup>10</sup> The gnostics reject Scripture. However, their rejection occurs at the level of importing heretical

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<sup>9</sup> Intriguing is Irenaeus's distinction between the *praedicatio apostolorum* and the *apostolorum dictatio*. Unger opines that the *dictatio* of the apostles might be their letters. Rousseau suppresses *apostolorum dictatio* and merely includes *la prédication des apôtres, l'enseignement du Seigneur, l'annonce des prophètes, et le ministère de la Loi* (SC 294:365; see SC 293:355 [SC 294:367n1]).

<sup>10</sup> *Haer.* 2.35.4 (Unger, 111).

teaching to the text. In identifying the wrong God and a series of divine emanations, they rearrange Scripture into a discordant cacophony of contradictory and enigmatic texts.

### **Irenaeus's Methods for Interpreting Scripture**

I have not argued against the presence of exegetical methods or rigorous exegetical analysis in Irenaeus. In fact, I have qualified statements regarding the centrality and more fundamental nature of a doctrine of God with mitigating assertions, indicating the presence of methods and analysis. After all, theological commitments invariably manifest at the level of exegetical practice. However, the skeptical reader may have wondered whether my recognition of the presence of methods and analysis was no more than lip-service and therefore lacking any palpable expression. In what follows, I intend to allay this potential concern. I will begin by briefly identifying a few ways Irenaeus evinces exegetical methodology and intricate analysis of biblical texts. These first few examples demonstrate the real presence of various ways Irenaeus engages the biblical text meticulously. I then spend the majority of this chapter on identifying and explaining three of Irenaeus's most common exegetical methods—recapitulation, the principle of Scripture interpreting Scripture, and the discipline of reading Scripture within the rule of truth. Moreover, although Irenaeus evinces the presence and operation of methods, it becomes evident that these methods are governed by his understanding of God.

One example of intricate engagement with the biblical text at the level of methodology in Irenaeus is the presence of word studies. For example, Irenaeus offers a brief word study on the way biblical authors use the word *day* to answer the gnostic interpretation that Jesus's earthly ministry lasted only one year.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Irenaeus argues from additional texts that Jesus's earthly ministry spanned the occurrence of

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<sup>11</sup> *Haer.* 2.22.1–2.

several Passover celebrations.<sup>12</sup> Also, Irenaeus performs a word study of “God” and “Lord,” demonstrating the consistent use of these terms when used absolutely, and the semantic range of the words when used with qualification.<sup>13</sup>

Additionally, Irenaeus’s exegesis exemplifies critical analysis of texts, including an evaluation of grammar and syntax. For example, he identifies syntactical methods such as transposition.<sup>14</sup> Irenaeus identifies that the gnostics have changed the tense of a verb in the Gospels to substantiate their error.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, Irenaeus identifies the internal incoherence of the exegesis practiced by his opponents throughout careful analysis. For example, he highlights the inconsistency in identifying the Ogdoad in the Gospel of John, arguing that John would have preserved the proper order of the Ogdoad if indeed he had intended to reveal it through his writing.<sup>16</sup> He adds to his criticism of gnostic interpretation of John 1 the immediate context in which John declares that the Word became flesh (John 1:14). According to his opponents, the Aeon called “Word” never became flesh. Irenaeus demonstrates exegetical inconsistencies by appeal to the immediate context of a verse. Irenaeus accents other inconsistencies in gnostic exegesis. For example, their claim that the twelve apostles reveal the Dodecad while neglecting to find another ten apostles to reveal the Decad,<sup>17</sup> and their belief that the woman who had suffered a hemorrhage for twelve years reveals the passion of the twelfth Aeon when, in fact, the woman suffered for twelve years and was healed rather than the inverse.<sup>18</sup> In the final analysis of gnostic

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<sup>12</sup> *Haer.* 2.22.3.

<sup>13</sup> *Haer.* 3.6.1–5.

<sup>14</sup> *Haer.* 3.7.1–2.

<sup>15</sup> *Haer.* 4.6.1.

<sup>16</sup> *Haer.* 1.9.1.

<sup>17</sup> *Haer.* 2.21.1.

<sup>18</sup> *Haer.* 2.23.1.

exegesis, Irenaeus asserts that the gnostics pervert the Scriptures from a natural or plain reading of the text to a non-natural and alien interpretation of Scripture.<sup>19</sup>

Further, Irenaeus employs concepts and terms from classical rhetoric. I address in greater detail one of his favorites—recapitulation. Another one of these rhetorical terms is *hypothesis*. Behr writes, “In Hellenistic times, the term ‘hypothesis’ (ὑποθέσις) had a variety of meanings, one of which, again in a literary context, was the plot or outline of a drama or epic . . . . It is what the poet posits, as the basic outline for his subsequent creative work.”<sup>20</sup> The majority of the times Irenaeus employs the term, he utilizes the word with a negative connotation describing the foreign hypothesis of the gnostics, which they foist onto the Scriptures.<sup>21</sup> However, there is what Irenaeus calls τῆ τῆς ἀληθείας ὑποθέσει<sup>22</sup> or the “the hypothesis of the truth”<sup>23</sup> in *Haer.* 1.10.3. Scripture interpreted properly always includes reading Scripture in light of the correct hypothesis.

## Recapitulation

As much as any other facet of Irenaeus’s theology and exegesis, recapitulation occupies a seat at the center of scholarly discussion. According to Michael Slusser, recapitulation “is probably the theological idea most frequently proposed as the central theme for Irenaeus.”<sup>24</sup> In their introduction to early Christian exegesis, John O’Keefe and

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<sup>19</sup> *Haer.* 1.9.4.

<sup>20</sup> John Behr, *Formation of Christian Theology*, vol. 1, *The Way to Nicaea* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 32.

<sup>21</sup> See e.g., *Haer.* 1.4.4; 1.9.2–4; 2.7.2; 2.13.6; 2.23.1; 2.25.1; et al.

<sup>22</sup> *Haer.* 1.10.3 (SC 264:162).

<sup>23</sup> This translation is my own.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Slusser, “The Heart of Irenaeus’ Theology,” in *Irenaeus: Life, Scripture, and Legacy*, ed. Paul Foster and Sara Parvis (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 133. Slusser identifies recapitulation as something Irenaeus picked up from Justin. Michael Slusser, “How Much Did Irenaeus Learn from Justin?,” in *Studia Patristica XL*, ed. Edward J. Yarnold, Maurice F. Wiles, and Paul Parvis (Leuven: Peeters, 2006). For example, in *Haer.* 4.6.2, Irenaeus quotes from one of Justin’s non-extant works *Syntagmata against Marcion*. Debate exists among scholars regarding how much of the paragraph comes

Russell Reno identified three components of Irenaeus's hermeneutical approach to Scripture, an approach that proved to be "the dominant patristic theory of the unified truth of scripture."<sup>25</sup> These three components, taken from classical rhetoric, were hypothesis, economy, and recapitulation. According to Eric Osborn, "The idea of recapitulation dominates the theology of the second century" and "is expanded endlessly by Irenaeus."<sup>26</sup>

### *Defining Recapitulation*

Defining recapitulation has proven to be a challenge. Osborn includes eleven ideas that he posits are inherent in recapitulation.<sup>27</sup> Recapitulation, according to O'Keefe and Reno, "means final repetition, summing up, drawing conclusion. As a term in rhetoric, it refers to the end of a speech, when the speaker drives home the point with a summary of the strongest arguments."<sup>28</sup> According to Thomas Torrance, recapitulation means that "that redemptive activity of God in Jesus Christ was not just a transcendent act that touched our existence in space and time at one point, but an activity that passed

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from Justin's work. If the remainder of the paragraph belongs to Justin, Irenaeus has apparently derived recapitulation from Justin since Justin speaks of the Son "recapitulating in himself his own handiwork." Eusebius provides only the first sentence from Justin and lacks the bit regarding recapitulation (*Hist. eccl.* 4.18.9). For further discussion, see Unger, 215n5, on *Haer.* bks. 4 and 5. However, Justin apparently had his own understanding of recapitulation operative in his interpretation of Scripture. In *Dial.* 100.4–5, Justin asserts that the Son of God

is become incarnate of the Virgin, in order that the disobedience caused by the serpent might be destroyed in the same manner in which it had originated. For Eve, an undefiled virgin, conceived the word of the serpent, and brought forth disobedience and death. But the Virgin Mary, filled with faith and joy, when the angel Gabriel announced to her the good tidings that the Spirit of the Lord would come upon her, and the power of the Most High would overshadow her, and therefore, the holy one born of her would be the Son of God, answer, "Be it done unto me in accordance with your word." (Falls, 152)

<sup>25</sup> John J. O'Keefe and Russell R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 34.

<sup>26</sup> Eric Francis Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 97.

<sup>27</sup> Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 97–98. These ideas are unification, repetition, redemption, perfection, inauguration, consummation, totality, the triumph of *Christus Victor*, ontology, epistemology, and ethics.

<sup>28</sup> O'Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 39.

into our existence and is at work within it, penetrating back to the beginning in the original creation retracing and re-affirming in it the divine Will, and reaching forward to the consummation in the new creation in which all things are gathered up, thus *connecting the end with the beginning*.”<sup>29</sup> John Behr, appreciating and building upon the work of Torrance, accents the “well-defined meaning” of recapitulation in “Hellenistic literary and rhetorical theory.”<sup>30</sup> In contrast to Osborn, Behr contends that recapitulation was fundamentally a literary concept grounding the relationship between the Scriptures and the gospel. Often used as a rhetorical device, recapitulation (ἀνακεφαλαιωσις) served to provide a summary of the whole case, or a restatement of the argument in an epitome, bringing together the whole into a single conspectus for the purpose of greater effect.<sup>31</sup> Behr is right to accent the literary aspect of ἀνακεφαλαιωσις. For example, Quintilian, in his discussion of peroration in *Inst.* 6.1.1, identifies ἀνακεφαλαιωσις as that grouping of the facts, *et memoriam iudicis reficit et totam simul causam ponit ante oculos, et, etiam si per singula minus mouerat, turba ualet*.<sup>32</sup> In Quintilian’s understanding, recapitulation involves putting the “whole case” in summary fashion before the hearers. According to Quintilian, each detail of the argument considered on its own may be less convincing. However, the summation of the case causes greater impact. Bernard Sesboüé illuminatingly explicates recapitulation in Irenaeus under four primary verbs—*résumer* or summarizing, *assumer* or assuming/adopting, *recréer* or recreating, and *achever* or completing.<sup>33</sup> *Résumer* according to Sesboüé, is “*la reprise du concept*

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<sup>29</sup> Thomas Forsyth Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 121.

<sup>30</sup> John Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity*, Christian Theology in Context (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 136.

<sup>31</sup> Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 137.

<sup>32</sup> Quintilian, *Institution Oratoire*, trans. Jean Cousin, Collection Des Universités de France (Paris: Les Belles lettres, 2003), 4:7.

<sup>33</sup> Bernard Sesboüé, *Tout Récapituler dans le Christ: Christologie et Sotériologie d’Irénee de Lyon*, Jésus et Jésus Christ 80 (Paris: Desclée, 2000), 160–63.

*rhétorique de récapitulation.*”<sup>34</sup> Sesboüé’s second verbal aspect of recapitulation in Irenaeus includes Christ assuming solidarity with the human universe (*l’univers humain*) through the incarnation. *Recréer* is synonymous for Sesboüé with restore (*restaurer*), renew (*renouveler*), and liberate (*libérer*). Irenaeus’s use of recapitulation includes not merely a restoration of humanity to its previous state of existence prior to sin but a remodeled version of humanity. Finally, under *achever*, Sesboüé suggests that recapitulation leads to the eschatological completion of humanity in Christ.

Recapitulation, as I will demonstrate below, is both an exegetical and theological concept in Irenaeus. Consistent with the thesis of this work, it blossoms naturally within an understanding of scriptural harmony. In fact, without a harmonious and unified conception of Scripture, recapitulation cannot exist. In what follows, I provide a brief engagement with a couple of sections in *Haer.* book 3 that are germane to Irenaeus’s understanding of recapitulation as the bringing together of all of human history in the person and work of the Incarnate Son.

### *Recapitulation in Jesus*

In *Haer.* 3.16.6, Irenaeus’s affirmation of recapitulation occurs in the context of his opposition to two heresies—adoptionism and Docetism. The particular variety of the former with which Irenaeus was concerned had a Valentinian flavor. Irenaeus describes those who “claim that the Jesus of the economy is the one who passed through Mary, and upon Him descended the Savior from on high, who is also called the All.”<sup>35</sup> Proponents of Docetism contended that Christ “suffered only in appearance, being naturally impassible.” The fundamental flaw in both heretical beliefs is the separation of Jesus Christ into two distinct entities. As Irenaeus demonstrates from Scripture, it was the

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<sup>34</sup> Sesboüé, *Tout Récapituler dans le Christ*, 160.

<sup>35</sup> *Haer.* 3.16.1 (Unger, 77).

incarnate Logos who was conceived of the Virgin Mary, experienced life and suffering as a genuine human being, died on the cross, and rose from the dead. Perhaps one of the clearest of scriptural proofs that Jesus is the Christ and Christ is Jesus occurs in 1 John 2:18–22, which concludes, “Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is the Antichrist.”<sup>36</sup> There are several portions of Scripture to which Irenaeus appeals. For example, the Gospel of John “knew one and the same Word of God, and that this was the Only-begotten, and that He was the one who became incarnate for our salvation.”<sup>37</sup> Through his genealogy Matthew manifested “the generations of Christ,” and not as Irenaeus’s opponents claimed, merely “the generations of Jesus.” Paul’s letter to the Romans asserts that God’s Son “was descended from David according to the flesh . . . designated Son of God in power . . . by the resurrection from the dead, of Jesus Christ our Lord.”<sup>38</sup> Galatians teaches a single Jesus Christ the Son of God who was born of a woman (Gal 4:4–5). Through these scriptural proofs, Irenaeus concludes, “The Gospel knows no other Son of Man except this one who was born of Mary, who also suffered; not of another Christ who flew upwards from Jesus before the passion.”<sup>39</sup>

Having disarmed his theological opponents, Irenaeus restates their views, which consist of distinguishing and dividing Jesus from Christ. “They are ignorant that His Only-begotten Word, who is always present with the human race [*qui semper humano generi adest*<sup>40</sup>] was united and closely grafted to His handiwork [*unitus et consparsus suo plastmati*] according to the Father’s good pleasure, and who became flesh.”<sup>41</sup> When the Logos became flesh, the one who was “always present with the human

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<sup>36</sup> *Haer.* 3.16.5 (Unger, 81).

<sup>37</sup> *Haer.* 3.16.2 (Unger, 78).

<sup>38</sup> *Haer.* 3.16.3 (Unger, 79), quoting Rom 1:1–4.

<sup>39</sup> *Haer.* 3.16.5 (Unger, 81).

<sup>40</sup> *Haer.* 3.16.6 (SC 211:312).

<sup>41</sup> *Haer.* 3.16.6 (Unger, 82).

race” became united to the Father’s handiwork (i.e., humanity)—God the Son became human. Irenaeus’s understanding of the Logos being “always present with the human race” is necessary because only that which is recapitulated in the Incarnate Logos can be restored. The Logos must be present with humanity at all points in order to recreate the same humanity that had suffered sin in Adam. For Christ to create another humanity while forfeiting the first to sin would imply a failure on God’s part. While Irenaeus does not display a developed Chalcedonian Christology, some of the seeds of what would produce the Chalcedonian Confession through centuries of theological development are present. At this juncture, Irenaeus brings his Christology into close confessional unity with his theology proper. “There is, therefore . . . one God the Father and one Christ Jesus our Lord, who comes through every economy and *recapitulates in Himself all things [omnia in semetipsum recapitulans*<sup>42</sup>].” In other words, the Logos was present at all times and in all locations throughout the history of humanity. Using the image of a work of literature (appropriate when considering recapitulation as indicated above), the Logos was present throughout every chapter. It was necessary that he come “through every economy.” When the chapter of the incarnation arrived, the Incarnate Logos recapitulated all the previous chapters into one. Not only does this concept apply to the various stages of salvation history; it also applies to every stage of human development. For example, Irenaeus states elsewhere, “He did not reject human nature or exalt himself above it, nor did he abrogate in himself his own law [given in behalf] of the human race; but he sanctified every age by a likeness to himself.”<sup>43</sup> In other words, Christ became an infant to sanctify infants, a child to sanctify children, and an adult to sanctify adults.

Irenaeus’s presentation of recapitulation carries with it a robust Christology that affirms simultaneously the deity and humanity of Jesus Christ as the Incarnate

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<sup>42</sup> *Haer.* 3.16.6 (SC 211:312).

<sup>43</sup> *Haer.* 2.22.4 (Unger, 74).

Logos. As stated above, Christ “comes through every economy and *recapitulates in Himself all things.*” Included in the “all things” is humanity. The Logos from the Father who is invisible, incomprehensible, and impassible became visible, comprehensible, and passible in the incarnation.<sup>44</sup> In Irenaeus, the recapitulation of *all things* in Jesus is related to his doctrine of God, in which he asserts that there is one, and only one, God who comprehends *all things*. In other words, the God who comprehends all things recapitulates all things in his Incarnate Word. On the other hand, the gnostics propound a disjointed system in which all is not from the Supreme Father. According to the gnostics, some humans are from the Supreme Father (Profundity) and some are from the fruit of degeneration through the fall of the thirtieth Aeon into passion and the subsequent creation of the world by the Demiurge, who is ignorant of what is above him. Irenaeus proposes a harmonious and consonant existence of all things in one God and his one Word through recapitulation in Jesus Christ.

Although Irenaeus’s understanding of recapitulation centers on Jesus, its exegetical implications are not limited to Jesus. For example, the Virgin Mary plays a prominent role in recapitulation in Irenaeus. It is important to note that Mary’s role is not isolated, or even atomized, from Christ’s role. Irenaeus conceptualizes the recapitulation that takes place through Mary as a part of the recapitulation of all things in Jesus Christ.

In this section, discussion revolves around a proper understanding of Isaiah 7:14, where the prophet prophesies a “sign” of deliverance from the Lord. That sign takes the form of the virgin conception and birth. According to Irenaeus, the error of some regarding their interpretation of Isaiah 7:14 occurred by claiming that the prophecy consisted of a νεᾱνίς conceiving and bearing a son rather than a παρθένος. The former indicated the sign of a “young girl” conceiving and bearing a son while the latter promised the miraculous sign of a “virgin” conceiving and bearing a son. Irenaeus’s

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<sup>44</sup> *Haer.* 3.16.6; see also Unger, 82.

commitment to the LXX becomes apparent as he defends the divine origin of the text recounted in the Letter of Aristeas.<sup>45</sup>

In addition to stating his belief in the preservation of Scripture by God as contained in the LXX, Irenaeus substantiates the reading of *παρθένο*s by appealing to the preaching of the church as demonstrated in the ministry of the apostles who preceded these false teachers.<sup>46</sup> His exegesis of Isaiah 7:14 includes both the deity (Emmanuel) and humanity (descriptions of him eating curds and honey and not yet knowing good and evil) of Jesus Christ. Against the interpretation common among his opponents that Isaiah 7:14 refers to a “young woman” rather than a “virgin,” Irenaeus quips, “what would there have been great about . . . a young girl” giving birth, “which happens to all women who bear children.”<sup>47</sup>

Perhaps the most insidious aspect of his opponents’ exegesis was that it failed to see the utter uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the Incarnate Logos from the Father. After all, Jesus is “the eternal king who recapitulates in Himself all things” and “has recapitulated in Himself even the ancient first-fashioned man.”<sup>48</sup> Apparent is the influence of passages like Romans 5:12–21 and 1 Corinthians 15:21, where the apostle Paul compares and contrasts the failure of Adam (and the subsequent consequences on his posterity) with the success of Jesus Christ (and the subsequent blessings on his posterity). Irenaeus’s language of Christ who recapitulates in Himself “all things” closely resembles Paul’s language of one trespass leading to the judgment on “all men” (*πάντας ἀνθρώπους*) and one act of righteousness (*ἐνὸς δικαιοῦματος*) leading to the justification of life for “all men” (*πάντας ἀνθρώπους*). For Paul, it is “all” who

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<sup>45</sup> *Haer.* 3.21.1.

<sup>46</sup> *Haer.* 3.21.3.

<sup>47</sup> *Haer.* 3.21.6 (Unger, 101).

<sup>48</sup> *Haer.* 3:21.9–10 (Unger, 102); *Et antiquam plasmationem in se recapitulatus est* (SC 211:426).

participate both in Adam and in Christ. Similarly, Irenaeus understands Christ to recapitulate all in himself.

In recognizing this parallel between Adam and Christ, Irenaeus finds additional parallels between the first Adam and the last Adam. This conceptual move is justifiable on the basis of Christ recapitulating all things in himself. The first man received his substance *de rudi terri et de adhuc uirgine*.<sup>49</sup> In describing the land as a virgin, Irenaeus sets up his understanding of recapitulation through Mary. The Incarnate Word, “since He is the Word recapitulating Adam in Himself, He rightly took from Mary, who was yet a virgin, His birth that would be a recapitulation of Adam.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, Irenaeus discovers a parallel between the virgin land and the Virgin’s womb. Moreover, Irenaeus suggests that if Adam had been born of a human father, it would have been appropriate for Christ to have been born from a human father. Since the first man was formed from the virgin soil without the participation of a human father, Christ, who recapitulated in himself the first man, must be born from the Virgin without the participation of a human father. Additionally, as this first Adam was fashioned from the virgin soil by the Word of God, “so it was necessary that the same Word, since he was recapitulating Adam in Himself, have the same kind of birth.” Anticipating the possible retort regarding why God did not take soil a second time “instead of making the handiwork from Mary,” Irenaeus responds that it was the handiwork of Adam, and not a new handiwork, that God intended to save. In other words, Adam and his progeny were recapitulated in Jesus, as opposed to God beginning anew in Jesus by creating a new humanity without regard for the first.

Similarly, Christ’s obedience on the tree (i.e., the cross) parallels and cancels the disobedience of Adam through the tree in the Garden. Christ “recapitulated the

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<sup>49</sup> *Haer.* 3.21.10 (SC 211:428).

<sup>50</sup> *Haer.* 3.21.10 (Unger, 102).

disobedience that was by means of a tree, through the obedience that was by means of a tree.”<sup>51</sup> Irenaeus asserts elsewhere, “And the transgression which occurred through the tree was undone by the obedience of the tree—which [was shown when] the Son of Man, obeying God, was nailed to the tree, destroying the knowledge of evil, and introducing and providing the knowledge of good.”<sup>52</sup>

In *Haer.* 3.22, Irenaeus opposes any Christology that fails to affirm the humanity of Jesus. In particular, he argues that Christ genuinely received his humanity from the Virgin Mary. Christ did not merely appear to be a man, he authentically was and is a man. Similar to what Gregory of Nazianzus<sup>53</sup> would develop two centuries later, Irenaeus contends, “And if He was not made what we are, He did nothing great when He suffered and endured.”<sup>54</sup> In other words, in order for his death to effect anything for us, it was necessary for Christ to become what we are—genuinely human. According to Irenaeus, the Word became a human soul and body in order to “recapitulate in Himself His own handiwork.” Jesus took from Mary authentic humanity such that he experienced hunger, exhaustion, sadness, and other integrally human experiences.<sup>55</sup>

The genealogy of Luke, which consists of seventy-two generations from Adam to Christ demonstrates the recapitulation of “all the tongues, and the human race” in Christ.<sup>56</sup> The success of Christ recapitulating all things in himself is so comprehensive that Irenaeus insists on the salvation of the ensouled man (i.e., Adam) by the spiritual

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<sup>51</sup> *Haer.* 5.19.1 (Unger, 167).

