

# IRENÆUS OF LYONS

ERIC OSBORN

*Honorary Professor, La Trobe University, Melbourne  
and  
Professorial Fellow, University of Melbourne*



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## CHAPTER I

### *Irenaeus: argument and imagery*

#### 1.1 LIFE AND WORK

The original Greek text of Irenaeus' *Against heresies* is found only in fragmentary form, while a complete Latin translation prepared about the year 380 has survived. There are three early manuscripts of the Latin translation, the oldest of which (Claromontanus) dates from the tenth or eleventh century. The others are later (Leydensis, Arundelianus). Erasmus' *editio princeps* of Irenaeus (1526) contains some readings not represented by any of these three manuscripts and the sources from which his variants may derive have since disappeared. Useful editions of *Against heresies* have subsequently been prepared by Massuet, Stieren and Harvey. The recent edition by Rousseau, Doutreleau and others (Sources Chrétiennes) supersedes earlier editions.

Eusebius mentions another work by Irenaeus, *The demonstration of the apostolic preaching*, known since 1907 in a sixth-century Armenian version. Lost works include the *Letter to Florinus* (also known as *Concerning the sole rule of God, or that God is not the author of evil*), *On the Ogdoad*, an attack on the Valentinian Ogdoad, which presents primitive apostolic tradition, *On schism*, addressed to Blastus and *On knowledge*, a refutation of paganism. Irenaeus intended (but did not produce) a work against Marcion (3.12.12). His writings all date from the last two decades of the second century.

Most early theologians were travellers, but their movements and teachers are not always certain. Justin tells us his Palestinian place of birth and philosophical pedigree, and sets his dialogue in Ephesus;<sup>1</sup> his apology and the report of his martyrdom establish that he taught

<sup>1</sup> According to Eusebius, *H.E.* 4.18.8.

and died at Rome. Tertullian illuminates his own native setting in Carthage, but says nothing of time spent elsewhere. Clement of Alexandria tells us where he went to learn (*stromateis* 1.1.11) but does not name his teachers.

We know a little more of Irenaeus' personal life and history. There are limits: despite attempts to prove his non-Hellenic origin, his birthplace remains uncertain. There is wide disagreement on the date of his birth, with estimates from those of Dodwell (AD 98), Grabe (108), Tillémont and Lightfoot (120), Ropes (126), Harvey (130), to those of Dupin, Massuet and Kling (140), Böhringer, Ziegler and others (147). The most probable date lies between 130 and 140.<sup>2</sup> The early estimates ignore the late development of his writing. The late estimates probably make him too young for episcopacy in 177, when he succeeded the ninety-year-old Pothinus. Irenaeus' claim (5.30.3) that the Apocalypse was written towards the end of the reign of Domitian († 96) and near to the time of his own generation makes a year of birth much after 130 improbable, since a generation was commonly reckoned as thirty or forty years.

There is an uncertain tradition that Irenaeus died as a martyr in 202 or 203 during the persecution of Septimius Severus.<sup>3</sup> This claim is first found (410) in Jerome's commentary on Isaiah (ch. 64), but not in his earlier (392) *De viris illustribus*, suggesting that the story may be an interpolation from Gallic traditions concerning the havoc of the persecution in Lyons.

The church at Lyons had begun about the middle of the second century, since those arrested in 177 included its founders. The community was originally Greek and Greek-speaking but included Romans whose Latin names occur among those of the martyrs. Irenaeus indicates a Celtic element in the church and it is clear that, although small, the community represented all social ranks. The churches of Lyons and nearby Vienne were closely related, while connections with Rome and Asia Minor were strong; but the church did not reflect the dominance of the city in the whole of

<sup>2</sup> A. Benoit, *Saint-Irénée, introduction à l'étude de sa théologie* (Paris, 1960), 50.

<sup>3</sup> See J. van der Straeten, 'Saint-Irénée fut-il martyr?', in *Les martyrs de Lyon (177)*, CNRS (Paris, 1978), 145–52. The whole of this book is useful for the understanding of the historical background to Irenaeus.