<sup>52</sup> *Epid.* 33 (Behr, 62).

<sup>53</sup> In his first letter to Cledonius, Gregory contends, “For that which He has not assumed He has not healed; but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved. If only half Adam fell, then that which Christ assumes and saves may be half also; but if the whole of his nature fell, it must be united to the whole nature of Him that was begotten, and so be saved as a whole” (*NPNF*<sup>2</sup>, 7:440).

<sup>54</sup> *Haer.* 3.22.1 (Unger, 103).

<sup>55</sup> *Haer.* 3.22.2.

<sup>56</sup> *Haer.* 3.22.3 (Unger, 104).

man (i.e., Christ) in *Haer.* 3.23. According to Irenaeus, it is necessary theologically and exegetically that Adam was rescued through Christ. After all, the same God who created Adam sent his Incarnate Son to rescue humanity. Moreover, to forfeit the salvation of the first man—the handiwork of God—would be paramount to “the ancient spoils” remaining in the power of the enemy.<sup>57</sup> Additionally, the text indicates an act of repentance on the part of Adam in covering himself with fig leaves since there would have been many other leaves that would have been more conducive for covering and less irritating to the body.<sup>58</sup> As a result, “all are liars, therefore, who deny salvation to Adam.”<sup>59</sup> Irenaeus’s conclusion regarding the necessity of Adam’s salvation is secondary to the thesis of my work. What is apparent is the continuity with which Irenaeus approached Scripture evinced in Adam’s recapitulation and salvation in Christ.

As I have mentioned above, Irenaeus grants space for Mary’s role in recapitulation as he continues to unpack the ramifications of Christ recapitulating all things in himself.<sup>60</sup> Again, Irenaeus’s understanding of recapitulation in Mary is best understood as an outgrowth of Christ as the locus for the recapitulation of all things. Although all the ways Irenaeus’s framework for including Mary in recapitulation is not my primary concern, of great interest is the continuity and harmony that undergirds

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<sup>57</sup> *Haer.* 3.23.2 (Unger, 106).

<sup>58</sup> *Haer.* 3.23.5.

<sup>59</sup> *Haer.* 3.23.8 (Unger, 109); Irenaeus introduces Tatian as the one who first introduced the perspective that Adam perished.

<sup>60</sup> As Hauke and Chonak comment, “The parallelism between Eve and Mary later becomes a starting point for the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, according to which the Blessed Virgin was free from original sin from the first moment of her existence.” Manfred Hauke and Richard Chonak, *Introduction to Mariology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2020), 81. Whether such a development for the dogma of the Immaculate Conception is valid is an altogether different question. Irenaeus merely sees a parallel between Eve and Mary, the former’s disobedience resulting in sin and death plaguing her progeny, and the latter’s obedience and faith serving to contribute to the birth of the one who would dispel sin, the serpent, and death. For a brief summary of the Virgin Mary throughout the Patristics, see Andrew Louth, “Mary in Patristics,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mary*, ed. Chris Maunder, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 54–66. For a more extensive engagement with beliefs concerning Mary in the Patristics, see Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*, trans. Thomas Buffer (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1999).

Irenaeus’s exegetical approach. This harmony provides the foundation for various examples of recapitulation in his polemic against the gnostics. “Consistently, then, also the Virgin Mary was found to be obedient when she said, *Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord, let it be done to me according to Your word*; but Eve was disobedient, for she did not obey when she was yet a virgin.”<sup>61</sup> Eve was “disobedient, and became the cause of death for herself and for the entire human race. In the same way, Mary, thought she had a man destined for her beforehand, yet nevertheless a virgin, was obedient and was made the cause of salvation for herself and the entire human race.”<sup>62</sup> Irenaeus adds an additional parallel between Eve and Mary through the role of angelic beings. Eve was deceived by the words of an angel—the serpent. Mary, on the other hand, received the good news delivered by the angel Gabriel.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, Irenaeus uses the analogy of a knot to contrast Eve’s disobedience and Mary’s obedience. Through her faith, Mary untied the knot caused by Eve’s unbelief: “For what the virgin Eve tied by her unbelief, this Mary untied by her belief.”<sup>64</sup>

### Scripture Interprets Scripture

Another theologically informed method Irenaeus commonly employed is the principle of Scripture interpreting Scripture. Irenaeus states this principle most clearly and concisely in *Haer.* 3.12.9: “For you ought to know that scriptural proofs [*ostensiones . . . in Scripturis*; αἱ ἐν ταῖς γραφαῖς] cannot be illustrated except from Scripture [*ex ipsis Scripturis*; ἐξ αὐτῶν τῶν γραφῶν].”<sup>65</sup> Irenaeus so pronounces and

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<sup>61</sup> *Haer.* 3.22.4 (Unger, 104). Similarly, Justin Martyr observes parallels between Eve’s disobedience bringing forth death and Mary’s obedience and faith bringing forth the one who would deliver from death and destroy the Serpent (*Dial.* 100.5).

<sup>62</sup> *Haer.* 3.22.4 (Unger, 104).

<sup>63</sup> *Haer.* 5.19.1.

<sup>64</sup> *Haer.* 3.22.4 (Unger, 105).

<sup>65</sup> *Haer.* 3.12.9 (Unger, 66; SC 211:225).

practices this exegetical strategy that Unger has commented, “This single sentence is a concise summary of Irenaeus’ exegetical ‘method,’ insofar as he can be described as having one discretely.”<sup>66</sup> The impulse to interpret Scripture in light of Scripture grows out of a unified vision of God and Scripture. As demonstrated above, Irenaeus read the Scriptures as a single and harmonious revelation of the one true God and Creator of all things.

This unified vision of God is thoroughly Trinitarian, both in its metaphysical foundation and its methodological application manifested in Irenaeus’s commitment to Scripture interpreting Scripture. As Irenaeus states, “The Spirit demonstrates [*ostendit*] the Word, and, because of this, the prophets announced [*adnuntiabant*] the Son of God, while the Word articulates [*articulat/ἀρμύζω*] the Spirit, and therefore it is He Himself who interprets [*interpretator/ἐξηγητής*] the prophets and brings man to the Father.”<sup>67</sup> While discussion remains regarding the text of the original Greek, especially that which the Latin translator rendered *articulat*,<sup>68</sup> the Trinitarian sense is clear enough. The intra-Trinitarian reality of the Spirit demonstrating the Word, and the Word articulating the Spirit, receives expression in the Spirit superintending the prophets to announce the Word, and the Incarnate Word exegeting the prophetic writings.<sup>69</sup> At the methodological level in exegesis, this reality manifests when the inscripturated testimony concerning Christ in the New Testament interprets the inscripturated testimony of the prophets in the Old Testament. Where else do the prophets announce the Word but in the Scriptures? Where else does the Word interpret the prophets but in the Scriptures? Undergirding this

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<sup>66</sup> Unger, 153n34, on *Haer.* bk. 3.

<sup>67</sup> *Epid.* 5 (Behr, 43; SC 406:90).

<sup>68</sup> See Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 103n24.

<sup>69</sup> Irenaeus may be thinking of Luke 24:27.

method of Scripture interpreting Scripture is a unified theological vision of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

To understand this principle and its application in Irenaeus, there are a few premises that merit attention. First, Scripture speaks with clarity concerning the issues of central importance. Such issues “are expressed in the Sacred Scriptures clearly and unambiguously [*aperte et sine ambiguo*] by the words themselves.”<sup>70</sup> Instructive is Irenaeus’s assertion that the Christian interpreter finds clarity in the very words contained in the Scriptures (*ipsis dictionibus posita sunt in Scripturis*). As I will show below, not all of Scripture is equally clear. However, the central truths contained in what Irenaeus often called the *regula* were accessible from the text of Scripture itself. Irenaeus did not merely contend for the lucidity of a few isolated and individual passages. Rather, “the entire Scriptures, both the Prophets and the Gospels, clearly and unambiguously . . . preach that through his own Word God made all things.”<sup>71</sup> In other words, while certain passages are clear and accessibly communicate Christian truths, these central Christians truths are broadly presented with clarity throughout the scope of the Scriptures. There are particular passages that are intelligible and Scripture as a collective and harmonious unity of revelation evinces intelligibility.

This appears to be one of Irenaeus’s purposes for penning *The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*. In this short summary of biblical interpretation, Irenaeus proposes that the interpreter of Scripture may be able to accurately interpret the rest of Scripture.<sup>72</sup> For Irenaeus, the fundamental storyline, message, and theology of Christianity contained in the Scriptures were accessible and served to provide the interpreter with an exegetical grid through which to understand the rest of the Scriptures.

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<sup>70</sup> *Haer.* 2.27.1 (Unger, 85; SC 294:264).

<sup>71</sup> *Haer.* 2.27.2.

<sup>72</sup> *Epid.* 53.

This clarity was not limited to the written medium of divine revelation—the Scriptures. Since there is only one God who inspired the text of Scripture and created all things, creation itself bears unequivocal testimony to the existence of God. Moreover, Irenaeus asserts that creation harmoniously testifies to God’s act of creating and preserving all things through his Word.

Second, although these clear scriptural truths are received only by those with a properly postured mind, they are openly proclaimed to all promiscuously. “The sound and safe and religious and truth-loving mind will readily apply itself to the things God placed within the power of men and granted to our knowledge.”<sup>73</sup> Irenaeus identifies four qualities of the mind (*sensus*) to which Scripture’s message is clear. Such a mind is sound (*sanus*), safe (*sine periculo*<sup>74</sup>), religious (*religiosus*), and truth-loving (*amans uerum*). In Irenaeus’s estimation, it appears that there are certain qualities of the mind that inhibit some from understanding and accepting the plain truth contained in Scripture.

Distinguishing Irenaeus’s understanding of divine revelation and the understanding of his gnostic opponents is the scope of revelatory distribution. For Irenaeus, God reveals himself openly and to all. The gnostics, on the other hand, maintained that the Savior taught fundamental truths in private through enigmas and parables. In fact, Irenaeus observes that, in the gnostic understanding, the Savior withheld this revelation even from some of his own disciples and granted it to a select few.<sup>75</sup>

Third, some portions of Scripture are difficult to understand. Irenaeus is comfortable with the reality that interpreters will not find the answer to all their questions. This may be due to the interpreter asking the wrong questions, or it may be due

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<sup>73</sup> *Haer.* 2.27.1.

<sup>74</sup> Gnostic interpretation, on the other hand, is dangerous. According to Irenaeus, they “hurl themselves into danger.” *Haer.* 2.27.3 (Unger, 87). Moreover, Irenaeus refers to the doctrine of his opponents as “homicidal” (3.16.8). Orthodoxy is healing and protects against danger while heresy is perilously reckless.

<sup>75</sup> *Haer.* 2.27.3.

to finitude and the nature of progressive understanding and perpetual growth. As an illustration, Irenaeus appeals to the mysteries present in nature.<sup>76</sup> Such an illustration is apropos given the single divine source of both creation and Scripture. Irenaeus enumerates many facets of the world that are beyond the understanding of human beings. He reasons that if there are truths regarding the functions and causes within the created world that elude the comprehension of human minds, the interpreter ought to be content to leave some solutions to exegetical difficulties “in God’s keeping.”<sup>77</sup> Limitations are part and parcel not merely to this life but also to the life to come.

Fourth, the clear portions should interpret the unclear portions, and not the inverse. For example, parables, which appear to have been a treasure trove for gnostic speculation, should be interpreted in light of clearer portions of Scripture and the clear testimony of a harmonious reading of Scripture. Irenaeus states, “The plain statements explain the parables.”<sup>78</sup> As Irenaeus states in *Haer.* 2.10.1, the gnostics seek to explain ambiguous passages by fabricating the existence of another God. Moreover, rather than depending on the clearly revealed truth of Scripture to interpret more difficult portions of Scripture, the gnostics gather their system ἐξ ἀγράφων ἀναγινῶσκοντες and thereby braid a rope of sand.<sup>79</sup> However, according to Irenaeus, “no mystery is solved by another that itself needs a solution, nor is one ambiguity solved by another ambiguity by anyone who has sense, or one riddle by another greater riddle.”<sup>80</sup> Exegetical difficulties are allayed by things that are *manifestis, consonantibus, and claris*.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> *Haer.* 2.28.2.

<sup>77</sup> *Haer.* 2.28.3 (Unger, 88).

<sup>78</sup> *Haer.* 2.28.3 (Unger, 88–89).

<sup>79</sup> *Haer.* 1.8.1 (SC 264:112).

<sup>80</sup> *Haer.* 2.10.1 (Unger, 36).

<sup>81</sup> *Haer.* 2.10.1 (SC 294:88).

A common misunderstanding of Irenaeus is well summarized and espoused by William Schoedel in his influential article “Theological Method in Irenaeus,” in which he engaged *Haer.* 2.25–28.<sup>82</sup> Schoedel suggests,

It seems unlikely . . . that what Irenaeus has in mind in this passage is merely a distinction between relatively difficult problems and relatively easy ones in investigation of nature and in Scripture exegesis. Rather, it would be more in line with his thought if as regards things in nature it is their causes that ‘are reserved for God’ and the events themselves that ‘have come into our knowledge’ . . . . The most important point, then, is that when Irenaeus worries about the Gnostic interpretation of parables, it is because such exegesis reflects dissatisfaction with knowing ‘that’ and an unhealthy desire to know ‘why.’<sup>83</sup>

Mary Ann Donovan likewise comments, “It is important to distinguish between the things human beings can know and those that they cannot know.”<sup>84</sup> In summarizing Irenaeus’s approach to exegesis and theological method, Donovan suggests, “The Irenaean approach explains unclear passages in the Scriptures via the clear passages and in conformity with the rule of faith, always bearing in mind that speculation into the why of God’s actions is not for humankind.”<sup>85</sup> While there is much to be commended in Donovan’s summary, with Schoedel, she has misunderstood Irenaeus to reject all theological speculation as a valid enterprise for the Christian. Put another way, Donovan and Schoedel believe that, according to Irenaeus, the Christian must always be content with knowing “that” rather than seeking “why.”<sup>86</sup> Contrariwise, I have argued that

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<sup>82</sup> Schoedel, “Theological Method in Irenaeus.”

<sup>83</sup> Schoedel, “Theological Method in Irenaeus,” 35.

<sup>84</sup> Mary Ann Donovan, *One Right Reading?* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1997), 53.

<sup>85</sup> Donovan, *One Right Reading?*, 53.

<sup>86</sup> Similarly, Grant offered a truncated view of Irenaeus’s understanding of scriptural interpretation when he wrote, “In his [Irenaeus’s] opinion truth is to be found only within the church . . . . An instructive passage shows us his dislike of philosophical learning,” after which he quotes *Haer.* 2.28.2. Robert M. Grant and David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 50. However, Irenaeus does not dismiss the possibility of philosophical knowledge. He merely illustrates that humanity is limited with respect to comprehension of nature. It is therefore no surprise that this is also the case when interpreting portions of Scripture.

Irenaeus's concern is not with theological speculation per se but with the gnostic rejection of what Scripture clearly and unambiguously asserts.<sup>87</sup>

### **Exegesis and the *Regula***

An additional method or systematic approach to properly interpreting Scripture, according to Irenaeus, is interpreting Scripture according to the parameters and doctrinal explanations contained in the *regula veritatis*. According to Kathryn Greene-McCreight, “The Rule of Faith functions as a hermeneutical key for the interpretation of Scripture.”<sup>88</sup> Moreover, Reno and O’Keefe have stated, “The church father most closely associated with the rule of faith is Irenaeus of Lyons.”<sup>89</sup> Donovan has observed that Irenaeus is the first to use the term “Rule of Faith.”<sup>90</sup> She further suggests, “The whole work [of *Adversus Haereses*] is an exercise organized toward exegesis under the Rule of Faith.”<sup>91</sup> Before discussing the relationship between the *regula* and scriptural exegesis in Irenaeus, it is advantageous to understand the content of the *regula*.

### *The Content of the Regula*

Ascertaining the precise content of the *regula* can be difficult. As Reno and O’Keefe suggest, “The specific content of this rule remains elusive. It is a fluid array of doctrines, some involving specific claims about the nature of God in relation to both creation and salvation, and some articulating a narrative scheme that outlines the divine

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<sup>87</sup> For a helpful article see Anthony Briggman, “Theological Speculation in Irenaeus: Perils and Possibilities,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 71, no. 2 (2017): 175–98.

<sup>88</sup> Kathryn Greene-McCreight, “Rule of Faith,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 703.

<sup>89</sup> O’Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 119.

<sup>90</sup> Donovan, *One Right Reading?*, 11. In *Haer.*, Irenaeus never uses the epithet “rule of faith” (*regula fide*) but instead prefers “rule of truth” (*regula veritatis*). However, he employs “rule of faith” in *Epid.* 3.

<sup>91</sup> Donovan, *One Right Reading?*, 14.

economy.”<sup>92</sup> Doubtless, Irenaeus used the Greek κανών translated in the Latin manuscripts as *regula*. The language itself indicates a “standard” or “rule” whereby one ascertains and applies the truth. Broadly speaking, the rule of truth was a way “to refer to the sum content of apostolic teaching.”<sup>93</sup>

Although the “specific content of this rule remains elusive,” Irenaeus’s various iterations of the *regula* reveal essential ingredients. A lucid presentation of the rule occurs in *Haer.* 1.22.1:

The Rule of the Truth that we hold is this: There is one God Almighty, who created all things through His Word; He both prepared and made all things out of nothing, just as Scripture says: *For by the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of His mouth* [Ps 33:6 LXX]. And again: *All things were made through Him and without Him was made not a thing* [John 1:3]. From this all nothing is exempt. Now, it is the Father who made all things through Him, whether visible or invisible, whether sensible or intelligible, whether temporal for the sake of some dispensation or eternal. These He did not make through Angels or some Powers that were separated from His thought. For the God of all things needs nothing. No, He made all things by His Word and Spirit, disposing and governing them and giving all of them existence. This is the one who made the world, which indeed is made up of all things. This is the one who fashioned man. This is the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, above whom there is no other God, nor a Beginning, nor a Power, nor a Fullness. This is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>94</sup>

The occasional aspect of this presentation of the rule is conspicuous in Irenaeus’s repeated statements in rejection of gnostic beliefs. For example, adding explicatory comments such as “from this all nothing is exempt” indicates Irenaeus’s opposition to interpretations of “all” that permit gnostic protological myths. Additionally, Irenaeus eliminates the possibility of interpreting the creation of all things by the Father as a creation mediated by an Aeon separated from “His thought,” presumably a reference to the consort of Profundity or Supreme Father (cf. *Haer.* 1.1.1). The occasional context of Irenaeus’s presentation of the rule notwithstanding, the central article of this occurrence

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<sup>92</sup> O’Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 120.

<sup>93</sup> Greene-McCreight, “Rule of Faith,” 703.

<sup>94</sup> *Haer.* 1.22.1 (Unger, 80–81).

of the rule is Irenaeus's doctrine of God articulated as one almighty God who made all things through his own Word and Spirit. In this sense, the *regula* is a presentation, among other things, of the Christian doctrine of God.

The same ingredients occur in Irenaeus's other presentations. For example, although not introducing the *regula* with the same lucidity, Irenaeus identifies faith that was received from the apostles and their disciples<sup>95</sup> as such:

One God the Father Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth and the seas and all things that are in them, and in one Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was enfleshed for our salvation, and in the Holy Spirit, who through the prophets preached the Economies, the coming, the birth from a Virgin, the passion, the resurrection from the dead, and the bodily ascension into heaven of the beloved Son, Christ Jesus our Lord, and His coming from heaven in the glory of the Father to recapitulated all things, and to raise up all flesh of the whole human race, in order that to Christ Jesus, our Lord and God, Savior and King, according to the invisible Father's good pleasure, Every knee should bow [of those] in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess Him, and that He would exercise just judgment toward all; and that, on the other hand, He would send into eternal fire the spiritual forces of wickedness, and the angels who transgressed and became rebels, and the godless, wicked, lawless, and blasphemous people; but, on the other hand, by bestowing life on the righteous and holy and those who kept His commandments and who have persevered in His love—both those who did so from the beginning and those who did so after repentance—He would bestow on them as a grace the gift of incorruption and clothe them with everlasting glory.<sup>96</sup>

According to Irenaeus, this is the faith, which the church—although scattered throughout the world—has received, guards, and believes together. When compared to Irenaeus's presentation in *Haer.* 1.22.1, one discovers both continuity and discontinuity. For example, both compendia of the rule possess, as their first article, belief in one God the Father and Creator of all things. Irenaeus's doctrine of God serves as the foundational article. Additionally, both include faith in the Word and the Spirit, although the former focuses exclusively on their role in creation, and the latter focuses on their roles in the incarnation and prior proclamation through the prophets respectively. Both summaries explicitly unite the work of the one Almighty God and Father with the work of the Word

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<sup>95</sup> *Et ab apostolis et discipulis eorum accepit eam fidem* (SC 264:154).

<sup>96</sup> *Haer.* 1.10.1 (Unger, 49).

and the Spirit. The iteration of the *regula* in *Haer.* 1.10. 1 includes many details regarding what the Holy Spirit revealed, and the Incarnate Word accomplished, in addition to an eschatological element not always explicitly present in other presentations.

Similarly, Irenaeus begins *Epid.* with a presentation of the *regula fide*, which, Irenaeus warns, “we must keep . . . unswervingly.”<sup>97</sup> This rule, received in baptism, as Irenaeus explicitly states in *Haer.* 1.9.4, and implies by juxtaposing baptism to this iteration of the rule in *Epid.* 3, begins with God the Father who created all things and contains all things but is himself uncontainable.<sup>98</sup> Again, the doctrine of God serves as the first principle of Irenaeus’s *regula* presentations. Irenaeus refers to “God, the Father, uncreated, uncontainable, invisible, one God, the Creator of all”<sup>99</sup> as the “first article of our faith.” Moreover, as in *Haer.* 1.22.1, Irenaeus cites Psalm 33:6 (32:6 LXX) interpreting the text to indicate that God the Father created through the Word and Spirit.<sup>100</sup> Apparently, Irenaeus did not conceptualize the rule as something entirely separate from Scripture. The second article consists of “the Word of God, the Son of God, Christ Jesus our Lord,” after which Irenaeus narrates his work of recapitulation through the incarnation. The third article consists of “the Holy Spirit, through whom the prophets prophesied and the patriarchs learnt the things of God and the righteous were led in the path of righteousness, and who, in the last times, was poured out in a new fashion upon the human race renewing man, throughout the world, to God.”<sup>101</sup>

There are other examples of Irenaeus’s presentation of the *regula*, which reveal both variety and consistency in relation to those mentioned above. For example, “the rule

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<sup>97</sup> *Epid.* 3 (Behr, 41).

<sup>98</sup> *Epid.* 4.

<sup>99</sup> *Epid.* 6 (Behr, 43).

<sup>100</sup> *Epid.* 5.

<sup>101</sup> *Epid.* 6 (Behr, 44).

of truth in the Church” is “that there is one God almighty, who through His Word made all things, both visible and invisible.”<sup>102</sup> When Irenaeus seeks to capture the essence of the *regula* with utmost brevity, remaining are belief in one God who created all things through His Word. In other words, both Irenaeus’s doctrine of God and his doctrine of creation by this one and only God serve as essential ingredients. To further substantiate this claim, the *regula veritatis* maintains “that there is one God, the Creator of the universe; he sent the Prophets who led the people out of Egypt; he revealed his Son in the last times, that he might confound the unbelievers and search after the fruit of righteousness.”<sup>103</sup> Again, although variety is found, Irenaeus belabors the same essential points of truth regarding one and only God who created all things and about whom all the Scriptures testify through the revelation of his Son.