Gaul.<sup>4</sup> Lyons was the centre, indeed the ‘recapitulation’ where all Gaul came together: ‘All the threads of Roman public service in this great region converged at Lugdunum and were gathered up at that centre.’<sup>5</sup>

Irenaeus was still young when, at the royal court in Smyrna, he heard and saw Polycarp († 155/6).<sup>6</sup> The reference to the ‘royal court’ does not establish that the emperor was there at the time, nor is the emperor to be identified certainly with Hadrian, who was resident at Smyrna for the second time between 127 and 129. The period in question could better refer to 136, when the future emperor Antoninus Pius was in Smyrna as Proconsul of Asia. Irenaeus’ report of Polycarp’s words on the decline of the times imply that Polycarp was an older man when Irenaeus heard him, and that he himself was young. A Moscow manuscript of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* states that Irenaeus was teaching in Rome at the time of Polycarp’s death.

Irenaeus names Polycarp as the dominant influence of his youth. As a bishop, Irenaeus was closer to the collegiate pattern of Polycarp than to the monarchical pattern of Ignatius.<sup>7</sup> We know from Irenaeus (3.3.4) that Polycarp visited Rome two years before his martyrdom to confer with Anicetus on controversy concerning the date of Easter (*H.E.* 5.24.12–17).

Irenaeus elegantly claims to have no rhetoric or excellence of style,<sup>8</sup> but shows some rhetorical skill and a knowledge of the works of Plato, Homer, Hesiod and Pindar. Although he does not confront the philosophical tradition as do Clement and Origen, his account of God reveals his awareness of the Middle Platonic and Stoic philosophies of the day. He may have gone to Rome to study rhetoric and then gone on to Lyons.<sup>9</sup> However, Smyrna was a centre of the Second Sophistic movement and his skills could have been learnt at home. His attack on Sophists may be seen as turning

<sup>4</sup> Benoit, *Introduction*, 52–5.

<sup>5</sup> James S. Reid, *The municipalities of the Roman empire* (Cambridge, 1913), 179.

<sup>6</sup> Irenaeus, *Letter to Florinus*, in Eusebius, *H.E.* 4.14.

<sup>7</sup> J. de Roulet, ‘Saint Irénée évêque’, *RHPPhR* 73.3 (1993), 261–80.

<sup>8</sup> This does not mean, as Harvey argues, that he was of Syrian origin. See W. Harvey, *Against heresies*, text (Cambridge, 1857), vol. 1, cliv.

<sup>9</sup> P. Nautin, *Lettres et écritains chrétiens des IIe et IIIe siècles* (Paris, 1961), 93. See whole section 33–104.

sophistic weapons against their owners, although Benoit considered that he 'has not totally assimilated rhetoric'.<sup>10</sup> His dominating love of truth came through Justin, from Socrates, Plato and Paul.

Irenaeus travelled (by way of Rome) to the great city of Lyons, situated at the confluence of the Rhône and the Saône in the centre of Celtic Gaul, which at that time stretched from the Seine to the Garonne.<sup>11</sup> During the persecution of the church at Lyons in 177, he carried a letter from the confessors in Lyons to Eleutherus, bishop of Rome. It is possible that Irenaeus was already bishop of Vienne and that he took over the care of both churches when Pothinus died. This would explain why Irenaeus was not himself in prison at the time.<sup>12</sup> Irenaeus' journey, 'for the peace of the churches', was on behalf of the confessors at Lyons (*H.E.* 5.3.4). In the same year Pothinus, bishop of Lyons, died in prison, and Irenaeus succeeded to his office. Irenaeus' participation in current controversies extended into Victor's tenure as bishop of Rome. His *Against heresies*<sup>13</sup> was written at Lyons.

We have in a letter an extended account of the persecution at Lyons. The servants of Christ in Vienne and Lyons send to Asian and Phrygian brethren a greeting for 'peace, grace and glory' based on a common faith and hope in redemption (*H.E.* 5.1.3). The violent sufferings of the martyrs are contrasted with their moderation and humanity (*H.E.* 5.2.7). The churches of Vienne and Lyons enjoy peace and concord because of the virtues of the martyrs. Vettius Epagathas, for instance, 'possesses fullness of love to God and neighbour', is fervent in the spirit and is the comforter of Christians because he has within him the comforter, the spirit. The fullness of his love is seen in his defence of his brothers, for whom he gives his life (*H.E.* 5.1.9-10). The criterion of a true prophet is not asceticism but love of

<sup>10</sup> See Benoit, *Introduction* (58-9), who cites A. Boulanger, *Aelius Aristide et la sophistique dans les provinces d'Asie-Mineure au IIe siècle de notre ère* (Paris, 1923), 441-4. See also F. Sagnard, *La gnose valentinienne et le témoignage de saint Irénée* (Paris, 1947), 69-80 and R. M. Grant, 'Irenaeus and hellenistic culture', *HTHR* 42 (1949), 41-51.