When considering the various forms of the *regula* in Irenaeus, a few conclusions are merited: First, the *regula* as articulated by Irenaeus was not fixed but could be expressed through a variety of iterations. Second, Irenaeus’s understanding of the *regula* always began with his doctrine of God, which he calls the “first article” (*κεφάλαιον/primum capitulum*) of the faith.<sup>104</sup> While the various expressions of the *regula* in Irenaeus betray variety, there were constituent parts. Faith in one and only God the Father who created all things was a *sine qua non* of the *regula*. This means that while it may not be possible to identify every constituent part of the *regula*, one can ascertain essential tenets and parameters. Third, the *regula* always consisted of a harmonious portrait of God throughout the various stages of salvation history (e.g., creation, the patriarchs, the exodus of Israel from Egypt, the giving of the law, the prophetic utterances, the incarnation of the Word, the descending of the Spirit). This eliminated any

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<sup>102</sup> *Haer.* 3.11.1 (Unger, 52).

<sup>103</sup> *Haer.* 4.35.4 (Unger, 102).

<sup>104</sup> *Epid.* 6 (Behr, 43; SC 406:92).

system that posited a division between the supreme God, on the one hand, and the Creator of the world on the other hand, such as Irenaeus's gnostic opponents proposed. Fourth, the iterations of the *regula* often included quotations from Scripture as Irenaeus indicates by quoting Psalm 33:6 (32:6 LXX), which leads to the relationship between the rule and Scripture in Irenaeus.

### *The Relationship between the Regula and Scripture*

Articulating precisely how Irenaeus conceptualized the relationship between the *regula* and Scripture has not been without debate. For example, Reno and O'Keefe find what they call an "intrinsic" and "extrinsic" function of the *regula* in relation to Scripture. In the former, Irenaeus believes that the *regula* is the principle or logic of Scripture itself. In this sense, the content of the *regula* and Scripture are virtually indistinguishable. On the other hand, when the *regula* functions extrinsically, according to Reno and O'Keefe, it is a "communally authorized" understanding of the Christian faith.<sup>105</sup> In this capacity, the *regula* frames exegetical questions and helps identify the right answers to those questions. Alternatively, V. Philips Long has taken issue with any understanding of the relationship between the *regula* and Scripture that suggests a guiding or governing interpretative role for the *regula*.<sup>106</sup> Arguing from the ultimate authority of Scripture, Long posits, "There is no suggestion in Irenaeus that his summaries enjoy independent authority or somehow provide something lacking in the Scripture deposit itself. Rather, for Irenaeus, the rule of truth *derives directly from the Scripture*."<sup>107</sup> Long is right to reject any interpretation of Irenaeus that concludes the presence of any "independent authority" inherent in the *regula*. However, he fails to

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<sup>105</sup> O'Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 120.

<sup>106</sup> V. Philips Long, "Irenaeus, Scripture, and the 'Rule of Truth': Of Kings, Foxes, and Mosaics," *Crux* 54, no. 2 (2018): 13–25.

<sup>107</sup> Long, "Irenaeus, Scripture, and Rule of Truth," 20.

distinguish between what some have called the “material” sufficiency of Scripture and the “formal” sufficiency of Scripture.<sup>108</sup> Regarding the former, Scripture possesses sufficient revelatory material or content. In other words, it needs no supplement from another source. In this respect, it is wrong to claim that the *regula* supplements Scripture in some way according to Irenaeus. Regarding the latter, the use of Scripture demands interpretation. For Irenaeus, the *regula* provided an interpretive grid summarizing Scripture itself to help aid in the interpretation of Scripture. It appears that Long assumes both material and formal when speaking of Scripture’s sufficiency. Irenaeus operates with the truth of the material sufficiency of Scripture alongside a recognition of Scripture’s formal insufficiency. In other words, Scripture must be interpreted. Moreover, it is precisely the necessity for scriptural interpretation and the presence of erroneous interpretations purported by the gnostics which leads Irenaeus to write much of his polemic.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in *Haer.* 3.2.1–2, where Irenaeus begins by appealing to Scripture to condemn the teaching of his gnostic opponents. However, “when they are exposed by means of the Scriptures, they turn round and make accusations against the Scriptures themselves, as if these were not correct or were not authentic and stated things variously, and that the truth cannot be found in them by those who are ignorant of tradition.”<sup>109</sup> In other words, the gnostics, when faced with the clear teaching of Scripture, admittedly do not derive their system of beliefs from Scripture but

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<sup>108</sup> For a helpful explanation of this distinction in Irenaeus, see A. N. S. Lane, “Scripture, Tradition and Church: An Historical Survey,” *Vox Evangelica* 9 (1975): 37–55. Additionally, Oberman functions with this distinction when evaluating the earliest relationship between the rule or tradition and Scripture, especially as it relates to Vincent of Lérins in his *Commonitorium*. See Heiko Augustinus Oberman, “Quo Vadis? Tradition from Irenaeus to Humani Generis,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 16, no. 3 (1963): 225–55. Oberman identifies what he calls “Tradition I” and “Tradition II.” The former is representative of Irenaeus’s view and posits a single exegetical tradition of interpreted Scripture. The latter is represented in what Lane called the “supplementary” view and posits the presence of extrabiblical tradition. Additionally, Oberman describes a “Tradition III” model in which tradition is defined as an ongoing and developing body of beliefs, comparable to the “unfolding view” of Lane.

<sup>109</sup> *Haer.* 3.2.1 (Unger, 31).

from a non-scriptural and allegedly apostolic source. According to the gnostics, that source was not “handed down by writings, but by a living voice.”<sup>110</sup> Irenaeus meets his opponents on their own field of battle, meeting their claim to apostolic tradition not explicitly contained in Scripture. When they reject the clear teaching of Scripture, he refutes them with the tradition (including the *regula*) handed down from the apostles. Here, it is helpful to remember that the content of the *regula* and the content of the Scriptures coincide. Moreover, the tradition is contained, guarded, and passed on through the church. Irenaeus describes the response of the gnostics: “When, however, we refer them again to the tradition that derives from the apostles and is guarded in the Churches by the succession of the presbyters, they are opposed to tradition and claim that they are wiser not only than the presbyters but even than the apostles, and have found the unadulterated truth.” In Irenaeus’s argument, there is an apparent correspondence between the message of Scripture, tradition (including the *regula*), and the teaching of the church.

Additionally, with recourse to Augustine’s *De symbolo ad catechumenos*, Long asserts, “The Creed [and presumably the *regula* in Irenaeus’s case] does not add to Scripture; indeed, it derives from it and remains subject to it.”<sup>111</sup> When compared to Irenaeus, Long is unequivocally correct in his first statement, namely that the *regula* does not add to the content of Scripture. Rather, as Irenaeus describes, the *regula* provides “the order and the connection of the Scriptures.”<sup>112</sup> In other words, the *regula* provides the comprehensive portrait of Scripture, a portrait which Irenaeus describes as that of a king. It is this order and connection that the gnostics disregard, dismembering the various parts of the body of truth and rearranging them to fit their own heretical system. The content of

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<sup>110</sup> *Haer.* 3.2.1 (Unger, 31).

<sup>111</sup> Long, “Irenaeus, Scripture, and Rule of Truth,” 19.

<sup>112</sup> *Haer.* 1.8.1 (Unger, 41).

the *regula* corresponds to the content of Scripture precisely because they derive from the one and only true God. John the apostle helped establish the *regula veritatis* in the church by penning his Gospel.<sup>113</sup> Additionally, Irenaeus describes the content of the *regula* as identical to the content of Luke's Gospel.<sup>114</sup> Long and others are correct to recognize that the *regula* in no way adds to the content of Scripture.

To describe the *regula* as derived from and subject to Scripture does not account for the complexity of Irenaeus's historical context and the relationship he conceptualized between the *regula* and Scripture. This reading of Irenaeus assumes distinctions and a particular order of priority and hierarchy, which Irenaeus did not envision.<sup>115</sup> This is especially the case if one identifies the Scriptures as what has become known today as the New Testament. It is right to recognize that the tradition as handed down by the apostles, through the various churches, was a tradition dependent on the presence of the Scriptures known commonly today as the Old Testament. In many respects, the *regula* provided the proper interpretation of the already existing Scriptures, which the Jews accepted as authoritative. In this sense, the apostolic *regula* never existed apart from the presence of a canon of Scripture. This is informative and can lead one to justifiably discover a relationship of dependence between the *regula* and Scripture. On the other hand, by Irenaeus's historical moment the vast majority of the writings that

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<sup>113</sup> *Haer.* 3.11.1.

<sup>114</sup> *Haer.* 3.15.1.

<sup>115</sup> For example, Irenaeus never evaluates Scripture on the basis of the *regula*. In other words, Scripture is never "in the dock," according to Irenaeus. He everywhere assumes harmony between the two. Moreover, the teaching of the church as contained in the *regula* was handed down by the apostles who authored Scripture. Irenaeus did not evaluate the truth value of the *regula*. Rather, he accepted it as that which was included in the tradition bequeathed to the church by the apostles. For this reason, Michael Allen and Scott Swain suggest that the *regula* functioned a bit like a Kantian *a priori* in Michael Allen, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 114. The *regula* was not merely something that Irenaeus thought *about* but something that he thought *with* as he read Scripture.

would become known as the New Testament writings were in full use, demonstrated through his multitudinous quotations.<sup>116</sup>

Since the content of the *regula* and the content of Scripture were the same for Irenaeus, it is better to identify God as the source from which Scripture and the *regula* are derived rather than claiming the source as Scripture and the *regula* as derived. Moreover, Irenaeus believed that God provided Scripture (specifically the New Testament) and the *regula* through the medium of the apostles, whose authority was derived. At times, Irenaeus grants chronological priority to oral preaching over inscripturation, although the content of the two is the same. He writes, “In point of fact, we received the knowledge of the economy of our salvation through no others than those through whom the Gospel has come down to us. This Gospel they first preached orally, but later by God’s will they handed it on to us in the Scriptures, so it would be *the foundation and pillar of our faith*.”<sup>117</sup> Additionally, in Irenaeus’s day, recounting each bishop from the time of the apostles to Irenaeus provided a strong argument in favor of the superiority of a Christian doctrine of God against the gnostics.<sup>118</sup> Irenaeus demonstrates the sufficiency of authority

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<sup>116</sup> It is a bit anachronistic to designate the collection of apostolic writings as the “New Testament” and the collection of the law and prophetic writings as the “Old Testament.” As Behr has aptly observed, “Irenaeus . . . does not (yet) work or speak in a framework structured by two bodies of literature, an Old and a New Testament; instead he intersperses words from the Law and the Prophets together with words from the apostles, evangelists, and Christ, under, as described here, the headings of the one God, the one Christ and his economy, and the one human race.” Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 94n35. On the other hand, Souter remarked, “It is in Irenaeus . . . that we first find something like a whole New Testament freely quoted.” Alexander Souter, *The Text and Canon of the New Testament*, 2nd rev. ed., Studies in Theology 25 (London: Duckworth, 1954), 170. Unger notes, “Of the New Testament, Irenaeus quotes or uses every book except Philemon and 3 John.” Unger, 9, on *Haer.* bk. 1. Others have challenged whether Irenaeus makes use of Hebrews, 2 Peter, Jude, and James. Achilleus Camerlynck granted Irenaeus’s use of James and the additional possibility of Jude due to its presence in the Roman canon at the time. However, Camerlynck argued, “*Il est fort peu probable qu’Irénee dé pende directement de II Pet.*” Achilleus Camerlynck, *St. Irénée et Le Canon Du Nouveau Testament* (Louvain, 1896), 38. It is my understanding that Irenaeus accepted as authoritative Scripture the vast majority of New Testament books.

<sup>117</sup> *Haer.* 3.1.1 (Unger, 30). Interestingly, if Irenaeus is appealing to 1 Tim 3:15, he alters the wording. Whereas Paul describes the church as the “pillar and buttress of the truth,” Irenaeus describes Scripture as “the foundation and pillar of our faith.” While Irenaeus’s historical moment does not accommodate a clear hierarchical relationship between Scripture and the *regula*, he asserts that, although the apostles’ oral teaching was divinely authoritative, inscripturated apostolic teaching has become the foundation of all that Christians believe.

<sup>118</sup> *Haer.* 3.3.1.

and purity of content contained in the tradition and deposited in the Churches established by the apostles. He asks, “What if the apostles had not left us the Scriptures; ought we not, then, to follow the disposition of tradition, which they handed down to those to whom they entrusted the Churches?”<sup>119</sup> Surely, such a view neither envisions derivation of the tradition from Scripture nor subjugation of tradition to Scripture.<sup>120</sup>

Lane has provided a helpful stratification identifying various models for explaining the *regula* (or tradition)<sup>121</sup> in relation to Scripture.<sup>122</sup> According to Lane, Irenaeus is best understood as representing a “coincidence” view of the *regula* (or more broadly, tradition), the teaching of the church, and Scripture. In other words, “the teaching of the church, Scripture and tradition coincide.”<sup>123</sup> Moreover, Lane insightfully contends that discussions regarding the relationship between tradition and Scripture have failed to give the church its proper place in this discussion.<sup>124</sup> Contrary to believing that the *regula* supplements the content of Scripture, Irenaeus operated with the belief that the content of the *regula* and the content of Scripture do not differ. Kevin Vanhoozer has correctly observed, “The early church acknowledged no material difference between

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<sup>119</sup> *Haer.* 3.4.1 (Unger, 35).

<sup>120</sup> Although Irenaeus envisages a relationship between tradition and the *regula*, the two are not necessarily synonymous. After all, tradition includes items not found in any of Irenaeus’s iterations of the *regula*. For example, Irenaeus claims that his belief that Jesus’s earthly ministry extended into his forties was a part of the “tradition” handed down by John through the presbyters in Asia Minor (*Haer.* 2.22.5). Perhaps although the *regula* was a part of what the apostles handed down or “traditioned” to the churches through the presbyters, tradition encompassed more than the *regula*.

<sup>121</sup> It is important to search out what an author intends by “tradition.” In his detailed reply to the Council of Trent, Martin Chemnitz identified eight types of tradition or “traditions.” Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia, 1971), 217–307. Germane to my thesis is merely the *regula*. However, in the broader dialogue among scholars, the *regula* is often subsumed under the category of “tradition.”

<sup>122</sup> Lane has catalogued and proposed the following four views as representative: (1) the Coincidence View, (2) the Supplementary View, (3) the Ancillary View, and (4) the Unfolding View. Lane, “Scripture, Tradition and Church.”

<sup>123</sup> Lane, “Scripture, Tradition and Church,” 39.

<sup>124</sup> This third element, namely the church, produces a different conclusion than the one espoused by Oberman. Including the church as an integral element of the framework results in a distinction between what Lane calls the “coincidence” view and the later Protestant view, which he designates as the “ancillary” view.

Scripture and tradition; the tradition is simply Scripture properly interpreted. Irenaeus and Tertullian are among representatives of the so-called coincidence or coinherence view.”<sup>125</sup> Moreover, as Lane has highlighted, the church was the context for properly understanding the Scripture according to Irenaeus.<sup>126</sup> Lane rightly observes that Irenaeus rejected the gnostic claim “to a secret tradition supplementing Scripture.”<sup>127</sup> Irenaeus’s opponents constructed a “rule” received through secret knowledge and extrinsic to Scripture. They then imposed this rule on Scripture. Irenaeus’s rule, on the other hand, was intrinsic to Scripture. This explains why Irenaeus opposes heretical rules and defends the proper *regula* by means of a persistent appeal to Scripture.<sup>128</sup> Rather than adding to the content of Scripture, the *regula* manifested the proper interpretation of Scripture.

In Young’s *magnum opus*, she concludes similarly, “There was in early Christianity a general assumption—indeed a deep confidence—that the rule of faith or the creed was coinherent with scripture.”<sup>129</sup> In modifying a previously stated conclusion that “the rule of faith was ‘partly external to the text,’” she “reinforces the point that it [the rule of faith] ‘encapsulates the essential meaning of the text,’ that ‘kernel of scripture . . . is enshrined in the plan of salvation,’ which, as Irenaeus affirmed, was ‘handed down to us by the will of God in the scriptures,’ by ‘those through whom the

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<sup>125</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 156.

<sup>126</sup> I will discuss this further below.

<sup>127</sup> Lane, “Scripture, Tradition and Church,” 39.

<sup>128</sup> This is not to suggest that Irenaeus evinces no additional arguments beyond an appeal to Scripture. For example, I briefly evaluated his argument from episcopal succession above. However, the vast majority of his arguments and the construction of his theological framework, manifested in books 3–5, consist of exegetical engagement with the texts of Scripture.

<sup>129</sup> Frances M. Young, *Scripture, the Genesis of Doctrine*, vol. 1, *Doctrine and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2023), 232.

Gospel came to us.”<sup>130</sup> Since authoring *Virtuoso Theology*,<sup>131</sup> Young has shifted her accent slightly toward an extremely intimate, organic, and indeed “coinherent” relationship between the *regula* and Scripture in Irenaeus. Young contends that a distinction between the hypothesis or plot of Scripture and the *regula* “is not in the end convincing . . . . Rather, the notion that the rule of faith itself might be regarded as scripture’s *hypothesis* is well worth consideration.”<sup>132</sup> Indeed, in *Epid.*, according to Young, Irenaeus clearly regards the hypothesis of Scripture and the rule of faith as identical.<sup>133</sup> Young is precisely correct when she concludes, “A Christian reading of scripture requires the doctrinal framework that scripture itself generated as interpreters sought to articulate what scripture was all about.”<sup>134</sup> With clarity regarding the relationship between Scripture and the *regula*, I now turn to the guiding (or governing) function of the *regula* in exegesis.

### *Ruled Reading*

Maintaining the above qualifications, it is accurate to describe Irenaeus as espousing exegesis in accordance with the *regula*, or what has been described as a “ruled reading.” In this understanding, Irenaeus employed the *regula* to “guide” interpretation. The *regula* was not a supplement to Scripture’s content but an exegetical aid containing the same essential content as Scripture in summary form. It provided the proper portrait of a king, which Scripture itself, properly arranged and interpreted, produced.<sup>135</sup> As a result, the *regula* offered the church’s summative interpretation of Scripture.

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<sup>130</sup> Young, *Scripture, the Genesis of Doctrine*, 233.

<sup>131</sup> Frances M. Young, *Virtuoso Theology: The Bible and Interpretation* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 1990), 53.

<sup>132</sup> Young, *Virtuoso Theology*, 98.

<sup>133</sup> Young, *Virtuoso Theology*, 99.

<sup>134</sup> Young, *Virtuoso Theology*, 99.

<sup>135</sup> *Haer.* 1.8.1.

Donovan has suggested a certain reciprocity between the *regula* and Scripture: “The Rule of Faith governs right exegesis and the Scripture (the object of the exegesis) explains the Rule of Faith.”<sup>136</sup> This is an accurate understanding of Irenaeus’s use of the *regula* if the explanations I have offered above regarding the relationship between the *regula* and Scripture are maintained. The rule of faith aided interpretation as a guide providing parameters while Scripture, containing more detail and information, provided additional understanding of the articles summarized in the rule of faith. On the other hand, if Donovan conceptualizes the content of the *regula* as supplementary to the content of Scripture, this is an inaccurate caricature of Irenaeus. As demonstrated above, Irenaeus espoused what Lane has designated the “coincidence” view. If my understanding of Irenaeus is correct, scriptural interpretation according to the *regula* is interpretation according to the right summary of Scripture’s own content. In this sense, a “ruled reading” is another way of describing the way Scripture (or Scripture’s summary as expressed in tradition) interprets Scripture within the context of the church. This is not to confuse material sufficiency with formal sufficiency. For Irenaeus, the *regula* guided exegesis not by providing information that was lacking in the biblical witness, but by summarizing and explaining the relationship between the pieces of the mosaic of Scripture. One can see how the absence of the accompanying realization that the content of Scripture and the content of the *regula* coincide results in a misunderstanding of Irenaeus’s use of the *regula* in interpretation of Scripture.<sup>137</sup> Consistent with Irenaeus’s use of the *regula* in interpretation of Scripture, Daniel Treier concludes, “The Rule not

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<sup>136</sup> Donovan, *One Right Reading?*, 11.

<sup>137</sup> It is difficult to ascertain Donovan’s precise position regarding the relationship between the *regula* and Scripture.

only defines and defends parameters for proper interpretation but also derives from Scripture itself.”<sup>138</sup>

At this juncture, remembering the content of the *regula* according to Irenaeus is insightful. As argued above, the *regula* always included a summary of the Christian doctrine of God. As a result, given the exegetical use of the *regula* as a guide for faithful interpretation and the theological content of the *regula*, the exegetical lens with which Irenaeus interpreted Scripture was a Christian theological metaphysic.

### **The Church as Proper Exegetical Context**

Related to the role of the *regula* in Irenaeus’s exegesis is the place and context of the church. According to Irenaeus, the church was the context where ruled exegesis took place, and where the teaching of the apostles was kept and guarded. He claims that John, the disciple of the Lord and author of the Gospel of John, helped to establish the *regula* in the church and dispel aberrant theological beliefs. Irenaeus recounts, “The Lord’s disciple, therefore, wished to put an end to all such tenets, and to make firm the rule of truth in the Church [*regulam ueritatis*<sup>139</sup> *constituere in Ecclesia*], that there is one God almighty, who through His Word made all things, both the visible and the invisible.”<sup>140</sup> Among other apostles, John helped to establish the rule *in Ecclesia*.

The church was the guardian of the tradition handed down by the apostles. Irenaeus describes the tradition as that which “derives from the apostles and is guarded in the Churches by the succession of the presbyters.”<sup>141</sup> Irenaeus speaks of *traditionem quae est ab apostolis*. The Greek word for *traditionem*, which Irenaeus would have used, is

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<sup>138</sup> Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 59.

<sup>139</sup> When quoting from the Latin text of SC, I have chosen to maintain the decision of SC by using the Latin “u” in place “v.” Everywhere else, I have chosen to use a “v” as in *ueritatis*.

<sup>140</sup> *Haer* 3.11.1 (Unger, 52; SC 3:140).

<sup>141</sup> *Haer.* 3.2.2 (Unger, 31).

παράδοσις.<sup>142</sup> The term used refers to the body of truth handed down by the apostles to the church. Additionally, as indicated above, the content of the παράδοσις and the content of the Scriptures coincide in Irenaeus. While there is more to Irenaeus's ecclesiology than the presence of elders who oversee the church, there is certainly not less. After all, the elders were entrusted with the sacred task of protecting and guarding the *regula* as overseers of Christ's church. Essential to understanding Irenaeus's exegetical and theological posture is confidence in an unbroken succession, not merely institutionally but also doctrinally, between the apostles and the churches in Irenaeus's day.

This *regula* is not inconspicuously buried under layers of esoteric teaching but is immediately accessible to any who will go to the various churches.<sup>143</sup> Irenaeus challenges the gnostic claim to secret knowledge, which the apostles did not teach openly. Contrary to the gnostic claim to esoteric knowledge, Irenaeus maintains that the apostles appointed bishops, none of whom were aware of such secret teaching. He reasons that had the apostles possessed such knowledge they would have surely provided it to those in whose hands they left the churches. While Irenaeus does not recount the succession of bishops among all the ancient churches, he includes the episcopal lineage of the church in Rome, which he refers to as “the greatest and most ancient Church.”<sup>144</sup> Irenaeus asserts that the church in Rome was founded by the apostles Peter and Paul. If the gnostics were correct, why would the church in Rome not have any awareness of this mysterious teaching that allegedly, according to Irenaeus's opponents, Paul espoused and taught secretly?

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<sup>142</sup> Paul used παράδοσις in a similar way in 2 Thess 3:6 where he warns against those who do not live “according to the tradition which they received from us” (κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν ἣν παρελάβοσαν παρ’ ἡμῶν).

<sup>143</sup> *Haer.* 3.3.1.

<sup>144</sup> *Haer.* 3.3.2.

Irenaeus compares the church to a bank into which the apostolic deposit was made, and from which anyone can draw.<sup>145</sup> Additionally, he compares the church to a well from which one could draw the water of life. Moreover, according to Irenaeus, the church was the entrance or access to the apostolic truth. Why would one search elsewhere for what has already been freely provided in the context of the church? This unity of faith and teaching Irenaeus maintains exists around the world even among those who do not possess the written apostolic instruction.<sup>146</sup> The Spirit who authors salvation in the heart, resulting in the preservation of the apostolic tradition, is the cause of doctrinal unity among the various churches around the world.

Irenaeus assumes continuity of teaching between the apostles and the bishops of his day. In other words, the church into which the apostles deposited the *regula* and the bishops and elders into whose hands the apostles entrusted guardianship of the *regula*, provided Irenaeus with a convincing argument against gnostic teaching. Irenaeus's ecclesiology included the essential purity of the church regarding the *regula*, or tradition of the apostles.

According to Irenaeus, ruled reading, which included interpreting Scripture according to the Christian doctrine of God, took place in the context of the church because it was in the church where the apostles deposited the *regula*. Additionally, Irenaeus claimed that through the church anyone willing could enter life. To be “outside the Church” is to be “outside the truth.”<sup>147</sup> The Spirit of God furnishes the church with the truth regarding the economies of the Father and the Son, and all those who are in the church have embraced the “true knowledge,” which is the “doctrine of the apostles.”<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> *Haer.* 3.4.1.

<sup>146</sup> *Haer.* 3.4.2.

<sup>147</sup> *Haer.* 4.33.7 (Unger, 92).

<sup>148</sup> *Haer.* 4.33.8 (Unger, 92).

Irenaeus argues against the gnostics from apostolicity, antiquity, catholicity, and succession. The paragraph merits quoting in its entirety due to its relevance for understanding Irenaeus's conception of the church, the doctrine of the apostles, and exegesis.<sup>149</sup> He contends,

*Agnitio vera est Apostolorum doctrina, et antiquus Ecclesiae status in universo mundo, et character corporis Christi secundum successiones episcoporum quibus illi eam quae in unoquoque loco est Ecclesiam tradiderunt, quae pervenit usque ad nos custoditio sine fictione Scripturarum, plenissima tractatio neque additamentum neque ablationem recipiens, et lectio sine falsatione, et secundum Scripturas expositio legitima et diligens et sine periculo et sine blasphemia, et praecipuum dilectionis munus, quod est pretiosius quam agnitio, gloriosius autem quam prophetia, omnibus autem reliquis charismatibus supereminens.*<sup>150</sup>

John of Damascus's *Sacra parallela*, one of the sources for Greek fragments of *Haer.*, includes the following Greek fragment:

γνώσις ἀληθῆς, ἡ τῶν ἀποστόλων διδαχὴ, καὶ τὸ ἀρχαῖον τῆς ἐκκλησίας σύστημα κατὰ παντὸς τοῦ κόσμου, καὶ ὁ χαρακτήρ τοῦ σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ κατὰ τὰς διαδοχὰς τῶν ἐπισκόπων οἷς ἐκεῖνοι τὴν κατὰ τόπον ἐκκλησίαν ἐνεχείρισαν, κατηντηκυῖά τε εἰς ἡμᾶς διατήρησις ἀπλαστος τῶν γραφῶν, ὀλόκληρος συλλαγισμὸς μὴτε προσθήκη μὴτε ἀφαιρέσιν δεξάμενος καὶ ἀνάγνωσις ἀρραδιούργητος καὶ πρὸς τὰς γραφὰς ἐξηγήσις νομίμη καὶ ἐμμελής καὶ ἀκίνδυνος καὶ ἀβλάσφημος, καὶ ἡ ἐξαίρετος τῆς ἀγάπης δωρεά, τιμιωτέρα τῆς γνώσεως, ἐνδοξότερα δὲ τῆς προφητείας, πάντων δὲ τῶν λοιπῶν χαρισμάτων ὑπερβεβλημένη.<sup>151</sup>

Irenaeus identifies “true knowledge” (*agnitio vera*/γνώσις ἀληθῆς), as contrasted with knowledge falsely so-called purported by the gnostics, with a series of predicates or truths characteristic of this knowledge. First, the true knowledge is “the doctrine of the apostles” (*Apostolorum doctrina*/ἡ τῶν ἀποστόλων διδαχὴ). Irenaeus's argument against his opponents includes a claim to apostolicity as a central ingredient of the true Christian faith. Second is Irenaeus's argument from antiquity. The argument from the

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<sup>149</sup> Translating this paragraph is difficult due to its unique syntax and what appear to be scribal errors. For a helpful discussion of the Latin, see Unger, 253–53n42, on *Haer.* bks. 4 and 5.

<sup>150</sup> *Haer.* 4.33.8 (SC 100:820).

<sup>151</sup> SC 100:819, 821.

antiquity of the church (*antiquus Ecclesiae status*/τὸ ἀρχαῖον τῆς ἐκκλησίας σύστημα)<sup>152</sup> forms a central constituent in Irenaeus’s polemic. Third, contrary to the apparent discord present when comparing the teaching of the various gnostic sects, the ubiquity of the church’s *regula* demonstrates the accuracy of the church’s teaching. The church is present *in universo mundo*/κατὰ παντὸς τοῦ κόσμου. Fourth, Irenaeus refers to the particular character of the body of Christ according to the succession of bishops (*character corporis Christi secundum successiones episcoporum*/ὁ χαρακτήρ τοῦ σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ κατὰ τὰς διαδοχὰς τῶν ἐπισκόπων) to whom the apostles entrusted the truth. The bishoprics established by the apostles manifest clear harmony with one another whereas the gnostics do not have recourse to apostolic episcopacies. To appreciate Irenaeus’s argument from apostolicity, antiquity, catholicity, and succession, it is necessary to see each as a facet of a singular argument in favor of orthodox Christian doctrine as represented in the *regula* against the gnostics.

Irenaeus’s understanding of succession is fascinating given contemporary discussions between Roman Catholics, the Greek Orthodox, the Oriental Orthodox, and Protestants regarding apostolic or episcopal succession. Although Irenaeus did not exclude a degree of institutional succession as a part of his argument, institutional succession occurred within the context of doctrinal and liturgical succession. The bishop who received oversight in the church had also received the doctrine of the apostles. In fact, the reason he was able to argue from institutional succession was because of the continuity doctrinally through the institutional lineage. An example of Irenaeus prioritizing doctrinal or liturgical succession over institutional succession is his mediation regarding the Quartodeciman controversy, which I described in chapter 1. Victor had received institutional episcopal succession in the church of Rome. However, he was on the verge of censoring the Asiatic churches for their Quartodeciman practice, a

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<sup>152</sup> The Latin reads, “the ancient status” while the Greek reads, “the ancient constitution.”

ensorship, which would have challenged the received diversity of the early church down to the apostles. In this case, Irenaeus appears to have prioritized the doctrinal or liturgical succession (and the diversity of this practice) over Victor's claim to institutional succession. Irenaeus understood apostolicity, antiquity, catholicity, and succession to exist together.

As Irenaeus contends above, one finds the proper reading (*lectio*) of the Scriptures and the legitimate and careful exposition (*expositio legitima et diligens*) of the truth according to the Scriptures within the church. Moreover, this ecclesial exegesis is without the falsification or fabrication of additional scriptures (*sine fictione Scripturarum*). This is doubtless a rejection of the gnostic tendency to create and compile additional scriptures alongside the Christian Scriptures.

The believer receives this proper reading of the Scriptures, and this harmonious and legitimate explanation according to the Scriptures, through baptism. As Irenaeus describes, the Christian receives the *regula per baptismum*.<sup>153</sup> The Christian does not concoct, imagine, invent, or even add to the *regula*. Rather, the responsibility of the Christian is simply to keep unchanged what has been received through baptism. As Irenaeus states elsewhere, baptism provides for the Christian the *ordo dispositionis fidei*.<sup>154</sup> Through baptism, one receives the three articles of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

Contrary to the gnostics whose exposition of the Scriptures betray a cacophony of interpretations consisting of speculations, the church maintains a harmonious interpretation as the bank into which the apostles deposited their teaching. According to Irenaeus, the church follows “one and the same Lord as teacher,” possesses “his words as the Rule of the Truth,” and therefore “all speak the same things always about the same

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<sup>153</sup> *Haer.* 1.9.4 (SC 264:150).

<sup>154</sup> *Epid.* 6 (SC 406:90).

passages.”<sup>155</sup> The gnostics search for truth *extra ecclesia* and beyond the interpretive and theological parameters provided in the rule of truth.

While the methods Irenaeus employed are essential to his exegesis, those methods must never be excised from the ecclesial context for proper interpretation of Scripture. As Lane helpfully observed several decades ago, some treatments of the relationship between Scripture and tradition have failed “to give the church its proper place in the discussion.”<sup>156</sup> He continues, “Scripture and tradition cannot be studied in isolation. They only interact with one another through a third party, the contemporary church.”<sup>157</sup> This was certainly true for Irenaeus.

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<sup>155</sup> *Haer.* 4.35.4 (Unger, 102).

<sup>156</sup> Lane, “Scripture, Tradition and Church,” 37.

<sup>157</sup> Lane, “Scripture, Tradition and Church,” 37.

CHAPTER 5  
INSTANTIATING THE INTERSECTION OF  
IRENÆUS’S DOCTRINE OF GOD  
AND EXEGESIS

In chapter 4, I began showing the ways Irenæus’s doctrine of God and exegesis intersect. In this chapter, I continue to explicate the intersection of Irenæus’s doctrine of God and exegesis by accenting two instantiations of this intersection, the distinction and relationship between “signs” and “things” and prosopological exegesis. Both exegetical concepts are imbued with theological wealth and are thronged with Irenæus’s understanding of who God is.

**The Relationship between “Signs” and “Things”**

Engagements with semiotics, or the study of the relationship between “signs” or “symbols” and “signified” or “symbolized,” often begin with Augustine’s sign theory. However, although Augustine provides “the most developed and coherent explanation of text and referent,”<sup>1</sup> I argue that he is certainly not the first. For example, Hilary of Poitiers observes, “For he is the best student who does not read his thoughts into the book, but lets it reveal its own; who draws from it its sense, and does not import his own into it, nor force upon its words a meaning which he had determined was the right one before he opened its pages.”<sup>2</sup> According to Hilary, properly interpreting the Scriptures includes identifying the correct sense or referent to which the text points. Origen similarly offers his hearers the following exhortation: “Let us attempt to ascend from the

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen O. Presley, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Early Church: Recovering an Ancient Vision* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2025), 43.

<sup>2</sup> Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 1.18, trans. E. W. Watson and L. Pullan, in *NPNF<sup>2</sup>, Hilary of Poitiers, John of Damascus*, American ed. (Grand Rapids: Hendrickson, 2004), 9:45.

letter to the spirit, from the figures to the truth.”<sup>3</sup> Additionally, he warns against failing to see that “mysteries are dimly shadowed in these words [of Scripture]” and that these words of Scripture “more truly indicate” realities beyond the mere words and historical descriptions.<sup>4</sup> While these authors are not all using the same terms, they appear to be describing the same essential reality, namely that fundamental to proper interpretation of Scripture is identifying the correct referent indicated by the signs of the text.

Augustine outlines this theory in *Doctr. chr.*, wherein he explicates what he calls the relationship between a “sign” (*signum*) and a “thing” (*res*). “All doctrine concerns either things or signs, but things are learned by signs. Strictly speaking, I have here called a ‘thing’ that which is not used to signify something else, like wood, stone, cattle, and so on . . . . For no one uses words except for the purpose of signifying something. From this may be understood what we call ‘signs’; they are things used to signify something. Thus every sign is also a thing, for that which is not a thing is nothing at all; but not every thing is also a sign.”<sup>5</sup> According to Augustine, biblical interpretation consists in properly identifying the *res* signified by the *signum*. Many contemporary semiotic treatments remain indebted to Augustine’s explanation. However, there are differences between Augustine’s understanding and postmodern theorists. As Frances M. Young has observed, “Augustine certainly did understand like postmodern theorists that there is no natural connection between a word and that to which it refers, and that metaphor and figures of speech render language even less direct. However, in his view it is *res* (realities) that are signified, precisely the point that postmodernism has called into

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<sup>3</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, trans. Barbara J. Bruce, Fathers of the Church 105 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 41.

<sup>4</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 92.

<sup>5</sup> Augustine, *Doctr. chr.* 1.2, trans. D. W. Robertson Jr., Library of Liberal Arts 80 (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1958), 8.

question.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, Augustine was interested in realities accessible through the proper interpretation of semantic signs.

Although Irenaeus does not employ the same language that Augustine would later employ, the basic distinction and relationship between “signs” and “things” is a helpful heuristic for ascertaining distinction between Irenaeus’s exegesis and the exegesis of his gnostic opponents. Much earlier than Augustine, indeed characteristic of exegetes like Irenaeus of Lyons, was the ambition of discerning the proper reference of the words or “signs.” As Young observes, “So the fundamental question for understanding meaning was discerning the reference.”<sup>7</sup> This assumed what Young has called a “sacramental”<sup>8</sup> understanding of Scripture.

The exegetical difference between Irenaeus and the gnostics was not fundamentally in the signs of the sacred texts they sought to interpret. As I have shown, the gnostics revered the same texts. As a result, they received and interpreted many of the same signs. The difference between Irenaeus and his opponents was in the referential object of the scriptural signs. “They do violence to the good words [of Scripture] in adapting them to their wicked fabrications.”<sup>9</sup> The gnostics, according to Irenaeus, mine the Scriptures to support their system. “After having entirely fabricated their own system, they gather together sayings and names from scattered places and transfer them . . . from their natural meaning to an unnatural one.”<sup>10</sup> They collect and arrange the tesserae of Scripture in such a way that they reject the only true God as the referent signified and in

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<sup>6</sup> Frances M. Young, *Scripture, the Genesis of Doctrine*, Doctrine and Scripture in Early Christianity, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2023).

<sup>7</sup> Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 120.

<sup>8</sup> Young, *Biblical Exegesis and Formation of Christian Culture*, 117.

<sup>9</sup> *Haer.* 1.3.6 (Unger, 29).

<sup>10</sup> *Haer.* 1.9. 4 (Unger, 47).

his place identify a different referent.<sup>11</sup> “They deceive many by the badly composed phantasy of the Lord’s words that they adapt.” Their heresy is not in inventing new signs but in rearranging the scriptural signs in such a way that the proper image of a king is replaced by the image of a dog or a fox. Irenaeus’s opponents claim to embrace the true meaning or “thing” communicated by the “signs” of Scripture. In fact, they make use of the “ambiguous scriptural passages” and in so doing “they fabricated another god.”<sup>12</sup> The gnostics “while seeking to explain the Scriptures and parables, introduce another, greater God above the God who is the Creator of the world.”<sup>13</sup> Moreover, they make a “foolish fabrication with a multitude of gods.”<sup>14</sup>

### **τύπος and εἰκὼν**

One of Irenaeus’s refrains against his gnostic opponents is that they invent and imagine another God over the God who is. The gnostics “go in search of one who does not exist but is supposed to be above him [the true God], and who has never been proclaimed by anyone.”<sup>15</sup> They use ambiguous passages, often parables in the Gospels, to explain other ambiguous passages in favor of their theological imagination. In so doing, “they fabricated another God.” As a result, they reject the true God and “do not believe in the things that exist, but have fallen into what does not have existence.”

For example, the gnostics apparently appealed to the woman who was healed from a hemorrhage after twelve years<sup>16</sup> as exegetical evidence for the twelfth Aeon

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<sup>11</sup> *Haer.* 1.8.1.

<sup>12</sup> *Haer.* 2.10.1 (Unger, 35–36).

<sup>13</sup> *Haer.* 2.10.2 (Unger, 36).

<sup>14</sup> *Haer.* 4.34.5 (Unger, 99).

<sup>15</sup> *Haer.* 2.10.1 (Unger, 35).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Matt 9:20–22; Mark 5:25–34; Luke 8:43–48.

falling prey to passion and producing Demiurge.<sup>17</sup> They claimed that the woman was a *typos* (τύπος) of the *imago* (εἰκὼν) identified as the twelfth Aeon.

Although the breadth of meaning expressed in the terms *sign* and *thing* is greater than “type” and “image” in Irenaeus, the two couplets are not unrelated. For example, as Augustine comments, a “sign” is something that signifies or points to something else. A “thing,” at least as it is understood within the relationship between a sign and a thing, is the referent to which the sign points. In this sense, Irenaeus’s use of τύπος and εἰκὼν fits. After all, a τύπος points to, or signifies, an εἰκὼν. One difference in the relationship between a “sign” and a “thing,” and the relationship between a τύπος and an εἰκὼν, is that all signs are also things. However, not every τύπος is an εἰκὼν. In fact, it seems that a τύπος cannot also serve as an εἰκὼν.

According to Irenaeus, a τύπος represents an εἰκὼν when there is sufficient continuity between the two as understood within the applied system of theology. For example, the gnostic appeal to the woman with the hemorrhage for twelve years fails given their protological system and the absence of sufficient continuity. After all, the image of the Aeon in relationship to which they claim that the woman with the hemorrhage was the type failed because the Aeon that suffered passion was not technically the twelfth Aeon but the thirtieth.<sup>18</sup> As Irenaeus states, “This Aeon is not the twelfth *according to their system*.”<sup>19</sup> Moreover, if this woman was properly interpreted as a τύπος of the alleged twelfth Aeon, then the first eleven Aeons would have been the ones who suffered passion while the twelfth would have been exempted from such suffering. After all, the woman suffered the first eleven years and received healing on, or at the conclusion of, year twelve. If every Aeon suffered passion until year twelve, the

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<sup>17</sup> *Haer.* 2.23.1.

<sup>18</sup> See *Haer.* 1.1–2.

<sup>19</sup> *Haer.* 2.23.1 (Unger, 76); emphasis added.

exegetical and theological parallel considered within their system would stand.

“However, since she suffered for eleven years without being healed but was healed in the twelfth year, in what way can she be the type of the twelfth Aeon, when this one alone suffered passion, while the other eleven in no way suffered passion?”<sup>20</sup>

Irenaeus explains more specifically the relationship between the *τύπος* and the *εἰκὼν*, “True, at times a type and an image depart from the truth in regard to matter [*secundum materiam et secundum substantiam*], but in regard to the shape [*secundum autem habitum et liniamentum*] they must retain the likeness; likewise, by what is present they must manifest what is not present.”<sup>21</sup> Irenaeus indicates that the *τύπος* need not perfectly coincide with the *εἰκὼν* in all respects, specifically as it relates to the substance or essence of the sign typifying and the reality of the thing imaged. However, for the parallel between the two to stand, there must be sufficient overlap, especially as it relates to what is presented externally regarding form.

Irenaeus demonstrates further that interpreting the woman with the hemorrhage for twelve years as a type of a particular Aeon betrays the presence of an arbitrariness alongside inconsistency among the exegetical conclusions of the gnostics. Appealing to another text in Luke 13, Irenaeus wonders why it is that his opponents chose the woman with the hemorrhage for twelve years and not the woman who had been ill for eighteen years: “So if the first woman was a type of the twelfth Aeon who suffered passion, then this one ought to be the type of an eighteenth Aeon who suffered passion.”<sup>22</sup> This, of course, is not the conclusion of the gnostics. Irenaeus seeks to practice an exegetical

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<sup>20</sup> *Haer.* 2.23.1 (Unger, 76).

<sup>21</sup> Here, Unger reveals a decision to translate two concepts as a single concept or hendiadys. *Secundum materiam et secundum substantiam* therefore is translated, “in regard to matter” and *secundum autem habitum et liniamentum*, “in regard to shape.” While this is an understandable decision, it might be better to preserve the more detailed intricacies of the individual words with something comparable to the *ANF*, which opts for “matter and substance” and “form and features” respectively (*ANF*, 1:392).

<sup>22</sup> *Haer.* 2.23.2 (Unger, 76).

reading of Scripture that is neither arbitrary nor inconsistent but properly functions within the theological reality that undergirds all divine revelation. The gnostic system is found to be wanting in this respect and can therefore only grab for arbitrary material to suit their own foreign theological conclusions.

It is important to note that Irenaeus's understanding of a type and its relationship to its image is not necessarily the same concept as modern understandings of typology. Defining typology within contemporary scholarship has proven to cause an impasse among scholars. For example, Douglas Moo has written, "To be sure, typology is easier to talk about than to describe. And those who have attempted definitions do not always agree."<sup>23</sup>

Some have criticized typology. Drawing the ire of modern exegetes, Young has concluded, "'Typology' is a modern construct."<sup>24</sup> According to Young, typology, in the modern sense of the term, is differentiated from allegory in that the former is motivated by a historical consciousness interested in identifying previous historical events foreshadowing later events. What the patristic texts "describe as a 'type' is a mimetic 'impress' or figure in the narrative or action described."<sup>25</sup>

Still, Irenaeus employs the term *τύπος* to refer to a biblical figure or sign that points to a greater theological reality. Some defend typology as a distinct and superior interpretive strategy when compared to other exegetical tools or keys, such as allegory or

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<sup>23</sup> Douglas J. Moo, "Paul's Universalizing Hermeneutic in Romans," *SBJT* 11, no. 3 (2007), 81.

<sup>24</sup> Young, *Biblical Exegesis and Formation of Christian Culture*, 152. Young goes on to assert, "The modern affirmation of typology as distinct from allegory, an affirmation which requires the historical reality of an event as foreshadowing of another event, its 'antitype,' is born of modern historical consciousness, and has no basis in the patristic material" (152–53).

<sup>25</sup> Young, *Biblical Exegesis and Formation of Christian Culture*, 153. Young contends that the word *typos* "may be used for any 'model' or 'pattern' or 'parable' foreshadowing its fulfillment." For a thoughtful proposal of the relationship between allegory and typology, see Peter William Martens, "Revisiting the Allegory/Typology Distinction: The Case of Origen," *J ECS* 16, no. 3 (2008): 283–317.

even prosopology.<sup>26</sup> According to some scholars, one of the distinguishing factors between typology as a valid exegetical practice and other spiritual or figural readings is the former is predicated on ascertaining human authorial intent while the latter disregards the role and understanding of the human author. For example, James M. Hamilton Jr. inseparably links typology, or what he calls “promise-shaped patterns,” with human authorial intent. He writes early in his work focused on the practice of discovering valid typological patterns, “I am claiming that the biblical authors *intended* to communicate the types that will be discussed in this book.”<sup>27</sup> This understanding of the relationship between human authorial intent and typology stands in contrast to others. For example, Michael Heintz observes,

The stated aim of historical-critical scholarship is to ascertain authorial intent (within the context reconstructed by the various *-geschichtes*). The Fathers, too, were very much interested in authorial intent. However, the Author who made use of various human authors and to whom they devoted their fuller attention was Divine, and whose (quite literally) authority extended throughout the sacred text.<sup>28</sup>

It seems that this commitment not merely to having a role for human authorial intent but predicating all meanings of the text on the basis of human authorial intent arises out of a concern for subjectivism and reader-oriented exegesis. For example, Aubrey Sequeira and Samuel C. Emadi contend that “types are historical, authorially-intended, textually rooted, tied to Scripture’s covenant structure, and undergo escalation from old covenant shadow to new covenant reality.”<sup>29</sup> They contrast their understanding of typology with “figural readings.” In so doing, they contend that a figural reading of Scripture is rampant with the problems of subjectivism and reader-oriented exegesis.