<sup>11</sup> L. Cracco Ruggini, 'Les structures de la société et de l'économie lyonnaises par rapport à la politique locale et impériale', in *Les martyrs* (177), 65-97.

<sup>12</sup> Nautin, *Lettres et écrits*, 94.

<sup>13</sup> The shorter title given to 'Unmasking and overthrow of so-called knowledge'.

God and neighbour.<sup>14</sup> The story of Blandina gives the same pre-eminence to love (*H.E.* 5.1.55–6). Pothinus was fortified by the power of the spirit with a burning desire to be a martyr (*H.E.* 5.1.29). The martyrs had the holy spirit as their counsellor (*H.E.* 5.3.3), and Irenaeus came with their commendation (*H.E.* 5.4).<sup>15</sup>

In the brief letter to Eleutherus, the martyrs commend Irenaeus as brother, companion and ‘zealous for the covenant of Christ’ (*H.E.* 5.4.2), a description reminiscent of Elijah, who was very zealous for the Lord God (1 Kings 19:14), and of Mattathias, who was zealous for the law (1 Macc. 2:27).<sup>16</sup> Eusebius’ claim that Irenaeus was a peacemaker in name and nature (*H.E.* 5.24.18) is not simply a play on words but a fact borne out by Irenaeus’ life and work (*H.E.* 5.23–5).

His irenic approach shows that his objection to heresies on matters of faith had little to do with a struggle for power. Peace was strengthened by disagreement on points which were not matters of faith (*H.E.* 5.24). Even on matters of faith, elsewhere he prays for his adversaries whom he loves more than they love themselves (3.25.7). Eusebius considers the Easter controversy to be very serious. The Roman church’s authoritarian intervention in the controversy shocked the churches. Irenaeus stood in the middle of this debate; his theology of redemption, while close to the view of the Quartodecimans as expounded by Melito, was quite compatible with the Roman view of Easter. Irenaeus argued to Victor that both parties in the controversy should be free to celebrate Easter in the tradition of their own church, pointing out that no Roman predecessor had thought it necessary to excommunicate the churches of Asia Minor for their adherence to a primitive practice (*H.E.* 5.24).

Irenaeus explains the difference between the Quartodeciman practice of the Asian churches and other churches, who refused to end their fast on any other day than Sunday, the day of resurrection.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Une telle présentation insistant sur l’amour et le Saint Esprit se pose discrètement en antithèse de Montan et de ses prophétesses’, E. Lanne, ‘Saint Irénée de Lyon, artisan de la paix entre les églises’, *Iren* 69 (1996), 457.

<sup>15</sup> Lanne, ‘Saint Irénée de Lyon’, 458–9.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 460.

If the Quartodeciman practice could not claim ancient and apostolic tradition, Polycrates of Ephesus found a basis for this position in Philip and John, who kept the fourteenth day according to the gospel and the rule of faith (*H.E.* 5.24.6). He agrees that the mystery of resurrection should be celebrated only on the Lord's day, but urges Victor not to reject those churches which hold to an ancient custom. He goes on to talk of different traditions of fasting which had their origin in the past. Our predecessors (he argues), without precision, preserved and transmitted their custom in simplicity; despite their differences, they kept the peace. In striking words, he claims that 'disagreement on fasting validates the agreement on faith';<sup>17</sup> differences of practice had been tolerated because they did not compromise the essential unity of the faith. In the second passage which Eusebius cites, Irenaeus offers examples from history – Roman bishops before Soter had accepted the Quartodeciman practice. They did not observe this practice themselves, but maintained peace with those who did. Irenaeus gives the example of Polycarp and Anicetus. When Polycarp visited Rome, the bishop deferred to him in sacramental communion. Accordingly, peace should prevail rather than uniformity of practice. Matters of faith are different, because, as he points out (1.10.1, 2), there was one faith throughout the world.