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<sup>26</sup> See treatment of prosopological exegesis later in this chapter.

<sup>27</sup> James M. Hamilton Jr., *Typology: Understanding the Bible’s Promise-Shaped Patterns: How Old Testament Expectations Are Fulfilled in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2022), 4.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Heintz, introduction to Jean Daniélou, *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers*, trans. Dom Wulstan Hibberd (N.p.: Ex Fontibus, 2018), xi.

<sup>29</sup> Aubrey Sequeira and Samuel C. Emadi, “Biblical-Theological Exegesis and the Nature of Typology,” *SBJT* 21 no. 1 (2017): 12.

Laudable in their approach alongside Hamilton's is the desire to focus on the inspired text of Scripture. In the view of Hamilton, Sequeira, and Emadi, the interpreter should not approach the text as an avenue for accessing "what really happened" behind the text. The biblical text is not mere propaganda but is inspired by the one and only God. Moreover, they rightly suggest that "the progressive nature of redemptive-historical revelation through the canon entails that the 'meaning' of a text undergoes 'organic development' through the canon until it reaches its full bloom in Christ."<sup>30</sup> However, they are forced to maintain this recognition regarding a fuller meaning or *sensus plenior* beholden unnecessarily to the limitations of human authorial intent. While advocates of this approach are not generally averse to the epithet *sensus plenior*, some have opted for different appellations to distinguish this approach from others. For example, Moo and Andrew Naselli have suggested *sensus praegnans*. *Sensus praegnans* "appeals to the meaning of the text itself that takes on deeper significance as God's plan unfolds."<sup>31</sup> In this spirit, Sequeira and Emadi offer the following three assertions:

(1) the 'meaning' of any text is established by the intent of its human author; (2) the dual authorship of Scripture entails that texts are also embedded with "divine-authorial intentions" that may surpass the intent of human authors; (3) divine authorial intent is always communicated and constrained by the intent of the human author, is progressively developed across the canon, and is therefore, accessible and exegetically discernible by contemporary readers.<sup>32</sup>

In the end, Sequeira and Emadi conclude that advocates of figural or spiritual readings, as opposed to typological exegesis in the realm of what they (or Hamilton) have espoused, are guilty of "reading . . . *into*" the text.<sup>33</sup>

Rather, I would argue that this need not be the case. Irenaeus does not appear

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<sup>30</sup> Sequeira and Emadi, "Biblical-Theological Exegesis," 14.

<sup>31</sup> Douglas J. Moo and Andrew David Naselli, "The Problem of the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament," in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2016), 736.

<sup>32</sup> Sequeira and Emadi, "Biblical-Theological Exegesis," 14–15.

<sup>33</sup> Sequeira and Emadi, "Biblical-Theological Exegesis," 27.

to believe that God's intent is *constrained* by human authorial intent. In fact, discussion focused on human authorial intent does not appear to be Irenaeus's chief concern.<sup>34</sup> So, what does constrain or govern his exegesis? The Christian theological metaphysic! Whereas Hamilton and company contend that human authorial intent governs and circumscribes proper exegesis, Irenaeus contends that who God is governs and circumscribes proper exegesis. Irenaeus reads out of Scripture the doctrine of God present within, and undergirding, Scripture. It was the gnostics who were guilty of reading into the text what was not present. For Irenaeus, the answer to the fanciful exegesis of the gnostics is not a return to the constraints of human authorial intent. Irenaeus's "typology" and the guardrails for his typological exegesis surfaces in *Haer.* 2.25.1. After dismantling gnostic explanations regarding the significance of names, people, activities, and numbers, Irenaeus responds,

If someone should reply, what then? Are the giving of names and the choice of apostles, and the Lord's activity, and the arrangement of created things something empty and aimless? We would answer: Certainly not! On the contrary, all things have clearly been made by God harmonious and beautiful with great wisdom and care, both the ancient things and whatever his Word has made in this last epoch. One must, however, not connect these things with the number thirty, but with an existing system [*subiacenti . . . argumento*] . . . . On the contrary, the numbers themselves and all created things must be harmonized with the existing system of truth [*subiacenti ueritatis argumento*]. For a rule [*regula*] does not come from numbers, but numbers from a rule [*regula*]; neither does God [come] from created things, but created things come from God. For all things are from the one and same God.<sup>35</sup>

Rather than appealing to human authorial intent, Irenaeus appeals to the one and only God who created all things, and who has spoken to his people in the Scriptures. The Christian doctrine of God governs, guides, corrects, and establishes good exegesis because all interpretation (including all typology) connects with a *subiacenti* . . .

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<sup>34</sup> This is not to suggest that Irenaeus is unconcerned about human authorial intent. After all, he appeals to human authors (Moses, David, John, Paul, et al.) when he references passages of Scripture (*Haer.* 1.9.1–3; 3.1.1; 3.2.1; 3.5.1; 3.6.3, 5; 4.2.1, 3; et al.). My contention is to locate exegetical guardrails fundamentally in human authorial intent rather than a Christian theological metaphysic is misguided.

<sup>35</sup> *Haer.* 2.25.1 (Unger, 82; SC 294:250).

*argumento* (“underlying argument” or “system”). Typological exegesis, according to Irenaeus, must be consonant with a *subiacenti ueritatis argumento* (“underlying system of truth”). The appropriate exegetical parameters for typology or any other exegetical tool are provided by the *regula ueritatis* underlying the textual connections. After all, “all things are from the one and same God.” Irenaeus does not model a reader-oriented interpretation or a subjectivist exegetical impulse. Quite the contrary, Irenaeus interprets Scripture with the truth of the God who spoke Scripture. Hamilton’s ambition is laudable. He rightly takes Scripture seriously on its own terms as God’s inspired Word. However, what he seeks to establish by appeal to human authorial intent, namely exegetical guardrails, Irenaeus finds in the underlying theological metaphysic of Scripture.

### **θεὸς and Κύριος**

Perhaps the clearest and most germane example of the relationship between signs and things occurs in *Haer.* 3.6–8. Here, Irenaeus explicates the relationship between the signs—θεὸς and Κύριος—and the *res* signified, namely the only true God and Creator of the world. Irenaeus contends that Jesus, in the Gospels, and his apostles through the apostolic writings and teaching would not have used the designation θεὸς or Κύριος unless the term was apt. Irenaeus’s opponents argued that one of the reasons the apostles referred to the lesser “god” with this epithet was it accommodated to their hearers. Irenaeus dismisses this as nonsense. The apostles would not have “named any other God or called any other Lord besides Him who is truly God and Lord of all, as these heretics who are most senseless sophists do.”<sup>36</sup> After all, this would have amounted to offering blindness to the blind, teaching the weak in accordance with their weakness, and promoting error among those caught in error.

The gnostics further posited that the Lord Jesus spoke in parables to reveal the

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<sup>36</sup> *Haer.* 3.5.1 (Unger, 36).

unnamable Father to some while appearing to describe the lesser deity, namely the Demiurge, to others. Irenaeus retorts that this is not the way those who seek to heal and give life instruct.<sup>37</sup> Rather, Jesus and his apostles sought to reveal the truth to those caught in error, not add blindness to already existing blindness. As Christ himself spoke, he came as a physician to those who were sick, for he came not to call righteous but sinners to repentance (cf. Luke 5:31–32). The sick receive healing and the weak are given strength not by continuing in their error but by hearing and receiving the truth:

Ignorance, the mother of all these things, is driven out by knowledge. Therefore, the Lord brought knowledge to His disciples, by which He both cured the ailing and forced sinners away from sin. So He did not speak to them according to their former opinion, nor did He answer them according to the answers expected by the questioners, but according to the salutary doctrine, without hypocrisy and partiality.<sup>38</sup>

Irenaeus provides two examples of the Lord and his apostles teaching in accordance with the truth contrary to the error of hearers. If he can demonstrate that Jesus was perfectly willing to teach contrary to the expectations of his hearers, he is able to undermine the gnostic interpretation that where Jesus appears to contradict gnostic teaching, he was merely accommodating to the ignorance of others. First, the Lord “revealed the Son of God to those of the circumcision.”<sup>39</sup> Second, the apostles revealed the Son of God to the uncircumcision, instructing them to renounce their idolatry. “The apostles, in turn, taught the Gentiles to forsake their empty woods and stones, which they imagined were gods, and to worship the true God who established and made the entire human race, and by means of His creation nourished, increased and strengthened them, and bestowed on them existence.”

At this juncture, Irenaeus firmly declares,

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<sup>37</sup> *Haer.* 3.5.2.

<sup>38</sup> *Haer.* 3.5.2.

<sup>39</sup> *Haer.* 3.5.3.

Therefore, neither the Lord, nor the Holy Spirit, nor the apostles would precisely [*κυρίως/definitive*] and absolutely [*ἀληθῶς/absolute*] ever have named ‘God’ one who is not God unless He truly was God. Nor would they, in their own name [*ex persona*], have called anyone Lord except God the Father who has dominion over all things, and His Son who received from His Father power over all creation.<sup>40</sup>

Irenaeus’s adverbs are noteworthy. He does not claim that the epithets Θεός and Κύριος were never used in Scripture to refer to another besides God the Father and His Son. His claim rather is that the Lord, Holy Spirit, and apostles only ever used these titles *κυρίως/definitive* and *ἀληθῶς/absolute* with reference to God the Father and his Son. Irenaeus’s point is precise.

An example of this occurs in Psalm 110:1 (109:1 LXX), “The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.” Irenaeus concludes that this is an example of “the Father speaking to the Son, who gave to Him the inheritance of the Gentiles and subjected to Him all enemies.” Since the Father is Lord *κυρίως/definitive* and *ἀληθῶς/absolute*, and the Son is Lord *κυρίως/definitive* and *ἀληθῶς/absolute*, the Holy Spirit designated them by the title “Lord.”

Irenaeus is consistent in his interpretation of texts where these titles appear to be used without qualification. For example, he interprets the incident recounted in Genesis 19:24, where “the Lord” rains down fire and sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah from heaven as a reference to the activity of the Son after having spoken to Abraham and received power from the Father to condemn the Sodomites.

Likewise, Irenaeus appeals to Psalm 45:7–8 (44:7–8 LXX), “Your throne, O God, is forever; the scepter of Your kingdom is a scepter of equity. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore, God, your God, has anointed you.” Irenaeus interprets the uses of Θεός in this passage as references to the Son (Θεός) who is anointed and the Father (Θεός) who anoints. The Psalm is an address offered by the

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<sup>40</sup> *Haer.* 3.6.1 (Unger, 38; SC 211:64).

Holy Spirit to the Son with the words about the anointing of the Son (Θεός) by the Father (Θεός).

According to Irenaeus, the Holy Spirit also uses Θεός to describe those who through “the grace of filial adoption” have received the title. However, such instances do not demonstrate the use of the title definitively (κυρίως/*definitive*) and absolutely (ἀληθῶς/*absolute*). Irenaeus provides a few examples of this use. First, he references Psalm 82:1 (81:1 LXX) where the LXX reads that God has taken his place among the συναγωγῆ θεῶν and ἐν μέσῳ . . . θεοῦς he holds judgment. Irenaeus observes, “He is speaking of the Father and the Son, and of those who received the filial adoption; these, however, are the Church [*Ecclesia*], for she is God’s assembly [*synagoga*], which God, that is, the Son, assembled by Himself.”<sup>41</sup> While my purpose is not to defend the exegetical conclusions at which Irenaeus arrives, his decisions may tend to leave the modern interpreter dizzied and astonished by what appears to be a fanciful and overly imaginative reading of the text. After all, surely the ancient Israelite reader of Psalm 82 would have been unable to arrive at these theological conclusions regarding the Father, Son, and the church! However, for Irenaeus, divine ontology, what I am consistently referring to as a doctrine of God or theological metaphysic, is not collapsed into the divine economy. I am not suggesting that historical context did not matter to Irenaeus. That the events really did happen was a commitment of Irenaeus, but the events were divinely interpreted and presented through the God-breathed Scriptures. As a result, the text was not fundamentally an avenue through which Irenaeus had access to the events *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. The Scripture itself was reality because it was sourced in the God who contains all. As a result, what the ancient Israelite reader might have understood from a given passage of Scripture was not primary for Irenaeus. Rather, when Scripture uses the language of God absolutely and definitively, there is only one God to whom the

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<sup>41</sup> *Haer.* 3.6.1 (Unger, 39).

Holy Spirit could be referring. Irenaeus's doctrine of God and the resulting exclusivity of God governed his exegetical conclusions, and the way he approached Scripture as a revelation from, and about, the only true and living God.

Another text to which Irenaeus refers is Psalm 50:1 (49:1 LXX), "The God of gods, the Lord has spoken, and He has summoned the earth." Irenaeus then asks which God is the Spirit describing in the text? He answers the question from the immediate context of Psalm 50:1: "the one of whom He said, God will come manifestly, yea our God, and He will not keep silence," a quotation from Psalm 50:3 (49:3 LXX). This is a reference to the Son "who came to men by a manifestation of Himself." Again, it is not that Irenaeus imagines that the original hearers understood this meaning of the text. Rather, these texts reveal the God who is. Moreover, Irenaeus asks, "Of what gods [is He God]?" His answer is, "Of those of whom He said, *I have said, 'You are gods, sons of the Most High.'*" This quotation of Psalm 82:6 (81:6 LXX) aids Irenaeus's understanding of how the Spirit uses the plural ("gods"). In the end, Irenaeus exegetes Psalm 50:1 ("The God of gods") as a description of the Son in relation to the church.

On the other hand, Irenaeus observes that there are instances where "Scripture calls those gods who really are not."<sup>42</sup> When it does, it does not "present them as gods absolutely, but with certain modification and indication [*προσθηκῆς . . . καὶ σημειώσεως/additamento et significatione*] by which they are shown not to be gods."<sup>43</sup> For example, Irenaeus quotes Psalm 96:5 (95:5 LXX) and Psalm 81:9 (80:10 LXX), which read respectively as quoted by Irenaeus, "The gods of the nations [*Οἱ θεοὶ τῶν ἔθνῶν/Dii gentium*] are idols of the demons,"<sup>44</sup> and "you shall not bow down to foreign

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<sup>42</sup> *Haer.* 3.6.3 (Unger, 39).

<sup>43</sup> *Haer.* 3.6.3 (Unger, 39; SC 211:70–71).

<sup>44</sup> *Haer.* 3.6.3 (Unger, 39; SC 211:70–71).

gods [θεῶν ἄλλοτριῶν/*Deos alienos*].”<sup>45</sup> Irenaeus aptly observes that qualifiers such as τῶν ἔθνῶν and ἄλλοτριῶν in the text indicate that the referent or thing signified by the sign “gods” excludes them from being the one, true God.

Noteworthy is Irenaeus’s belief in the harmony and unity of Scripture’s testimony.<sup>46</sup> While his gnostic opponents may interpret such statements as sourced in various divine authors such as the ignorant Demiurge who erroneously claims exclusivity, Irenaeus’s doctrine of God does not permit a theological metaphysic alien to the biblical text. After all, Scripture is a revelational unity sourced in the one God who created all things. Irenaeus’s monotheism and the resulting harmony of Scripture licenses him to move seamlessly from one text to another, substantiating his exegetical insights concerning the relationship between the sign “God” or “gods” and the thing signified, namely the only God, Father, and Creator of all things along with his divine Son.

Irenaeus suggests that the use of “gods” to refer to what are not gods is intentional. In addition to observing various ways the Holy Spirit qualifies or modifies the sign “gods” to indicate the referent, Irenaeus comments that the biblical author “uses the name [i.e., “gods”] so that we might know of whom he speaks.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, to refuse to use the “sign” that is commonly employed with reference to so-called gods is to fail to communicate effectively. Rather than creating ambiguity or confusion, Irenaeus contends that Scripture uses the signs or terms commonly employed and accepted for the purpose of clarity. However, he does this, as mentioned above, with the necessary qualifications to clearly instruct that these “gods” are gods in name only.

After presenting a cluster of texts, which demonstrate the scriptural use of “gods” with qualification to unequivocally refer to those who are not God absolutely,

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<sup>45</sup> *Haer.* 3.6.3 (Unger, 39; SC 211:70–73).

<sup>46</sup> I introduced the harmony of Scripture as a characteristic of Irenaeus’s approach to Scripture on account of his doctrine of God in chap. 4, but it bears repeating here.

<sup>47</sup> *Haer.* 3.6.3 (Unger, 39).

Irenaeus erupts in spontaneous prayer. His prayer, triggered by the supplication of Elijah on Mount Carmel, consists of a request for God to make known to the readers of *Haer.* that he alone is God and above him there is no other God. Irenaeus believes that his engagement with the gnostics demands the divine work of the only true and living God to make himself known so that those to whom God makes himself known may separate themselves from the heretical doctrines of the gnostics. Irenaeus interprets his context as fundamentally a contest between the only true God and spurious gods. This prompts Irenaeus to pray,

Therefore, I too call upon You, O Lord, God of Abraham, and God of Isaac and God of Jacob and Israel, who are the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God who because of the multitude of Your mercies has shown Your good pleasure toward us that we might know You; who made heaven and earth, who has dominion over all things; who are the only true God, above whom there is no other God. Through our Lord Jesus Christ grant the gift of the Holy Spirit, and grant that everyone who reads this writing [*scripturam*] may know You, that You alone are God, and may be strengthened in You, and may separate himself from every heretical, godless, and impious doctrine.<sup>48</sup>

Thus far, Irenaeus's scriptural proofs of this distinction between the use of the sign "God" or "gods," and the thing signified, had come from the Old Testament. This is not insignificant since by so doing Irenaeus demonstrates that all Scripture bears testimony to the same God. He then shifts to quoting from portions of the apostolic writings, or the New Testament, to corroborate his thesis.

He appeals initially to Galatians 4:8–9. "Likewise, when the apostle Paul said, *Formerly . . . you were in bondage to beings that by nature were not gods; but now that you have come to know God*, he separated those who were not [gods] from Him who is God."<sup>49</sup> Irenaeus observes that Paul also speaks of "so-called" gods. Paul does this, according to Irenaeus, in recognition that a so-called god is treated as a god by "those who are ignorant of God." Perhaps as lucid as any text to which Irenaeus could refer his

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<sup>48</sup> *Haer.* 3.6.4 (Unger, 40).

<sup>49</sup> *Haer.* 3.6.5 (Unger, 40).

readers is 1 Corinthians 8:4–6. As Irenaeus quotes, “*We know that an idol has no real existence, and that there is no God but one. For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth . . . yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and for whom we exist; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we exist.*” This text proves especially significant for Irenaeus since it demonstrates that when Paul uses Θεός and Κύριος “precisely and absolutely,” he is referring to the Father and the Son respectively. The apostle Paul both distinguishes and separates “those who are called gods, but really are not, from the one God the Father, from whom are all things.” Additionally, according to Irenaeus, “he [Paul], in his own name [*ex sua persona*],<sup>50</sup> most firmly acknowledged the one Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>51</sup> Quite contrary to gnostic belief in esoteric and secret teaching that sits under, behind, and ultimately contrary to the biblical text, Irenaeus believes that Paul spoke plainly concerning the true God and His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Irenaeus’s opponents interpret the phrase, “in heaven or on earth” as a reference to “the makers of the world” or *mundi fabricators*.<sup>52</sup> This is erroneous. Instead, the reference to so-called gods in heaven or on earth is comparable to Moses proscription against the construction of idols or images “of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.”<sup>53</sup> As Irenaeus explains, Moses identifies what the things in heaven are, namely the sun, moon, stars, and all the hosts of heaven (Deut 4:19). Paul carefully distinguishes the Creator from creation—the only true God and everything else through his use of things in heaven and on earth.

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<sup>50</sup> SC 211:78. The Greek has ἐξ ἰδίου προώπου. Unger has observed that Irenaeus uses this prepositional phrase six times in *Haer.* bk. 3 (6.1; 6.3; 6.5; 9.1; 10.1; 10.5), and twice in bk. 5 (both in 25.2). Unger provides a discussion of the possible meanings of this phrase, determining that the phrase is related to actors who did not wear a mask but spoke “in their own name” (Unger, 133–34n1).

<sup>51</sup> *Haer.* 3.6.5 (Unger, 40).

<sup>52</sup> SC 211:78.

<sup>53</sup> *Haer.* 3.6.5, quoting Exod 20:4 and Deut 5:8.

Again, there exists a fundamental and metaphysical distinction between God and everything else that undergirds all that Scripture reveals.

*“The God of This World”*

In chapter 7, Irenaeus exposit 2 Corinthians 4:4, and the particular referent or thing to which the sign ὁ θεὸς τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου points. Although the gnostics identified Demiurge as the thing to which the sign θεὸς points in 2 Corinthians 4:4, Irenaeus advances the interpretation that Paul refers to the only true God and Creator of all things by the phrase ὁ θεὸς τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου. Apparently, this text was one of the proof texts among Irenaeus’s opponents who sought to demonstrate that “there is one God ‘of this world’ and another who is above every dominion and principality and power.”<sup>54</sup>

Irenaeus’s argument proceeds in two stages. First, he offers what he considers to be the proper understanding of 2 Corinthians 4:4 by appeal to the literary tool known as “hyperbaton” or *hyperbatis*.<sup>55</sup> This literary device consists of the transposition of words for the sake of emphasis. Second, he demonstrates that *hyperbatis* is not unique to this instance in Paul but appears to be a literary device Paul made use of elsewhere.

The issue at hand is how to read Paul. Irenaeus writes concerning the gnostics, *ne quidem legere Paulum sciunt*.<sup>56</sup> Read within the context of Irenaeus’s discussion of the relationship between the unqualified and absolute use of the signs θεὸς and Κύριος, the gnostics go awry in their exegesis on account of an erroneous doctrine of God. They import their understanding of who God is into the biblical text thereby identifying a different God than the one about whom Paul wrote. Their error was exegetical in nature. However, the exegetical error was the consequence of a faulty theological metaphysic.

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<sup>54</sup> *Haer.* 3.7.1 (Unger, 41).

<sup>55</sup> The Greek is ὑπερβατοῖς.

<sup>56</sup> *Haer.* 3.7.1 (SC 211:80).

Irenaeus's exegesis of 2 Corinthians 4:4 is sophisticated and thoroughly theological. After all, the exegetical observations he makes revolve around the importance of identifying the right God—the God about whom Paul was writing. However, Irenaeus does not sacrifice meticulous attention to grammatical or syntactical detail in the biblical text. After all, his conclusion hinges on the assumed placement of a pause or comma in Paul's statement and identifying the correct substantive, which the modifier ("of this world") qualifies.