In Irenaeus' explanation (4.33) of Paul's words that a truly spiritual disciple judges all and is himself judged by no one (1 Cor. 2:15), a reference to the Montanist controversy has been discerned: he who has received the spirit of God stands in succession to the prophets whose history of salvation he interprets. The truly spiritual disciple confronts the 'pneumatics', the heretics who reject the truth of the church. He also judges false prophets, those who cause schism, who lack the love of God, and who divide the great and glorious body of Christ; these strain at a gnat and swallow a camel (4.33.7). Irenaeus goes on to speak about the supreme gift of love that joins the martyr to the true prophet and to the truly spiritual disciple.

The name of Irenaeus as a peacemaker spread far and wide. A fragment of *Against heresies*, found at Oxyrhynchus, is contemporary

<sup>17</sup> και ἡ διαφωνία τῆς νηστείας τὴν ὁμόνοιαν τῆς πίστεως συνίστησι.

with Irenaeus himself. This shows the speed with which his ideas concerning concord between different traditions influenced the whole church.

How close was the link between the churches of Asia and Lyons? Opinions differ. Bowersock denies all relation between the churches of Lyons and Asia. Kraft claims the church at Lyons to be pre-Montanist and closely linked with Asia. Mondésert sums up the controversy as ‘not proven’. Frend claims that the church at Lyons, originally touched by Montanism, came to reject it because of its divisive tendencies.<sup>18</sup>

#### 1.2 IRENAEUS PHILOSOPHUS?

The perennial appeal of Irenaeus springs, says Sagnard, from his sincerity and optimism.<sup>19</sup> In 1526 Erasmus wrote with enthusiasm of the freshness and vigour which he found in the work he edited. The writings of Irenaeus seemed fresh with the first force of the gospel and the dedication of one who is ready to die for his faith. Martyrs have a distinctive diction which is earnest, strong and bold. Irenaeus gained these qualities because of his proximity to the days of the apostles and the flowers of martyrdom. He had listened avidly to Polycarp, who had known apostles who had seen and heard the lord and who possessed a vivid and comprehensive memory. From such beginnings the writings of Irenaeus convey the heart of the gospel and the aspiration of martyrdom.

Irenaeus’ strength of mind and strong digestive system (*patientis stomachi*) enabled him, said Erasmus, to handle the tedious monstrosities of the heretics. His opponent Valentinus was a most pompous Platonist who turned his gifts to the confusion of the church and the fabrication of intricate fables. Against the carping of impious philosophers, the philosophy of the gospel is established in strength. While Irenaeus is provoked by the censures of the heretics, his chief concern is positive; the response far exceeds the stimulus. He must use the whole armament of the divine scriptures to confirm the truth which has been attacked. The first Christian

<sup>18</sup> See *Les martyrs* (177), where each of these views is stated.

<sup>19</sup> Sagnard, *La gnose valentinienne*, 78–9.

conflict had been against the Jews. The second was against philosophers and heretics. Philosophy which had caused the trouble, provided the cure. When Valentinus philosophus attacked the church, Justin philosophus and Irenaeus philosophus defended it. Marcion philosophus was answered by Tertullian philosophus and Celsus philosophus by Origen philosophus. Erasmus concludes with the hope that God will raise up peacemakers (Irenaei) to lead the church of his day out of its troubles.

Despite his physical revulsion against the theosophical maunderings of Valentinus, Erasmus still calls him a philosopher. Here he follows the convention of his time and brings out the point that the contest was intellectual and not a struggle for power. Valentinus may have lacked all the qualities which Erasmus looked for in a human mind, but he had to be elevated to the status of philosopher in order to be attacked by argument.<sup>20</sup> Today questions of genre ('Is X a philosopher?') are rightly considered less important than the identification of 'the people with poetic gifts, all the original minds who had a talent for redescription'.<sup>21</sup> Gnostics cited philosophical opinions without argument, and philosophy without argument is like opera without music, ballet without movement and Shakespeare without words. Irenaeus shows less knowledge of philosophy than he does of literature and rhetoric. Philosophers' opinions (cited thirty-two times, chiefly in Book 2), as distinct from the practice of argument, were of little use.<sup>22</sup> They are never an indication of philosophy, which may be found rather in Irenaeus' love of argument, subtlety of reasoning, and sense of measure and harmony.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, because of popular convention and inevitable misunderstanding, it is unwise to follow Erasmus in speaking of Irenaeus as a philosopher.