Irenaeus's gnostic opponents interpret the modifier "of this world" to modify the substantive "God." In this case, the sign (ΘΕὸς) points to the existence of a God ("the God of this world") distinct from the God who is above all things. Irenaeus rebuffs this interpretation as a failure to see that one should perceive a pause after "God" in the text, indicating that the modifier, "of this world," qualifies a subsequent substantive. As a result, the "true sense" of the verse is, "*God has blinded the minds of the unbelievers of this world.*"<sup>57</sup> In this interpretation, the reason for the transposition of the phrase "of this world" to the front of the verse is not to relate it to God. Rather, Paul moves it to the front in order to emphatically demonstrate that those who are blinded are "of this world." As a result, Irenaeus concludes, "Paul is not speaking of *the God of this world*, as if he knew of some other above Him. God he acknowledges as God."<sup>58</sup>

In *Haer.* 3.7.2, Irenaeus provides two other examples of transposition in Paul's writings. The first is Galatians 3:19, which Irenaeus quotes as, "*Why then was the law of works? It was added . . . until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made; it was ordained by angels through an intermediary.*"<sup>59</sup> The participial phrase,

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<sup>57</sup> *Haer.* 3.7.1 (Unger, 41).

<sup>58</sup> *Haer.* 3.7.1 (Unger, 41).

<sup>59</sup> Unger, 42.

διαταγείς δι' ἀγγέλων, apparently modifies ὁ νόμος. However, the latter occurs much later in the syntax of the verse, providing an example of transposition.

The second is 2 Thessalonians 2:8–9, where Paul describes the “lawless one” (or antichrist). Irenaeus quotes the verse as follows: “*And the lawless one will be revealed, and the Lord Jesus will slay him with the breath of His mouth, and destroy him by His appearing and His coming, . . . whose coming by the activity of Satan will be with all power and pretended signs and wonders.*”<sup>60</sup> The interpreter may easily misinterpret the meaning of the verse if he simply follows the precise word order. According to the word order, the relative clause, “whose coming by the activity of Satan will be with all power and pretended signs and wonders,” appears to modify “the Lord Jesus.” In other words, failing to identifying the transposition of the words results in a misinterpretation of the text. In this case, the word order has been transposed to demonstrate emphasis. Irenaeus observes, “Certainly, he does not say that the coming of the Lord will be by the activity of Satan, but the coming of the lawless one, whom we also call the Antichrist.”<sup>61</sup> Irenaeus states that the proper antecedent of the relative pronoun οὗ modifies “the lawless one.” Irenaeus’s attention to syntactical detail is apparent in his exegesis. However, exegesis *merely* based on syntax and grammar will not ensure that the interpreter arrives at the proper conclusions. As Irenaeus demonstrates time and again, proper exegetical conclusions are the product of the proper theological system.

Although Irenaeus promises the reader (at the conclusion of *Haer.* 3.7.1) evidence from Paul regarding how the only true God has blinded the mind of the unbelievers (as Paul states in 2 Cor 4:4), Irenaeus does not present this evidence in book 3. However, he does fulfill his promise in *Haer.* 4.29. After appealing to the purpose of parables in the Gospels, Irenaeus proposes, “Surely, one and the same God [*Unus enim et*

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<sup>60</sup> *Haer.* 3.7.2 (Unger, 42).

<sup>61</sup> *Haer.* 3.7.2 (Unger, 42).

*idem Dominus*],<sup>62</sup> on the one hand, blinds those who do not believe and who set him at naught.”<sup>63</sup> Irenaeus’s theological foil is apparent. There are not different Gods, one responsible for hardening Pharaoh and another responsible for granting revelation leading to reception and life. The same God hardens Pharaoh and grants revelation received by others. The gnostics interpolate a doctrine of God extrinsic, and contrary to, the biblical text. Irenaeus appeals to the illustration of the sun which “affects those who because of a defect in the eyes cannot look at its light.” On the other hand, God gives “a fuller and greater illumination of the mind to those who believe in him and follow him.” According to Irenaeus, the same revelation from God has differing effects on two groups of people. The gnostics located the distinction between those who are blinded and those who see in the nature of the human persons, some possessing a nature to know and embrace the esoteric knowledge taught in secret, and others possessing a lower nature incapable of attaining such knowledge. On the other hand, Irenaeus located the difference in the differing human responses to the ubiquitous revelation of the one and only God. In other words, the distinction rests in the will of the human person and the consequences of the work of God. God blinds those who do not believe. Noteworthy is Irenaeus’s contention that the two groups of people—those who believe and those who do not—receive the same revelation from God. Irenaeus then quotes passages illustrative of God actively blinding or hardening unbelievers (2 Cor 4:4; Rom 1:28; and 2 Thess 2:11–12). Irenaeus’s explanation consists of an appeal to God’s foreknowledge of all things. As the one who knows all things in advance, God “hands over to their unbelief all whom he knows to be unbelievers, and turns his face from such and leaves them in the darkness that they chose for themselves.”<sup>64</sup> For this reason, there is nothing unusual about

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<sup>62</sup> SC 100:766. *ANF* also translated the *Dominus* “God” (*ANF*, 10:502). The Greek reads, εἰς καὶ ὁ αὐτὸς Κύριος.

<sup>63</sup> *Haer.* 2.29.1 (Unger, 93).

<sup>64</sup> *Haer.* 4.29.2 (Unger, 83).

instances like Pharaoh when God hands someone over to their unbelief who would never believe in God. In this sense, God does not author the unbelief, but hands the unbeliever over to the unbelief that the unbeliever authored.

Although Irenaeus's exegesis of 2 Corinthians 4:4 is fascinating, my ambition is not to defend his exegetical conclusion that the referent, θεός (in 2 Cor 4:4), is the one and only God. Rather, I aim to demonstrate the consistency of Irenaeus's application of the relationship between signs and things, especially relative to θεός and Κύριος. Distinct from some modern exegetical practices, Irenaeus prioritizes the doctrine of God, which includes divine exclusivity, or monotheism, in a context where, according to Irenaeus, Paul employs θεός absolutely. He does so over normative syntax and the relationship between θεός and τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου.

To be sure, an interpreter can affirm Irenaeus's basic contention regarding the use of θεός absolutely and precisely as exclusively a reference to the only God, and still interpret θεός in 2 Corinthians 4:4 as a reference to another being rather than the one and only God. After all, if the interpreter understands Paul to qualify θεός by the phrase "of this world," then it is possible to suggest that the sheer qualification demonstrates that Paul does not use θεός absolutely in this text. Given Irenaeus's exegetical scheme, in particular his distinction between θεός used *absolute* and θεός used with *additamento et significatione*, he would have been justified in concluding that Paul used θεός in a couple of different ways in 2 Corinthians 4:4. On the one hand, Paul uses θεός absolutely to refer to the only true God when he refers to the "image of God." On the other hand, Paul uses θεός with the qualifier, τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου, to indicate one who is not God. This would be similar to other texts, which Irenaeus interprets as referring to so-called gods through the use of θεός. However, in Irenaeus's mind, this would be ceding too much theological ground to his opponents.

Irenaeus's polemical context informed him greatly. Gnostic theological speculation included the proposition that there was a lesser "God of this world," or

Demiurge, about whom portions of Scripture speak and the Supreme Father or Profundity revealed esoterically through enigmatic portions of Scripture, but more plainly understood through extrabiblical teaching. Their theological heresy was the context out of which Irenaeus interpreted texts like 2 Corinthians 4:4. Additionally, as I have shown in chapter 4, Irenaeus's exegetical foundation included the harmony of Scripture. Since all Scripture comes from the only true God, all Scripture is a harmonious revelation of this God. For this reason, Irenaeus interpreted 2 Corinthians 4:4 alongside other passages where a similar blinding, hardening, or obscuring occurs under the sovereign work of God and the rebellion of unbelievers.

### **The Inspiration of Scripture**

Both Irenaeus and his opponents were informed by their understanding of the nature of Scripture. According to Irenaeus, the only true God was the author of Scripture. The proofs to which Irenaeus appeals regarding who God is contrary to the gnostics are taken from *Scripturis diuinis*.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, divine Scripture testifies to God and his divine Word.<sup>66</sup> Irenaeus's writings are replete with the fundamental Christian belief in the divine inspiration of Scripture. But what about the gnostics? Did they differ from Irenaeus concerning the divine nature of Scripture? It does not appear that there was any substantial difference between Irenaeus's view of the divine nature of Scripture and the view espoused by the gnostics. The divide between Irenaeus and his opponents occurred at the level of the identity and nature of the God who inspired Scripture. In other words, the fundamental demarcation between Irenaeus and the gnostics was in their diverging doctrines of God.

For example, in Irenaeus's illustration of the mosaic properly arranged to

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<sup>65</sup> *Haer.* 2.35.4 (SC 294:366).

<sup>66</sup> *Haer.* 3.19.2 (SC 211:376, 378).

portray the image of a king, he does not vilify the gnostics for overtly rejecting the tesserae of Scripture.<sup>67</sup> Rather, he vilifies them for improperly arranging and interpreting the tesserae to picture not the image of a king but the image of a dog or a fox. They apparently received Scripture as divinely authored. However, they improperly arranged the Scriptures in their exegesis with the result that they rejected the one and only God revealed in the Scriptures. After all, they sought “to appropriate from the Scriptures” in accordance with their heresy.<sup>68</sup>

Although they rejected the meaning of the Scriptures as summarized in the *regula*, it was nevertheless the true sense of the Scriptures that they claimed to believe. According to Irenaeus, they even “deceive themselves, because they try to set up their fabrication by misusing the Scriptures.”<sup>69</sup> The gnostics did not deny the words, phrases, and names contained in the divine Scriptures. Rather, Irenaeus claimed that they “wrest each of the sayings from the Truth. They misuse the names and transfer them to their own system.”<sup>70</sup> In their exegesis, “they mistreat the Scripture.”<sup>71</sup> Irenaeus uses the example of a Homeric cento to illustrate the way the gnostics abuse the Scriptures. In his illustration, the gnostics pluck each portion of Homeric verse from their proper context and rearrange them alongside others communicating an entirely new “truth.” The gnostics, as a result, “gather together sayings, and names from scattered places and transfer them . . . from their natural meaning to an unnatural one.”<sup>72</sup> Again, Irenaeus does not take issue with their view of the nature of Scripture per se. He takes issues with their theological system and, therefore, their arrangement of the Scriptures.

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<sup>67</sup> *Haer.* 1.8.1.

<sup>68</sup> *Haer.* 1.8.2 (Unger, 41).

<sup>69</sup> *Haer.* 1.9.1 (Unger, 45).

<sup>70</sup> *Haer.* 1.9.2 (Unger, 46).

<sup>71</sup> *Haer.* 1.9.3 (Unger, 47).

<sup>72</sup> *Haer.* 1.9.4 (Unger, 47).

The gnostics fabricated another God but they did so not by renouncing the divine authority of or inspiration of Scripture. They did so by ostensibly accepting Scripture's divine origin. Their error included the attempt "to explain ambiguous, scriptural passages."<sup>73</sup> "Seeking to explain the Scriptures and parables, [they] introduce another, greater God above the God who is Creator of the world."<sup>74</sup> Their error occurred at the level of theology proper rather than fundamentally at the level of bibliology.

According to Irenaeus, the divine inspiration of the Scripture is the belief that the Scriptures were sourced in the one God and Creator of the world. In other words, the correct view of biblical inspiration is inseparable from a correct view of God. The gnostics, as I have argued, advocated divine inspiration. However, their view was accompanied by an entirely different doctrine of God. As a result, the God revealed in some locations of the Scriptures was not the same God as the one revealed in other locations. This is why Irenaeus described them as arriving "at the point where they say that the God who is preached differs from the one who is presented as Father in the parables and enigmas."<sup>75</sup> According to Irenaeus, all the Scripture [*omnis Scriptura*] given us by God harmonizes [*consonans*].<sup>76</sup> Whereas Irenaeus received every portion of Scripture as a revelation from the one and only God, his opponents maintained "that the apostles mixed with the Savior's words matter from the law, and that not only the apostles but the Lord Himself gave discourses derived at times from the Demiurge, at others from the Intermediate Region, and at yet others from the Highest Authority."<sup>77</sup> In other words, although Scripture is divinely inspired in the gnostic view, not all of

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<sup>73</sup> *Haer.* 2.10.1 (Unger, 36).

<sup>74</sup> *Haer.* 2.10.2 (Unger, 36).

<sup>75</sup> *Haer.* 2.27.2 (Unger, 86).

<sup>76</sup> *Haer.* 2.28.3 (Unger, 88; SC 294:276).

<sup>77</sup> *Haer.* 3.2.2 (Unger, 31).

Scripture is equally inspired. Some portions of Scripture reveal “the Highest Authority,” or the Supreme Father, while others reveal the lesser Demiurge. As observed in chapter 3, Irenaeus approached Scripture as a unified and harmonious revelation of the one, true God. The gnostics, on the other hand, approached Scripture as a discordant divine revelation revealing various Aeons and the Supreme Father. According to the gnostics, the interpretive key for ascertaining the true sense of the Scriptures was esoterically expressed in parables and enigmas within Scripture and occurred perspicuously within other gnostic sources, or ἐξ ἀγράφων ἀναγινῶσκοντες.<sup>78</sup>

### **Prosopological Exegesis**

Having considered the inspiration of Scripture in both Irenaeus and the gnostics, and having located the difference between Irenaeus and his opponents in their theology proper and not their bibliology per se, I now turn to an example of the way the doctrine of God emerges in one of the common exegetical methods of the early church. This method has received the title “prosopological exegesis.”

Scholarly interest in prosopological exegesis has burgeoned alongside the renewed interest in the development of early trinitarianism. In what follows, I define prosopological exegesis, briefly trace the development of interest among scholars, and consider how Irenaeus’s use of this reading strategy reflects the exegetical governance of his doctrine of God.

### **Definition of Prosopological Exegesis**

Matthew Bates has provided as helpful of a definition of this exegetical method as any. Bates posits,

Prosopological exegesis is a reading technique whereby an interpreter seeks to overcome a real or perceived ambiguity regarding the identity of the speakers or addressees (or both) in the divinely inspired source text by assigning nontrivial

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<sup>78</sup> *Haer.* 1.8.1 (SC 264:112).

prosōpa (i.e., nontrivial vis-à-vis the ‘plain sense’ of the text) to the speakers or addressees (or both) in order to make sense of the text.<sup>79</sup>

Prosopological exegesis seeks to identify the “persons” or *prosōpa* in a biblical text, especially when the text is dialogical in nature.

Timothy Scott Willis has offered a caveat to Bates’s explication of prosopological exegesis.<sup>80</sup> Whereas Bates describes prosopological exegesis as a subset of theodramatic interpretation,<sup>81</sup> Willis contends that any distinction between the two is arbitrary and did not exist in the mind of the ancient exegete.

One of the more prominent texts in early Christianity, which provides insight into the ancient exegetical mind, is found in Justin Martyr. In *1 Apol.* 36, Justin observes,

But when you hear the sayings of the prophets spoken as in the person [προσώπου] of someone, you must not suppose that they are spoken by the inspired persons themselves, but by the divine Word who moves them. For sometimes He speaks things that are to happen, in the manner of one who foretells the future; sometimes He speaks as in the person [προσώπου] of God the Master and Father of all; sometimes as in the person [προσώπου] of Christ; sometimes as in the person [προσώπου] of the people answering the Lord or his Father, just as you can see even in your own writers, one man being the composer of the whole, but introducing the persons [πρόσωπα] who converse.<sup>82</sup>

According to Justin, the writers of Scripture, or “prophets,” spoke not “by the inspired persons themselves”<sup>83</sup> (or ἂπ’ αὐτῶν τῶν ἐμπεπνευσμένων<sup>84</sup>) but from “the divine

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<sup>79</sup> Matthew W. Bates, *The Hermeneutics of the Apostolic Proclamation: The Center of Paul’s Method of Scriptural Interpretation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 218.

<sup>80</sup> Timothy Scott Willis, “Who Is the King of Glory? Identifying and Explaining Two Examples of Patristic Prosopological Exegesis with a Brief Critique of Matthew Bates,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 18, no. 2 (2024): 209–22. According to Willis, who builds upon the work of Bates, Bates “constrains” the phenomenon “to include only texts in which the prophet takes on another *prosopon* in order to speak as someone else” (219). In the end, Willis concludes, “I believe a simpler and more effective taxonomy of the hermeneutical phenomenon is in order” (221). Willis’s point is valid. However, as I demonstrate below, Willis does not drill deep enough (below a preoccupation with exegetical method to an interest in theological metaphysics), and therefore does not quite identify the theological substructure upon which Irenaeus is able to employ prosopological exegesis.

<sup>81</sup> Matthew W. Bates, *The Birth of the Trinity: Jesus, God, and Spirit in New Testament and Early Christian Interpretations of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 35.

<sup>82</sup> *1 Apol.* 36 (Barnard, 48; SC 507:224).

<sup>83</sup> *1 Apol.* 36 (Barnard, 48).

<sup>84</sup> *1 Apol.* 36 (SC 507:224).

Word” who moved them to speak or write Scripture. Moreover, Justin suggests that this exegetical tool is relevant primarily in dialogical contexts where “the persons . . . converse.”

Irenaeus provides a similar albeit less robust definition than his predecessor in *Epid.* 49, while explaining the Christological significance of Psalm 110 (109 LXX). He writes, “Since David says, ‘the Lord says to me,’ it is necessary to affirm that it is not David nor any other one of the prophets, who speaks from himself—for it is not man who utters prophecies—but [that] the Spirit of God, conforming Himself to the person concerned, spoke in the prophets, producing words sometimes from Christ and at other times from the Father.”<sup>85</sup>

Stephen Presley offers a treatment of prosopological exegesis in his summary of the biblical theology of the fathers. He explains,

Early Christian interpreters were attentive to the identity and activity of the Son in the Scriptures, especially in the Old Testament. Any persons presented with divine attributes were subjected to close theological scrutiny. Such interpreters were always attentive to the ways in which texts could help illuminate the nature of God and the relations of persons within the Trinity. They did not always agree, but they always strove to read in ways that were worthy of God or reflected a true understanding of the relationship of the Father and the Son. They were always watchful for the antecedents of pronouns, titles, and figures in the Scriptures. The identification of these antecedents is not always straightforward and is often influenced by the immediate literary context, in conversation with any actions associated with these pronouns, titles, and figures.<sup>86</sup>

Presley continues, “The word *person* (Greek *prosōpon*) was one of the earliest terms used to describe the nature of the person and work of God. The key is that the fathers assume a Trinitarian doctrine of God, and based on this assumption, they try to make sense of the divine titles and activities within Scripture.”

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<sup>85</sup> *Epid.* 49 (Behr, 73).

<sup>86</sup> Presley, *Biblical Theology in Life of Early Church*, 101.

Noteworthy is the overtly theological nature of this exegetical method. When attempting to identify the divine persons speaking within a given biblical text, the interpreter necessarily operates within an existing theological system.

### Scholarly Treatments

Treatments of prosopological exegesis abound. However, I will narrow my engagement to the primary contributors to treatments of prosopological exegesis among scholars of early Christianity. These primary contributors are Carl Andresen, Marie-Josèphe Rondeau, Michael Slusser, and Matthew Bates.

In a pioneering article written in 1961, Andresen provided the scholarly field of research awareness of what he termed “*prosopographische Exegese*.”<sup>87</sup> In the article, Andresen provided a corrective to Harnack by positing that the development of “the trinitarian conception of person” (*des trinitarischen Personbegriffes*) was informed by an exegetical method exemplified in Tertullian with recourse to other ancient authors. For Andresen, Tertullian did not invent Trinitarian personhood. However, such personhood grew out of a complex ancient exegetical method that sought to identify various *persona* in the source-text. Rondeau followed Andresen’s work by introducing the now prominent designation *exégèse prosopologique* (or “prosopological exegesis”) in place of *prosopographische Exegese*, an epithet more appropriate according to Rondeau since the method sought to identify speakers in a given text. In her work, Rondeau provided an analysis of patristic exegesis of the Psalms.<sup>88</sup> Presley prefers the former title offered by Andresen since it provides a “more general description focusing on the identity of the person (*prosōpon*), who is either speaking or acting in a text (*graphē*).”<sup>89</sup> However,

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<sup>87</sup> Carl Andresen, “Zur Entstehung und Geschichte des Trinitarischen Personbegriffes,” *ZNW* 52, nos. 1–2 (1961).

<sup>88</sup> Marie-Josèphe Rondeau, *Les Commentaires Patristiques Du Psautier: IIIe-Ve Siècles*, OrChrAn 220 (Rome: Pont. Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1982).

<sup>89</sup> Presley, *Biblical Theology in Life of Early Church*, 102.

Presley opts for the general descriptor “personal” to refer to the exegetical reflex among the fathers to find divine persons acting or speaking in a given text.

On the shoulders of Andresen’s and Rondeau’s research, Slusser theorized that the method of identifying the person speaking, the person spoken to, or the person spoken about, otherwise known as prosopological exegesis, “provided the early Christian thinkers with a way to talk about God in a Trinitarian fashion.”<sup>90</sup> Moreover, Slusser posited that this person-centered method of exegesis informed other doctrinal discussions, including the Christological controversies of the later fourth and fifth centuries.

Perhaps most notable of all, Bates has produced the most thorough treatment to date on prosopological exegesis in two installments. In his first book on the topic, *The Hermeneutics of the Apostolic Proclamation*,<sup>91</sup> Bates introduces this reading strategy into the study of Pauline hermeneutics as an exegetical method employed by the Apostle but neglected within contemporary Pauline scholarship. As indicated in the definition above, Bates summarizes four criteria for identifying prosopological exegesis: (1) the presence of speech or dialogue, (2) nontriviality of person,<sup>92</sup> (3) the priority of introducing formulae or markers, and (4) intertextual evidence.

Although *Hermeneutics* includes some references and discussions concerning prosopological exegesis in the early Christian fathers, Bates’s primary interest is investigating the Pauline corpus. In his second deposit, *The Birth of the Trinity*, Bates turned his attention to the first few centuries of the Christian church, contending that “a

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<sup>90</sup> Michael Slusser, “The Exegetical Roots of Trinitarian Theology,” *Theological Studies* 49, no. 3 (1988): 475.

<sup>91</sup> Bates, *Hermeneutics of Apostolic Proclamation*.

<sup>92</sup> By this criterion of nontriviality Bates communicates that there must be a real or perceived ambiguity in the pre-text regarding the identity of the *prosopon*. Bates explains further that “if there is no real or perceived ambiguity in the identity of the *prosopon* which can be presupposed, the exegesis is in accordance to the ‘plain sense’ of the pre-text and does not warrant special comment or the prosopological label.” Bates, *Hermeneutics of Apostolic Proclamation*, 219.

specific ancient reading technique, best termed prosopological exegesis, that is evidenced in the NT and other early Christian writings, was irreducibly essential to the birth of the Trinity.”<sup>93</sup> Although Bates includes a succession of early Christian exegetes in order to substantiate his thesis, he provides extensive treatment of none of them.<sup>94</sup>

Bates has received some criticism. For example, Hamilton proposes that Bates has fallen prey to an “arbitrary, non-contextual, exegetically unwarranted interpretive practice.”<sup>95</sup> In response to Bates’s interpretation of Hebrews 2:12 as an example of prosopological exegesis, Hamilton accuses Bates of suggesting that the Hebrews author was making “the text of the Old Testament say what he wants it to say.”<sup>96</sup> Hamilton provides additional criticisms of Bates throughout his work.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Bates, *Birth of the Trinity*, 2. By “birth of the Trinity,” Bates explains that he does not intend the beginning of an ontological reality, but rather the “initial sociolinguistic framing of the doctrine in human history by the nascent church” (4).