<sup>20</sup> Today we might distinguish between a philosopher's philosopher and an historian's philosopher. A philosopher's philosopher argues about such subjects as God, freedom, immortality, logic, epistemology, aesthetics, ethics and such subjects as have been linked with them by philosophical convention. Clement of Alexandria, following Aristotle, insisted that philosophy was necessary, because if you argued that it was not you had already begun to philosophize. The historian's philosopher cites the opinions of philosophers, arguing very little if at all.

<sup>21</sup> R. Rorty, *Contingency, irony and solidarity* (Cambridge, 1989), 76.

<sup>22</sup> Benoit, *Introduction*, 73

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 50 and Sagnard, *La gnose valentinienne*, 70–7.

## 1.3 THE UNEXPECTED JUNGLE

No one has presented a more unified account of God, the world and history than has Irenaeus. From the moment of his creation, Adam never left the hands of God. The entire universe, visible and invisible, has been brought together in Christ. 'There is one God the father . . . and one Christ our lord who comes through the whole economy to sum up the universe in himself . . . and as head of the church he draws all things to himself at the proper time' (3.16.6). 'There is nothing out of place' (3.16.7). This unbroken unity embraces opposites, as prophets and psalms declare that the man without beauty, humble and humiliated is holy lord, wonderful counsellor, beautiful, mighty God and coming judge (3.19.2). In contrast to this universal synthesis, the reader of Irenaeus is confronted by stark problems of incoherence, which provoked the conclusion by two great scholars that the thought of Irenaeus is a jungle (*Urwald, forêt vierge*).<sup>24</sup> No careful reader of Irenaeus can avoid the sense of confusion.

The nineteenth century produced many valuable expositions of Irenaeus. Duncker found a system in Irenaeus which cohered around his christology. Irenaeus had turned to John for theology, to Paul for anthropology, and his christology joined these two different tendencies. Later writers denied the systematic nature of the doctrine of Irenaeus, although they did not agree on the kind of system they were rejecting. Ziegler would not set out a coherent system which began from a central point and showed breaks within the system presented by Duncker. What we have in Irenaeus, according to Ziegler, is not so much his own system but rather the common doctrine of the ancient church. Irenaeus the bishop wishes to set out the main points of the doctrine of the universal church. Harnack adopted a fragmentary approach to Irenaeus: there was no synthesis, but many separate pieces of tradition which needed to be identified. The ruling principles were that the same God was creator and saviour and that Jesus Christ is saviour as God who has become man.

<sup>24</sup> Literally 'primeval forest', 'virgin forest': Koch and D'Alès respectively. The former describes Irenaeus as a confused compiler 'doctor constructivus et confusus'.

In the early twentieth century, Bonwetsch produced a lucid and concise account, then Koch claimed a limited coherence on the subject of Adam and evolution but could not credit Irenaeus with anything like general coherence. Beuzart did not see any conceptual scheme in Irenaeus, whose thought he deemed to be governed by polemic and practical needs. Consequently the difficulties and obscurities do not reward investigation. Lawson found nothing systematic in Irenaeus but believed that the many details of his thought had a common effect.

The scene remains confused. The distinguished major contributor, Orbe, has established a school of interpretation which follows his own voluminous work. Orbe takes the whole of Irenaeus seriously, understands him profoundly and explores him endlessly. Yet Orbe's success is almost a deterrent, because he refuses to abbreviate the rich complexity of Irenaeus and the mass of argument and imagery leaves readers overwhelmed.