<sup>94</sup> There are other treatments of prosopological exegesis which have impacted my own thinking on this topic. For example, Presley has interacted with the use of prosopological exegesis in Irenaeus and his opponents. While applauding the work of Andresen, Rondeau, and Slusser, Presley notes that “Irenaeus receives minimal treatment” among these authors. Stephen Presley, “Irenaeus and the Exegetical Roots of Trinitarian Theology,” in *Irenaeus: Life, Scripture, Legacy*, ed. Paul Foster and Sara Parvis (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 166. Robert Heine has engaged Origen’s interpretation of the Psalms, demonstrating various prosopological assignments. Ronald E. Heine, *Reading the Old Testament with the Ancient Church: Exploring the Formation of Early Christian Thought*, Evangelical Ressourcement: Ancient Sources for the Church’s Future (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 154–63. Heine communicates this exegetical strategy lucidly, including an interaction with Rondeau’s assessment of the Psalms. In addition to Presley’s and Heine’s work, Kyle R. Hughes has composed an extensive treatment of prosopological exegesis as it relates to the Holy Spirit in which he identifies the Spirit as a primary speaking agent and not merely a secondary inspiring agent. Kyle R. Hughes, *The Trinitarian Testimony of the Spirit: Prosopological Exegesis and the Development of Pre-Nicene Pneumatology*, SVC 147 (Boston: Brill, 2018). Michael Cameron has called attention to prosopological in Augustine’s interpretation of the Psalms. Michael Cameron, *Christ Meets Me Everywhere: Augustine’s Early Figurative Exegesis*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 165–212. Cameron distinguishes between prosopological exegesis and *prosopopoeia*. In the former, the voices in the Psalter do not merely “speak about Christ” but “Christ himself speaks” (Cameron, 171). In the latter, the psalmist impersonates the voice of another (Cameron, 179). According to Cameron, “While prosopological exegesis is the work of a text’s interpreter, *prosopopoeia* is the literary device of a text’s author” (Cameron, 180).

<sup>95</sup> Hamilton, *Typology*, 144.

<sup>96</sup> Hamilton, *Typology*, 144.

<sup>97</sup> See Hamilton, *Typology*, 144–45, 175, 181, and 194–95.

## Prosopological Exegesis in Irenaeus

There are two texts in the Psalms that provide helpful illustrations for the way Irenaeus embraced and practiced prosopological exegesis.<sup>98</sup> These texts are Psalm 24 and Psalm 110 (Pss 23;109 LXX). In what follows, I seek to exposit a few selections from Irenaeus's work in which he interprets these psalms prosopologically within the parameters of his theological system.

In *Haer.* 3.16.8, Irenaeus alludes to Psalm 24. He observes concerning John the apostle, “He knows one and the same Jesus Christ, to whom the gates of heaven [*portae caeli/αἱ πύλαι τοῦ οὐρανοῦ*] were opened because of His bodily assumption [*carnalem eius adsumptionem/διὰ τὴν ἔνσαρκον αὐτοῦ ἀνάληψιν*]. He will also come in the same flesh in which He suffered, in order to reveal the glory of the Father.”<sup>99</sup> Irenaeus interprets ὁ βασιλεὺς τῆς δόξης spoken about in Psalm 24:8 as the ascended Lord Jesus. After all, David identifies this King of glory as κύριος κραταιὸς καὶ δυνατός, κύριος δυνατὸς ἐν πολέμῳ. Given that David appears to use κύριος absolutely, he must be speaking about the Lord Jesus. While Irenaeus does not explicitly include an exposition of the larger context of the psalm here, it is reasonable to assume that Irenaeus would have been familiar with the surrounding portions of text. Earlier in the psalm, David provides a description of the hill of *YHWH* (τοῦ κυρίου, LXX). The question is posed, “Who shall ascend the hill (τοῦ κυρίου)? The answer is not

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<sup>98</sup> Presley has offered a brief treatment of prosopological exegesis in Irenaeus in Presley, “Irenaeus and Exegetical Roots of Trinitarian Theology.” Presley concludes that while Irenaeus practiced this exegetical method, he did not do so with the same degree of frequency as other patristic authors did. This is especially noteworthy given Irenaeus's engagement with dialogical texts, which lend themselves to this exegetical reading strategy. Presley's conclusion regarding the cause of this infrequency in Irenaeus is the exegetical tendencies of his gnostic opponents. The gnostics employed prosopological exegesis as a tool for identifying various divine figures in their protological system. While Presley's observations are intriguing, his expectations regarding frequency are unjustified. After all, one's expectations regarding appropriate frequency can easily become Procrustean regarding the degree to which Irenaeus might or should have practiced a particular exegetical method leading to considerations about motivations for not doing so. Additionally, if prosopological exegesis has suffered from an overly narrow definition alongside a misguided interest in method, perhaps Irenaeus practices prosopological exegesis more frequently than some have recognized. I agree with Willis, namely that prosopological exegesis suffers within modern treatments from a truncated definition. For example, it does not appear that Irenaeus would have demarcated his exegesis of Ps 110:1 (109:1 LXX) from his exegesis of Ps 24 (23 LXX).

<sup>99</sup> *Haer.* 3.16.8 (Unger, 83; SC 211:321).

completely given until verses 7 through 10, where the gates (πύλας) are opened to receive the King of glory who also is κύριος. Irenaeus interprets the κύριος entering the gates as the ascended Lord Jesus, the only one for whom the description is appropriate.

Irenaeus provides a far more robust engagement with this same text in *Epid.*

84:

David again says the same thing, “Lift up your gates O Princes, and be lifted up, you everlasting gates; and the King of glory shall enter in,” for the ‘everlasting gates’ are the heavens. But, because the Word descended invisible to creatures, He was not known to them in His descent; [yet] because the Word was incarnate He also ascended, visible, on high. And < . . . > having seen Him, the principalities, the lower angels, cried to those in the firmament, “Lift up your gates, <O Princes>, and be lifted up, you everlasting gates; the King of glory shall enter in.” And when they were astonished and said, “Who is He?”, those who already saw Him, testify a second time, “The Lord strong and mighty, He is the King of glory.”<sup>100</sup>

According to Irenaeus, David, the author of Psalm 24, bears testimony to the “same thing” that Irenaeus has just written. Just prior to this, in *Epid.* 83, he demonstrated from Psalm 68:18–19 (67:18–19 LXX; cf. Eph 4:8) that Scripture bears testimony of the heavenly ascension of Jesus after his death and resurrection. Moreover, after his resurrection from the dead, Jesus was taken up out of the disciples’ sight and received into heaven just as David described (Acts 1:4–12). The “same thing” about which Irenaeus writes in *Epid.* 84 is the heavenly ascension and installment of Jesus.

In his exegesis of Psalm 24:7–10, Irenaeus begins by identifying the everlasting gates with the heavens. He writes, *portae enim aeternales sunt caeli*.<sup>101</sup> The psalmist expresses ignorance regarding the identity of the King of glory. Irenaeus explains this ignorance as a reference to the Word’s earthly descent wherein he was “invisible to creatures” and “not known [*non cognitum*] to them.” However, the Λόγος who descended also ascended *visibile*.

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<sup>100</sup> *Epid.* 84 (Behr, 91).

<sup>101</sup> *Epid.* 84 (SC 406:196).

According to Irenaeus, David is the speaker in the text. However, Irenaeus’s interpretation permits a dual identification of the one speaking. On the one hand, Irenaeus asserts, “David again says the same thing.” On the other hand, through a creative identification of the persons speaking, Irenaeus identifies the speakers who cry, “Lift up your gates, <O Princes>, and be lifted up, you everlasting gates; and the King of glory shall enter in”<sup>102</sup> as the principalities or lower angels (*postestates . . . inferiores angeli*). Additionally, Irenaeus identifies the persons to whom these *inferiores angeli* are speaking in the text as the angels who occupy the firmament. The angels in the firmament, upon hearing the lower angels exhort, “Lift up your gates, <O Princes>, and be lifted up, you everlasting gates; and the King of glory shall enter in,” responded, “Who is He?” In other words, Irenaeus interprets Psalm 24 as a dialogue between angelic beings. The *inferiores angeli* who already saw the Lord Jesus “testify a second time” (*testantur secunda vice*<sup>103</sup>). The *inferiores angeli* respond to the angels in the firmament, *Dominus fortis et potens, hic est Rex gloriae*.

In his exegesis of Psalm 24, Irenaeus answers the following questions: (1) Who is speaking? (2) To whom are they speaking? (3) About whom are they speaking? Each of these questions appear to situate Irenaeus’s exegesis of this text within the category of prosopological exegesis.<sup>104</sup>

Additionally, Irenaeus’s exegesis of Psalm 24 in *Epid.* is especially apropos to a discussion regarding prosopological exegesis given its placement alongside perhaps the most frequent prosopological text cited, Psalm 110:1. In *Epid.* 85, Irenaeus continues to exegete texts within this framework:

And that, having risen and ascended to the right hand of the Father, He awaits the

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<sup>102</sup> *Epid.* 84 (Unger, 91).

<sup>103</sup> *Epid.* 84 (Unger, 91; SC 406:198).

<sup>104</sup> For a treatment of *Epid.* 84 as an instance of prosopological exegesis, see Willis, “Who Is the King of Glory?”

time determined by the Father for the judgement, when all enemies will be subjected to Him—and [the] enemies are all those who are found in apostasy, angels, principalities, and thrones, <and> those who despised the truth—the prophet David himself says thus, “The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.”<sup>105</sup>

Having ascended into heaven, Irenaeus believes the Lord Jesus now waits for the judgment of his enemies. The enemies, according to Irenaeus, are all who apostatized— heavenly and earthly beings. As indicated above, germane for my purposes is the occurrence of this text alongside Irenaeus’s exegesis of Psalm 24. Noteworthy is Irenaeus’s identification of the speaker in Psalm 110:1 as “the prophet David.” While Irenaeus does not explicate this psalm in detail in *Epid.* 85, he does so in *Epid.* 48–49.

The clearest demonstration of positive prosopological exegesis<sup>106</sup> in the Irenaeian corpus occurs in *Epid.* 48–49. In *Epid.* 47, Irenaeus concludes, after a series of expositions of biblical passages concerning the existence of the Son prior to his incarnation, “Therefore, the Father is Lord and the Son is Lord, and the Father is God and the Son is God.”<sup>107</sup> In order to substantiate more clearly that the Scriptures speak in this way of the Son, Irenaeus quotes Psalm 45:7–8 (44:7–8 LXX). According to Irenaeus, “David speaks about the Father and Son in this way, ‘Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. You have loved righteousness <and> hated iniquity; therefore God [has] anointed you with the oil of gladness above your fellows.’” Irenaeus’s exegesis of this psalm involves the identification of both “Gods” spoken about in the text. After all, David addresses God and describes the anointing of this God by another God. Irenaeus concludes, “For the Son, as He is God, receives from the Father, that <is>, from God, the throne of the everlasting kingdom.” The God whom David addresses is the Son and the

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<sup>105</sup> *Epid.* 85 (Behr, 92).

<sup>106</sup> I have included the qualifier “positive” to differentiate Irenaeus’s prosopological exegesis from his criticism of the exegetical practice among his gnostic opponents, who consistently sought to explain texts by interpolating divine beings or Aeons into the text (e.g., *Haer.* 1.5.4; 1.7.3; 1.24.2; 3.6.1–5; 4.35.1–4).

<sup>107</sup> *Epid.* 47 (Behr, 71). In SC 406:152, *Igitur Dominus est Pater, et Dominus est Filius, et Deus Pater et Deus Filius.*

God who anoints the God whom David addresses is the Father. Put another way, the anointed one is the Son and the one anointing is the Father. Moreover, “the oil of anointing,” according to Irenaeus’s exegesis, “is the Spirit by whom He is Anointed.” Finally, the ones David describes in the text as “your fellows,” and among whom the Son is anointed above, “are the prophets and righteous and apostles and all who receive participation in His kingdom, that is, His disciples.” Although some may dispute the claim that this is an example of prosopological exegesis, what is apparent is that Irenaeus is concerned to read biblical texts with an overarching theological metaphysic that governs his interpretive methods. Whatever one determines to call the “method” Irenaeus employs here, the proper identification of θεός in Psalm 45 is Irenaeus’s concern. For Irenaeus, the only one worthy of the title θεός absolutely dictates his exegesis of Psalm 45.<sup>108</sup>

What follows in *Epid.* is an exposition of Psalm 110 (109 LXX) alongside other corresponding biblical texts. After quoting the entire Davidic psalm, Irenaeus is comfortable merely to assert that David refers to the Son. This mere assertion of an exegetical conclusion may be due in large part to what had become a standard Christian interpretation of Psalm 110.<sup>109</sup> Additionally, Irenaeus distinguishes the exaltation of the humanity of the Son from his inherent exaltation as the divine Logos. “He will drink from the brook in the way, therefore He will lift up His head” (Ps 110:7; 109:7 LXX)<sup>110</sup> references the exaltation of the humanity of the incarnate Son after his *humilitatem et ignobilitatem*.<sup>111</sup> After all, if Irenaeus is correct in explicating Psalm 110 as properly

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<sup>108</sup> While modern scholars may prefer distinguishing such examples of exegesis according to methods employed, it is difficult to see how Irenaeus would distinguish his exegesis of Ps 45 from what follows.

<sup>109</sup> Cf. Matt 22:44; Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42; Acts 2:34; Heb 5:6; 7:17, 21.

<sup>110</sup> This is as it appears in Behr, 72.

<sup>111</sup> *Epid.* 48 (SC 406:154).

referring to the incarnate Son, then he is justified in interpreting each part of the psalm (i.e., the “signs”) in relationship to this exegetical reference (“thing”).

Irenaeus continues by quoting from other passages of Scripture (including Isa 45:1 and Ps 2). He appears to be working with a cluster of biblical texts united by their use of κύριος and the apparent presence of κύριοι.<sup>112</sup> In concluding his exegesis of these texts, and with particular reference to Psalm 2:7, Irenaeus observes,

Since the same promise is made by both prophets, that He would be King, then, consequently, the words of God are [addressed] to one and the same, that is, I say, to Christ the Son of God; since David says, “the Lord says to me,” it is necessary to affirm that it is not David nor any other one of the prophets, who speaks from himself—for it is not man who utters prophecies—but [that] the Spirit of God, conforming Himself to the person concerned, spoke in the prophets, producing words sometimes from Christ and other times from the Father.<sup>113</sup>

According to Irenaeus, neither David nor any one of the other prophets *qui loquitur . . . ipse a semetipso*.<sup>114</sup> Rather, according to Irenaeus, the Spirit of God, *formans-et-figurans-seipsum-similem* (συσχηματίζομαι) *propositae* (προκείμενος) *personae* (πρόσωπον), spoke in the prophets. According to Irenaeus, the Spirit speaks through the prophets. However, at times, the Spirit speaks through the prophetic words as the πρόσωπον of the Son, and at other times as the πρόσωπον of the Father. For this reason, when David writes, “the Lord says to me” in Psalm 2:7, Irenaeus can identify the Lord (or πρόσωπον) saying “to me” as the Father and the one to whom the Father is speaking (identified as “me”) as the Son. On the other hand, it is the Spirit of God

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<sup>112</sup> Isa 45:1 LXX reads, Οὕτως λέγει κύριος ὁ θεὸς τῷ χριστῷ μου Κύρω. It may be that the biblical text with which Irenaeus was working did not include reference to Cyrus, but rather to another Lord. The difference between the two words in Greek is merely the presence of an iota or lack thereof (Κύρω and Κύριω). Rousseau contends that, contrary to the Armenian translator of *Epid.*, the pronoun (μου) should be read in relation to Κύριω and not Χριστῷ. *Cependant, le rapprochement très intentionnel . . . qu'Irénée établit entre Ps. 109, 1 et Is. 45, 1 n'invite-t-il pas à rapporter le pronom μου au substantif Κύριω plutôt qu'à Χριστῷ* (SC 406:397). As a result, Rousseau opts for the translation of *Epid.* 49, *A son tour, le prophète Isaïe dit : «Ainsi parle le Seigneur Dieu au Christ mon Seigneur»* (SC 406:155). Additionally, while Ps 2:7 does not explicitly name two Κύριοι, it does describe the speaking of one Κύριος to his Υἱός. Moreover, the psalm moves on to describe the inheritance of all nations, a description that, according to Irenaeus, cannot refer to David.

<sup>113</sup> *Epid.* 49 (Behr, 73).

<sup>114</sup> *Epid.* 49 (SC 406:156).

speaking through David by conforming and figuring himself as the proposed persons of the Father and Son.

After his most thorough explanation of prosopological exegesis, Irenaeus offers another instantiation. Noteworthy is the inferential adverb (*Igitur*) immediately following his explanation in *Epid.* 49. “So [*Igitur*], in a very fitting manner Christ says, by David, that the Father Himself speaks with Him, and most properly does He say still other things concerning Himself through the prophets, just as, amongst others, by Isaias, in this way.”<sup>115</sup> He then goes on to quote Isaiah 49:5–6,

And now thus says the Lord, who fashioned me from the womb [to be] His servant, to gather Jacob and to gather Israel to Him; and I shall be glorified before the Lord, and my God will be [a] strength to me; and He said: “It will be a great thing for you to be called my servant, to establish the tribes of Jacob and to turn back the dispersed of Israel. I have placed you as a light to the nations, that you may be for salvation unto the ends of the earth.”<sup>116</sup>

Understanding Irenaeus’s treatment of Isaiah 49:5–6 within the context of his explanation of prosopological exegesis, the Spirit conforms himself to the person of the Son as the one narrating and identified as “me” in verse 5. Moreover, the Lord who fashioned the Incarnate Son from the womb to be his Servant Irenaeus identifies as the Father. As a result, it is the Father who speaks the following words to the Son: “It will be a great thing for you to be called my servant, to establish the tribes of Jacob and to turn back the dispersed of Israel. I have placed you as a light to the nations, that you may be for salvation unto the ends of the earth.” Irenaeus explicates this dialogue between the Father and the Son as taking place prior to the incarnation. He observes, “For here, firstly, from that [text] is that the Son of God pre-existed, that the Father spoke with Him, and caused Him to be revealed to men before His birth.”<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> *Epid.* 50 (Behr, 73).

<sup>116</sup> *Epid.* 50 (Behr, 73–74).

<sup>117</sup> *Epid.* 51 (Behr, 74).

Prosopological exegesis was an exegetical method that equipped Irenaeus to identify ostensibly ambiguous *prosopa* in dialogical texts of Scripture. On the other hand, the method was only appropriate to the biblical text in so far as a Christian theological metaphysic chaperoned it. Without the correct doctrine of God, prosopological exegesis devolved into eisegesis and the importation of false gods. For example, this method was not unique to Irenaeus in his polemical context. Irenaeus's gnostic opponents employed prosopological exegesis to support the presence of various Aeons within their protological system. In describing the Valentinian perspective regarding the "seed," or "offspring of Achamoth," Irenaeus expounds,

They explain, too, that this offspring spoke many things through the prophets, inasmuch as it was of a more exalted nature. The Mother, too—rather she through Demiurge and through the souls made by him—spoke many things about the Aeons on high. Moreover, they divide the prophecies into various classes: one portion they hold was spoken by the Mother, another by the offspring, and still another by Demiurge. In the same manner, Jesus had his prophecies partly from Savior, partly from his Mother, partly from Demiurge, as we shall show as our work proceeds.<sup>118</sup>

In a way similar to the Holy Spirit speaking through the prophets, the gnostics maintained that the offspring of Achamoth spoke through the prophets. Additionally, the gnostics assigned various statements and prophecies to various Aeons.

Saturninus of Antioch, whom Irenaeus places within the gnostic ancestry, also relied on something akin to prosopological exegesis, in which the exegetical method aided the interpreter to identify various *prosopa* in the text. Irenaeus explains Saturninus's exegesis in this way: "As for the prophecies, some were uttered by the Angels who made the world, others by Satan, whom he assumed to be the very Angel who opposes those who made the world, especially the God of the Jews."<sup>119</sup>

Irenaeus's most sustained engagement with prosopological exegesis among his gnostic opponents occurs in *Haer.* 4.35. The Valentinians, according to Irenaeus,

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<sup>118</sup> *Haer.* 1.7.3 (Unger, 39–40).

<sup>119</sup> *Haer.* 1.24.2 (Unger, 85).

and the rest of the falsely so-called Gnostics . . . assert that sometimes in the Scriptures things were spoken about by Supreme Power for the sake of the Offspring that also comes from there but at other times about the middle regions, for the sake of the <audacious> other, Prunikos; but at still other times many things were spoken about by the Maker of the world, from whom also the Prophets were sent.<sup>120</sup>

Prosopological exegesis was a shared method between Irenaeus and his opponents.

Moreover, this reading strategy came in handy among the gnostics on account of their need to find substantiation of the existence of a plethora of Aeons. However, as Irenaeus highlights, the applications and conclusions of gnostic prosopological exegesis lacked theological unity. Irenaeus posits, “If one would want to make an experiment with them and question their renowned men separately about some word, he would find him saying that the question is about Pre-father, namely Profundity; another the Beginning of all things, namely, Only-begotten; another about the Father of all things, namely Word,”<sup>121</sup> and so on. The gnostic doctrine of God fails to yield harmony of interpretation regarding the identification of persons in the biblical text. Irenaeus continues, “So great are the differences among them about the one [being], because they have various opinions about the same Scripture texts.”<sup>122</sup>

Contrariwise, the harmony of interpretation within the catholic church demonstrates a superior doctrine of God, as summarized in the *regula*, according to Irenaeus:

We, on the contrary follow one and the same true Lord as teacher, and possess his words as the Rule of the Truth, and so we all speak the same things always about the same passages. We know that there is one God, the Creator of the universe; he sent the Prophets who led the people out of Egypt; he revealed his Son in the last times, that he might confound the unbelievers and search after the fruit of righteousness.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> *Haer.* 4.35.1 (Unger, 99–100).

<sup>121</sup> *Haer.* 4.35.4 (Unger, 101).

<sup>122</sup> *Haer.* 4.35.4 (Unger, 102).

<sup>123</sup> *Haer.* 4.35.4 (Unger, 102).

The distinction between Irenaeus and his opponents does not occur at the level of exegetical method, at least not in the mind of Irenaeus. The distinction occurs at the level of theological metaphysics. Irenaeus's doctrine of God and the doctrine(s) of God among the gnostics govern exegesis, resulting in vastly different conclusions; the former is representative of the unity of the catholic church, and the latter of a discordant collection of interpretive conclusions.

While the gnostics practiced prosopological exegesis, a clear demarcation between their exegetical practice and that of Irenaeus is the harmony of Scripture.<sup>124</sup> The gnostics approached Scripture as a cacophony of disparate sayings thereby permitting the assignment of texts to competing divine or celestial authors. On the other hand, Irenaeus's doctrine of Scripture grew out of his doctrine of God, namely that the one and only true God inspired the biblical text. For this reason, every portion of Scripture harmonized.

### Conclusion

I have shown that what distinguished Irenaeus from his opponents was not the exegetical methods each utilized. Even regarding the alphanumeric interpretation of Scripture cherished among the gnostics, Irenaeus does not take issue directly. However, he contends, "A rule does not come from numbers, but numbers from a rule; neither does God [come] from created things, but created things come from God. For all things are from the one and same God."<sup>125</sup> Whether broadly, as an attempt to identify the "thing" or reality indicated by the referential "sign," or the identification of *prosopa* in biblical texts, it was a different understanding of God that governed the application of these methods by Irenaeus and his opponents. According to Irenaeus, governing the

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<sup>124</sup> See chap. 3 of this dissertation.

<sup>125</sup> *Haer.* 2.25.1 (Unger, 82).

identification of the “thing” or the person speaking, spoken to, or spoken about, was the doctrine of God. The question that directs the exegetical enterprise is, “Who (and what) is God?” For Irenaeus, this is the most fundamental exegetical question the interpreter must answer when seeking to exegete the text of Scripture. When the interpreter answers this question correctly and consonant with the catholic church, the interpreter will properly interpret Scripture.

While engagement with Irenaeus’s exegetical methods has its place, such engagement is superficial and tenuous if it fails to dig into the layers of theological substrata. How is it that Irenaeus identifies the Lord of Psalm 24:7–10 (23:7–10 LXX) as the Incarnate Son? The modern scholar justifiably engages prosopological exegesis as a method Irenaeus employs. However, for Irenaeus, the answer begins at a more simple and foundational level. The text must be describing the Trinitarian God because he alone is God and Lord absolutely! While the modern scholar might seek observable exegetical patterns for justification within Irenaeus, or the patristics broadly, such patterns begin with a doctrine of God, namely the one and only true God revealed throughout the harmonious revelation contained in the Scriptures. This belief inclined Irenaeus to see biblical texts as direct references to the only one worthy of the title God and Lord absolutely.

An illustration might prove helpful to further make the point. Native speakers of a language do not often consider how the speech contains “rules” of grammar and syntax. Rather the “rules” of the language are merely ways of describing detectable patterns or tendencies among native speakers of the language. When this relationship is inverted, the language becomes subservient to perceived rules rather than what is actually taking place; the patterns are mere expressions of the arrangement, order, and beauty of the language. I submit that failing to observe that Irenaeus’s exegesis flows instinctually from his doctrine of God is comparable. When the scholar seeks to work from exegetical method to conclusions, that scholar allows the exegetical tail to wag the theological dog

rather than understanding more properly that the theology gives birth to exegesis.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

I began in the introduction of this work by quoting Michael Legaspi: “I believe that the scriptural Bible and the academic Bible are fundamentally different creations oriented toward rival interpretive communities.”<sup>1</sup> Legaspi was not suggesting that the two “Bibles” contained different wording, different ancient texts, a different arrangement or canonical order, or even different content at the surface level. Rather, the two Bibles are undergirded by a different reality, and therefore are interpreted quite differently by two distinct interpretive communities—the church and the academy. Legaspi goes on to assess, “While it is true that the scriptural reader and the academic interpreter can offer information and insights that the other finds useful or interesting, they remain, in the end, loyal to separate authorities.”

I have argued for something similar as it relates to Irenaeus of Lyons and the gnostics with which he battled. In many respects, Irenaeus and his opponents read the same words. Moreover, they often employed the same exegetical methods. However, they approached those words and employed their exegetical reading strategies with massively different theological foundations. This is the fundamental reason why they came to irreconcilable conclusions that were worlds apart. In this way, I have argued that the Bible of Irenaeus was a different Bible than the Bible of the gnostics. This is true, not because they necessarily contained different words, books, or even a different canonical order. Rather, they were different Bibles because they were viewed as the product of, and

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<sup>1</sup> Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 169.

the summary of, different understandings of God.

Stephen Presley has recently advocated for “the recovery of premodern interpretation in ways that revive and revitalize the ecclesial shaping of biblical theology.”<sup>2</sup> Although Presley was working much more broadly, my work has provided one of the ways a particular premodern and patristic interpreter of Scripture, Irenaeus of Lyons, contributes to this revivification and revitalization. In the words of Presley, I have demonstrated that for Irenaeus, “Hermeneutics is not really about procedures anyway but rather is about essential questions of reality.”<sup>3</sup> Presley’s work is an attempt at retrieval or *ressourcement*. My work has illuminated one of the ways Irenaeus of Lyons contributes to this ongoing conversation. Presley bemoans, “The modern world has been furiously trying to untie the Gordian knot of methodology, without concern for the metaphysical assumptions that various methodologies harbor. But now, biblical interpretation must learn to think holistically, to walk outside the room and see how the whole project of biblical theology participates in a Christian culture.” This is precisely the kind of exegetical and theological approach modeled by Irenaeus.

What was the exegetical and theological model Irenaeus provided? A Christian reading of Scripture governed by a Christian theological metaphysic that undergirded Scripture and received expression in Scripture. Irenaeus believed that the interpreter only ever interprets rightly when he interprets Scripture for what it really is—harmonious divine revelation provided by the one, true, and living God who has revealed himself through his divine Son/Word and by his divine Spirit. This is the foundation upon which Scripture must be properly interpreted. Any exegetical method the interpreter uses, while important, goes awry when it is not predicated on this theological foundation. Irenaeus

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen O. Presley, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Early Church: Recovering an Ancient Vision* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2025), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Presley, *Biblical Theology in Life of Early Church*, 7.

contended that the fundamental distinction between a Christian interpretation of Scripture and the interpretations espoused by the gnostics originated in the theological beliefs governing interpretation. As a result, a Christian doctrine of God was the foundation for sound biblical interpretation for Irenaeus. I contextualized, established, and substantiated this thesis throughout the first five chapters.

In chapter 1, I situated the thesis within the secondary literature contained along three streams of scholarship—(1) Irenaean scholarship, (2) a growing interest in pre-critical exegesis, and (3) the relationship between theology and exegesis, often described as “theological interpretation of Scripture.” I summarized the development of scholarly treatments of Irenaeus from the critical posture of Hans Wendt to the rehabilitation efforts of the second half of the twentieth century in the works of Gustaf Wingren, Philippe Bacq, and notably, Richard Norris. Moreover, I identified the trajectory confirming scholarship of Jackson Lashier and Anthony Briggman, who together have helped concretize Irenaeus as a philosophically informed theologian whose theological awareness buttressed his retelling of the divine economy.

Regarding the second stream of scholarship related to my work, Henri de Lubac and Jean Daniélou have contributed to the renaissance of pre-critical interpretation of Scripture. Similarly, David Steinmetz’s vote in favor of the superiority of pre-critical exegesis alongside the recent works of Lewis Ayres and Craig Carter, whose work is immediately accessible to both scholar and layperson alike, have each contributed to the renewed appreciation of ancient exegetes.

In addition, many have proposed, defended, and modeled a reading of Scripture that is consciously theological. Relatedly, those whose work is often within this field dip in the former field of pre-critical exegesis. Yale scholars Brevard Childs and Hans Frei prepared a path for a focus on the form of the text possessed alongside an appreciation for pre-critical readings of Scripture. The work of R. R. Reno and the very recent contribution of Presley both contend that a properly theological reading of

Scripture is one that is read by the church, in the context of the church, and within the theological framework of the church. Moreover, in chapter 1, I established the historical and polemical context of Irenaeus against the gnostics out of which he produced his magnum opus—*Against Heresies*—and his helpful and short summary of Scripture—*Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*.

In chapter 2, I established that while Irenaeus and the gnostics revered many of the same sacred texts, the gnostics granted pride of place to their gnostic doctrine of God and protological myth. As a result, the gnostics imported a foreign doctrine of God into the biblical text, which chaperoned their exegetical work toward heretical conclusions. After confirming Irenaeus as a valid source for gnostic theology, I reconstructed a gnostic doctrine of God from *Haer.*, which consisted of two primary theological attributes: (1) divine transcendence, and (2) divine complexity. Divine transcendence, contrary to a Christian proposal of transcendence, was relative because the Supreme Father and all other divine figures existed on the same ontological plane as humanity. Divine complexity was the foundation for the retelling of the gnostic cosmogony consisting often of a Triacotad of Aeons, which devolve into a fall of the thirtieth Aeon and the production of the Demiurge, or Creator of this world.

With this theological framework, gnostic exegesis of the same biblical texts Irenaeus interpreted was built upon the foundation of two exegetical concepts: (1) esoteric revelation, and (2) an extrinsic theological system. The supreme and superior revelation given by the Supreme Father came to a small group of privileged people. Moreover, the Scriptures did not explicitly teach the theological *regula* of the gnostics. However, according to the gnostics, their *regula* was received through esoteric revelation, which was inconspicuously present beneath and behind the Scriptures.

Finally, I recognized two exegetical principles that directed the exegetical practices among Irenaeus's opponents. First, I identified the principle of ambiguity. Biblical authors often spoke equivocally. These sections of Scripture defy comprehension

without the aid of gnostic esoteric revelation. Second, I recognized the principle of discordance. Due to the plethora of divine figures and the complex divine drama and protological myth of the gnostics, Scripture was discordant. After all, the gnostics received Scripture as the product of Gods within their theological framework. With several divine voices and competitors (including Supreme Father, various Aeons, the Demiurge, and others), Scripture becomes a conglomeration of competing voices and persons only comprehensible to the enlightened gnostic interpreter.

In chapter 3, I determined that the fundamental response of Irenaeus to the theological and exegetical errors of the gnostics was to revisit and reconstruct a doctrine of God, which was represented in the various forms of the *regula veritatis* presented by Irenaeus, and preeminently included the identification of the only God as Father, Creator, and possessing the attributes of infinitude and simplicity. Irenaeus argues that a Christian doctrine of God maintains belief in the absolute transcendence and otherness of God and the immediacy of relationship between God as the Creator and creation.

According to Irenaeus, God the Father is the Creator of all things. Moreover, he is a *primo et maximo capitulo* and *primo omnium*, or *πρῶτον πάντων*.<sup>4</sup> Summarized in Irenaeus's theological bedrock, "God contains all and is alone uncontainable," which appears in some form or another at various points in Irenaeus's extant writings.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, God is Father in relation to the divine Son through eternal generation, not a version of gnostic divine emanation or emission. Although the Father is Father in relation to Christians, this fatherhood occurs through filial adoption by means of the work of the divine and proper Son of the Father. Moreover, the Father's relationship to his creation is quite different than his eternal relationship to the Son. God created all things from a state of non-existence, establishing the basis for an ontological gap and categorical distinction

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<sup>4</sup> *Haer.* 2.1.1 (SC 294:27); *Haer.* 4.20.2 (SC 100:628–29).

<sup>5</sup> *Epid.* 4; *Haer.* 2.1.1; 2.1.2; 4.20.2.

between God the Creator and creation. On this account, Irenaeus explicitly defends this doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* against the gnostics.

Finally, I contended that the theological center of Irenaeus was not fundamentally economic in orientation. Rather, Irenaeus's theological center was metaphysical, focusing on who God is *in se* and dealing with the very nature of God. Indebted to the work of Briggman, I defended an understanding of Irenaeus's theological metaphysic in the form of two propositions: (1) God is infinite, and (2) God is simple. Regarding the former, Irenaeus explicated an understanding of God as without limit. Put another way and summarized above, God contains all things and is contained by nothing. Divine immanence, or nearness, is best understood as a corollary of divine infinitude. God is near because God contains all things. Also, according to Irenaeus, God is simple and not composite. As a result, "He is all Mind, all Spirit, all Understanding, all Thought, all Word, all Hearing, all Eye, all Light, and the whole Source of all blessings. That is how the devout people can properly speak about God."<sup>6</sup> God is not composed of parts. In this sense, divine nature is entirely "other" when compared to created nature, which is necessarily composite. This is where the gnostics confuse the Creator and creation. God, according to Irenaeus, is *sui generis*.

In chapter 4, I began to evaluate the intersection between Irenaeus's understanding of God and his exegetical practice. Foundational to Irenaeus's exegetical practice was his bibliology, which sprang from his doctrine of God. According to Irenaeus, Scripture is harmonious because it is sourced in the one and only God. Put another way, Scripture's nature is a consequence of who God is. Contrary to the gnostics, Irenaeus argued that every part of Scripture harmonizes and proves that there is only one God over all things who created all things.

In this chapter, I evaluated three exegetical methods common in Irenaeus that

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<sup>6</sup> *Haer.* 2.13.3 (Unger, 43).

manifest his theological interpretation of Scripture. First, Irenaeus extensively interpreted Scripture through his understanding of recapitulation. Recapitulation, as I observed, is summarized as the redemptive activity of God, connecting the end with the beginning as T. F. Torrance and others have proposed. Moreover, recapitulation, as with the other exegetical methods observed in Irenaeus, is predicated on Scripture's harmony and single divine source.

The second exegetical method I unpacked was the concept of Scripture interpreting Scripture. As Irenaeus states, "Scriptural proofs cannot be illustrated except from Scripture."<sup>7</sup> This exegetical method incorporates a series of assumptions and practices. First, it assumes clarity on what is most important within Scripture. Scripture, according to Irenaeus, was unambiguous regarding the central matters. Second, although Irenaeus believed that the truths of Scripture should be, and were, proclaimed to all without distinction, the right interpretation of Scripture demands a properly postured mind. Third, some portions of Scripture are more difficult to understand than others. Due to the infinitude of God, the nature of Scripture as a product of God, and humanity's finitude, some explanations must be left "in God's keeping."<sup>8</sup> Fourth, clear portions of Scripture must interpret the unclear portions. However, although some have misunderstood Irenaeus to express an aversion to all theological speculation (e.g., Schoedel and Donovan), Irenaeus resisted a theological and exegetical approach that rejected the unambiguous teaching of Scripture. This is precisely what the gnostics were guilty of, seeking explanations of the unclear portions while rejecting the clear teaching of Scripture.

The third exegetical method I highlighted in chapter 4 was interpreting Scripture with the aid of the *regula veritatis*. The *regula*, according to Irenaeus, was both

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<sup>7</sup> *Haer.* 3.12.9 (Unger, 66).

<sup>8</sup> *Haer.* 2.28.3 (Unger, 88).

within Scripture and an exegetical framework for interpreting Scripture. The content of the *regula* and the content of Scripture coincided, the former being a clear summary of the central portions of the latter. In this sense, the *regula* could be substantiated from Scripture, and the interpreter's exegesis of Scripture should be confirmed by and governed by the *regula*. I observed that the *regula* was Scripture rightly interpreted. As a result, interpreting Scripture with the use of the *regula* was a way of interpreting Scripture with Scripture. Additionally, when interpreting Scripture by the *regula* as an exegetical tool, Irenaeus believed that the church was the proper exegetical and theological context. After all, the *regula* was traditioned to the church as a whole and was consistently apparent among the many churches.

In chapter 5, I sought to further instantiate the intersection of Irenaeus's doctrine of God and his exegetical practice. The first category of instantiation I observed was the relationship between "signs" and "things." Although developed by Augustine in *Doctr. chr.*, the relationship between signs and things is central to Irenaeus's exegesis. The gnostics failed precisely at this point because they misidentified the ultimate "thing" or reality to which the "signs" of Scripture point. As Irenaeus indicates in *Haer.* 1.8.1, the signs of Scripture offer a portrait of a king when properly arranged and interpreted. However, the gnostics had rearranged and misinterpreted the signs of Scripture as a portrait of a dog or fox.

One of the ways Irenaeus's understanding of signs and things surfaces is by his engagement with what he calls a "type," or *τύπος*, and an "image," or *εἰκὼν*. In Irenaeus's exegesis, a *τύπος* represented an *εἰκὼν* when there is sufficient continuity between the two as understood within the right theological system. The gnostics find unjustified images or realities behind the types or signs of Scripture. Irenaeus does not take issue with the exegetical motivation of finding images or realities communicated in the types or signs of Scripture. Rather, his censure is directed at the conclusions among the gnostics, each of which are governed by their own erroneous theological system.

Moreover, the gnostic application of discovering images or realities by means of the types or signs of Scripture are inconsistent. Although “a type and an image depart from the truth in regard to matter, but in regard to the shape they must retain the likeness; likewise, by what is present they must manifest what is not present,” according to Irenaeus.<sup>9</sup> Although there exists some degree of discontinuity between the type and the image, Irenaeus demonstrates that a certain degree of continuity must exist between the two in order to justify the relationship. The gnostics were arbitrary and inconsistent in their discoveries of realities behind the types of Scripture. Rather than seeing the reality that the sign or image signified, they interpolated realities that were foreign to Scripture.

Scripture’s use of θεὸς and Κύριος is another example I highlighted that revealed Irenaeus’s understanding of the relationship between signs and things within an existing theological system. The section I considered regarding Irenaeus’s exegetical considerations of θεὸς and Κύριος is *Haer.* 3.6–8. In summary fashion, Irenaeus states,

Therefore, neither the Lord, nor the Holy Spirit, nor the apostles would precisely [*definitive*] and absolutely [*absolute*] ever have named ‘God’ one who is not God unless He truly was God. Nor would they, in their own name [*ex persona*], have called anyone Lord except God the Father who has dominion over all things, and His Son who received from His Father power over all creation.<sup>10</sup>

According to Irenaeus, the signs, “God” and “Lord,” are only ever used in Scripture “precisely and absolutely” to refer to the one who is truly God, namely “God the Father who has dominion over all things, and His Son.” The gnostics pervert the teaching of Scripture when they insert another God above the only true God. They fail because they approach Scripture with the wrong theological foundation.

There are other times, as I observed, when the sign θεὸς or the sign Κύριος refers to someone who is not the one and only God. When this happens, Scripture does not “present them as gods absolutely, but with certain modifications and indication by

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<sup>9</sup> *Haer.* 2.23.1 (Unger, 76).

<sup>10</sup> *Haer.* 3.6.1 (Unger, 38; SC 211:64).

which they are shown not to be gods.”<sup>11</sup> The reason Scripture uses the signs θεὸς or Κύριος with “certain modifications and indication” to signify realities other than the true God is for the purpose of using conventional signs to maintain clarity. As I observed, Irenaeus contends that Scripture’s use of these signs with modification to refer to non-divine beings maintains a level of understanding because these signs were commonly used in this way. On the other hand, the Holy Spirit also clearly proclaimed that “an idol has no real existence” (1 Cor 8:4).

Additionally, I again accented how the application of this exegetical method in Irenaeus was motivated by belief in the harmony of Scripture. Moreover, the harmony of Scripture, as indicated time and again, was a consequence of belief in a single divine author of Scripture. This is one of the ways Irenaeus’s doctrine of God governed instantiations of his exegesis.

At this juncture, I noted that both Irenaeus and the gnostics had a view of the divine inspiration of Scripture that functioned comparably. Irenaeus believed that Scripture was sourced in the one and only God. The gnostics, although misidentifying God and gods, also espoused a view of the inspiration of Scripture that located Scripture’s source in divine beings. The gnostics did not first go astray in their view of inspiration. Rather, their error was in misidentifying the one who authored Scripture. Simply put, they worshiped the wrong god.

In addition to treating Irenaeus’s semiotic theory, I identified prosopological exegesis as another instantiation of Irenaeus’s doctrine of God at the level of exegetical method. After offering some proposals at a definition of this exegetical method and surveying the scholarly treatments from Andresen, Rondeau, Slusser, Bates, and others, I turned to summarizing Irenaeus’s use of this method. I identified two primary biblical texts which provide Irenaeus the opportunity to interpret prosopologically, namely

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<sup>11</sup> *Haer.* 3.6.3 (Unger, 39).

Psalms 24 and 110. After examining the ways Irenaeus identifies the various persons in the Psalms, I noted the penchant among the gnostics for prosopological exegesis. According to Irenaeus, his opponents were inclined to interpret various biblical texts by identifying the various *prosopa* including Aeons, the Supreme Father, and others.<sup>12</sup> Again, Irenaeus was not distinguished from his gnostic opponents by exegetical methods. In fact, both the gnostics and Irenaeus practiced this exegetical reading strategy alongside many others. Irenaeus and the gnostics were demarcated by their fundamentally different assumptions about reality. They were separated by different theological metaphysics. The God of Irenaeus was not the God or gods of the gnostics. As a result, the Christian Bible, which Irenaeus embraced was a different Bible than the gnostic Bible because it was received as the product of different Gods. Consequently, the exegetical conclusions promulgated by the gnostics were not the exegetical conclusions Irenaeus espoused.

I have shown that far more than any exegetical method practiced by Irenaeus, his theological metaphysic governed his exegesis. Moreover, this is simply the nature of things. What the interpreter believes about Scripture in relation to the God of Scripture will invariably lead to particular exegetical conclusions or at least a specific field of valid exegetical possibilities.

More work remains in attempting to deal at the level of assumptions regarding reality and the governing relationship these assumptions wield over exegetical practice. For example, I have focused most of my evaluation on the doctrine of God, or what is sometimes called theology proper in Irenaeus. More work is demanded in other fields of theology (e.g., Christology and pneumatology) and the way these foundational Christian beliefs shape exegesis. Moreover, if it indeed is the case that a theological metaphysic governs exegesis, as I have argued in Irenaeus, then the difficult work of ascertaining with greater precision the particular divine persons as they appear in the biblical text

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<sup>12</sup> *Haer.* 1.24.2; 4.35.1.

becomes necessary. In other words, assuming a theological metaphysic that is Trinitarian in nature demands some level of precision in identifying divine persons within the biblical text, as the example of prosopological exegesis reveals.

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## ABSTRACT

### THE DOCTRINE OF GOD AND EXEGESIS IN IRENAEUS OF LYONS

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This work examines the relationship between the doctrine of God and exegesis in Irenaeus of Lyons. Considering the growing interest in premodern exegesis alongside increased focus regarding a consciously theological approach to interpreting Scripture, Irenaeus provides fertile soil for exploration and integration of these fields of research.

By excavating the doctrine of God and the exegetical engagement represented in Irenaeus, I demonstrate that a Christian theological metaphysic provided Irenaeus the fundamental framework for proper exegesis, governing the various exegetical methods he employed when interpreting Scripture. While exegetical methods are present in Irenaeus, a proper understanding of God was more determinative of his interpretative conclusions.

To substantiate this thesis, I begin by providing a summary of scholarship within the following three streams: (1) the study of Irenaeus the theologian and exegete, (2) the renewed interest in the nature and practice of pre-modern exegesis, and (3) the relationship between theology and exegesis. In chapter 2, I provide a synopsis of the gnostic doctrine of God and exegesis provided by Irenaeus. While debate exists regarding the reliability of Irenaeus as a source for gnostic theology, I contend that benefit for employing Irenaeus as a reliable source remains. In chapter 3, I investigate Irenaeus's doctrine of God, insisting that Irenaeus was not merely a theologian of the divine economy but demonstrated the more fundamental concern of divine ontology. In chapter 4, I evaluate the intersection of Irenaeus's doctrine of God and exegesis in which the

fundamental theological-exegetical differences between Irenaeus and his opponents become apparent. I maintain that Irenaeus interpreted Scripture through the framework of a Christian doctrine of God while the gnostics interpreted Scripture through a doctrine of God alien to the biblical text. Although distinctions between Irenaeus and his opponents tenuously occur at the level of exegetical method, the more fundamental differences occur at the level of theological metaphysics. In chapter 5, I identify a couple of instantiations in which Irenaeus's doctrine of God and exegesis surface. These include the relationship between "signs" and "things" and prosopological exegesis. Finally, in chapter 6, I bring the entirety of the argument together in recapitulatory fashion.

While I affirm the necessity of exegetical methods and the apparent presence of methods in Irenaeus, this study increases awareness regarding the bedrock for Irenaeus's biblical interpretation—a right understanding of God. This explains why the locus for Irenaeus's disagreement with the gnostics occurred at the level of theological metaphysics rather than merely at the level of the divine economy or exegesis.

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