In English there have been two recent short works, both written as part of a series based on a particular method. Grant set out the historical and cultural background of Irenaeus and selected passages which illuminate the background and the content of Irenaeus. While Minns is aware of complexity, a necessary brevity limits his exposition to Irenaeus' account of what become the main elements of Christian doctrine.<sup>25</sup> Fantino and Sesboué offer extended treatments and other works may be expected, for there is interest in Irenaeus and appreciation of his worth. Much of the recent energy expended in Irenaeian studies has gone into the preparation of an excellent text and translation, where the work of Rousseau and Doutreleau displays depth of understanding.

#### 1.4 SOURCE CRITICISM AND CONCEPTUAL BANKRUPTCY

Early in the twentieth century, there appeared a remarkable work of source criticism which was to define the mood of scholarship for many years. Loofs analysed the writing of Irenaeus into four or five main sources which were mutually incoherent.<sup>26</sup> According to

<sup>25</sup> This is justified because Irenaeus claims that all thinking must be done in the context of the rule of faith.

<sup>26</sup> Loofs built on earlier work of Harnack and Bousset.



Loofs, Irenaeus was, if anything, a bad theologian, and perhaps not even a theologian at all. Loofs concluded, 'Irenaeus has become a much slighter figure as a theological writer than was previously supposed . . . As a theologian he has become even smaller.'<sup>27</sup> Irenaeus was so confused that he allowed the attribute of divinity not only to the father and the son but also to believers (it did not occur to Loofs that this was what anyone might find in the Fourth Gospel). Further, Irenaeus' favourite theme of recapitulation is a trivial flourish which has no real basis in his thought.<sup>28</sup> Theophilus had done a better job. Only, concludes Loofs, when one distinguishes his own meagre theological contribution from the priceless sources which he conveyed, is it possible to understand why Irenaeus was so prized in the ancient church.<sup>29</sup>

While negative response to this analysis came from several sides, such as that of Montgomery Hitchcock, and Loofs' argument was taken apart, the composite nature of Irenaeus was sufficiently accepted to make further exposition insecure. In the middle of the century, Benoit wrote his introduction to the study of Irenaeus, a lucid work in which he indicated that the theology of Irenaeus must wait for an expositor. There was too much incoherence, he believed, to write anything more than an introduction. From the beginning he rejected Loofs' conclusions as incomplete because it seemed that Loofs had made no attempt to understand the total thought of Irenaeus.<sup>30</sup> He pleaded, 'Is it not possible today, after these analytic studies and the many works of detail on Irenaeus to give a more synthetic account of his thought and his theology?'<sup>31</sup> Since then, there have been many works on particular themes of Irenaeus, and the secondary literature has not ceased to grow.

<sup>27</sup> F. Loofs, *Theophilus von Antiochien adversus Marcionem und die anderen theologischen Quellen bei Irenaeus*, TU 46,2 (Leipzig, 1930), 432.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 434: 'wenn man davon absieht, was er an Lesefrüchten in dies bunte Gefäß hineingesteckt hat'. In source analysis, incompatible strands may be assigned to different sources before a thorough search for conceptual coherence has been made.

<sup>29</sup> Yet Loofs was not content with a fragmentary view of Irenaeus but analysed the sources of the different sections and then looked for something which joined them all together.

<sup>30</sup> Benoit, *Introduction*, 35: 'il faut . . . achever le travail de Loofs . . . il faut reconstituer l'image d'ensemble . . . retrouver la vie intérieure et profonde qui a animé cet homme que fut Irénée'. He cites Marc Bloch, 'l'objet de l'histoire est par nature l'homme' and H-I. Marrou, 'c'est la complexité du réel, de l'homme qui est l'objet de l'histoire'.

<sup>31</sup> Benoit, *Introduction*, 40-1.

In contrast to the general trend, Wingren<sup>32</sup> found in Irenaeus the fusion of all previous Christian tradition into a harmonious whole. Without predecessors, Irenaeus unified the many strands of Christian thought. Dominant in this unification was the concept of God's historical dealing with man (1.10.3). The first two and a half books of *Against heresies* provide a straightforward view of saving history in opposition to the Gnostics. Here Irenaeus is concerned with the one creator God through whose economy 'the cosmos and history are embraced and held, given form and order and healed and redeemed'.<sup>33</sup>

A second criticism (conceptual bankruptcy) was far more serious than that of Loofs. Koch, after a successful analysis of Irenaeus' motif of education, nevertheless insisted that one should not look for concepts in Irenaeus whose mind works with intuitions and impressions, or even in verbal play. He was not a man of ideas, according to Koch, and we should not look for rational coherence in his writings. Houssiau, on the other hand, usefully looked for cohesion or harmony within the ideas of Irenaeus, an aesthetic rather than a logical consistency.<sup>34</sup> The key criterion for Irenaeus is what is appropriate or fitting, *to prepon* (τὸ πρέπον). Particular concepts of Irenaeus have drawn exploration from many scholars. The most recent example is the work by John Behr on Irenaeus' anthropology. Within the limits of these specific studies Irenaeus has been shown, time and again, to be a creative and consistent thinker. Finally, Fantino produced what Benoit happily welcomed as the 'theology of Irenaeus' for which he had waited and, most recently, Sesboüé has shown the coherence of Irenaeus' thought around the central issue of recapitulation.

#### 1.5 CONTENT, CONTOUR AND CONFLICT

Five centrifugal factors – diversity of adversary, tradition, scripture, imagery and aphorism – diffuse the thought of Irenaeus. Firstly, the

<sup>32</sup> G. Wingren, *Man and the incarnation. A study in the biblical theology of Irenaeus* (Edinburgh, 1959).

<sup>33</sup> M. Widmann, 'Irenäus und seine theologischen Väter', *ζThK* 54 (1957), 160.

<sup>34</sup> But see the limitations of his work as indicated by Benoit and Daniélou at Benoit, *Introduction*, 40–1.

diverse opinions and the particularity of Gnostic schools oblige him to wander into different paths. Secondly, Irenaeus does not want to say anything new. The tradition of the gospel is clear; yet tradition is never homogeneous, but always marked by particular insights. Thirdly, scripture is the supreme source of apostolic and prophetic tradition. The variety of biblical witness seems invincible. Fourthly, a mixture of images and ideas is never tidy. The exuberant images are not a cadenza, a flourish within the main work, but the origin of ideas. Fifthly, Irenaeus is concerned to purify the language of the church and has the gift of striking utterance. His aphorisms are famous ('The glory of God is a living man and the life of man is the vision of God', 4.20.7) but their meaning is never obvious. Just as Tertullian's striking aphorisms concerning Athens and Jerusalem, or concerning the paradox of God and man, led his interpreters time and again to misunderstand, so Irenaeus' brilliant sayings may further disrupt the coherence of his work.

When confronted by such confusion, it is wise to ask three questions concerning *content, contour and conflict*.

The first question concerns *content*. What does Irenaeus say? The overall plan of his *Against heresies* is straightforward. In the first book, he sets out systems of gnosis with many variants. He gives a genealogy of the Gnostic schools and makes the claim that to overcome gnosis one needs simply to reveal and unmask. In Book 2, he sets out a refutation of the doctrines he has listed in Book 1. He refutes the heretical account of pleroma and aeons, the arithmetical and exegetical exercises, and the account of the final consummation. Then comes a refutation of the doctrines of those who are not Valentinian. He speaks of the magic of Carpocrates and Simon, of moral licentiousness, of transmigration of souls. The different heavens of Basilides and the plurality of gods are all attacked. In Book 3, he begins from the authority and truth of scriptures, and then goes on to argue for the unicity of God and the unicity of Christ. This he does on the basis of scriptures. Book 4 has two main parts – in the first, Irenaeus refutes Gnosticism on the grounds of the clear and unambiguous statements of Jesus, and in the second he refutes their account on the basis of the parables of Jesus. There are two smaller sections, one which deals with the prophecies and the prophets, and the other

which deals with human free will. Book 5 is even simpler in its outline. It deals first with the words of Paul on the resurrection of the flesh, moves on to an extended account of the recapitulation in Christ and concludes with an exegesis of the temptation and two treatises, one on the Antichrist and the other on the millennium. The content, therefore, of the books, can be set out and seen at a glance.

Further, unity of content may be noted in the way in which the rule of faith brings clarity. God the father is perfect, omnipresent, sovereign mind, and the source of all good. God creates all things out of nothing, and man is his creature. God's plan is fulfilled through his constant activity from the beginning. The hands of God, the son and spirit never leave man but accustom him to God as they accustom God to man. Another theme which holds Irenaeus' thought together is the doctrine of recapitulation. By his life, death and resurrection, Christ corrected what had gone wrong in Adam and perfected what was begun in Adam. He inaugurated a new humanity which would find its consummation in the future. Because gnosis began with epistemology Irenaeus has a constant concern for truth and argument. The bible stands in the centre and Irenaeus is the first witness to a Christian bible containing works from old and new testaments. His understanding of scripture is not literal and biblicist, but theological and analytic. His ideas are formed through an understanding of the theology of Paul and John rather than from an accumulation of texts.<sup>35</sup> He takes from John the theme of glory and presents an aesthetic theology. Anthropology is a central concern, because Gnostics present a distinctive account of captive man. Man is made in the image and likeness of God and consists of body and soul with a gift of the divine spirit by which eternal life is possible. The ethical questions which are important in his conflict with the Gnostics concern free will, the martyr's love of truth and the love of enemies, for it is on the cross where Jesus forgives his enemies that God is most perfectly seen.

The second question concerns *contour*. There is a remarkable unity of content in Irenaeus through the rule of faith and the

<sup>35</sup> Like Clement of Alexandria, he interprets *kata noun* as distinct from *kata lexin*.

sequence of his own ideas. This is reassuring, but does not indicate a comprehensive account. All these themes may be found elsewhere in early Christian literature and they do not indicate the originality which we can sense in Irenaeus. Therefore we ask whether there is a shape to be found in his thought. Complex authors have an intellectual physiognomy which offers a way forward. Irenaeus invites diagrams, and many useful diagrams of his doctrine of recapitulation have been produced.<sup>36</sup> How did he think, how did he prove, how did he understand the ways of God? A good image is that of the hourglass lying on its side so that it presents a movement from left to right. It begins with creation and ends with the consummation of all things. The first half of the hourglass bears on its sides the message of the prophets. The visions of the prophets represent the mind of God, and take the place for Irenaeus of the world of Platonic forms. Like the forms, they reach a first principle in Christ as the Christian equivalent of the form of the good. The narrow neck of the hourglass is the recapitulation of all things in Christ, and the second half of the hourglass bears on its side the message of the prophets and the words of Christ and the apostles. Within the hourglass the believer lives, looking to the prophets through Christ and looking to the Gospels and the writings of the apostles. These represent the mind of God and find their climax in a form of perfect goodness which is Christ who sums up all things.

Irenaeus presents a continuous history which has a distinctive shape, where sources of knowledge are given through prophets and apostles to provide knowledge of truth. Irenaeus displays a form of horizontal Platonism.<sup>37</sup> Christ the rising sun sheds his light over the world and brings light to those who receive it. The prophets, saints and apostles, and above all the words of Jesus, take the place of the Platonic forms. So we may understand Irenaeus and his exegesis, which bounces off the sides of the hourglass in ways which

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, B. Sesboué, *Tout récapituler dans le Christ, christologie et sotériologie d'Irénéus de Lyon* (Paris, 2000), 182.

<sup>37</sup> In attributing a Platonic paradigm I am describing the general structure which the culture has imposed on his thought and not a conscious allegiance. We are all members of a linguistic community, which shapes our language. 'For it is not words which refer but speakers using words' who refer to the reality we confront; J. M. Soskice, *Metaphor and religious language* (Oxford, 1985), 136, with acknowledgement to Hilary Putnam, 'Realism and reason', in *Meaning and the moral sciences* (London, 1978), 123.

are provocative. His cadenzas are important because they indicate divine truth in the words of prophets, Christ and the apostles. The prolixity of Irenaeus is not a problem when we see it as an attempt to convey the richness of the mind of God as found in scripture.

Irenaeus was not conscious of this Platonic pattern in his thought; he did not acknowledge the authority of any philosopher and his accounts of body, physical world, incarnation and history were opposite to those of Plato. This Platonic pattern was simply the way in which most minds of his time functioned and, in order to communicate and to think alongside them, he reflected a Platonic structure. We may call this a Platonic paradigm, and it may increase hostility towards Christians from professed Platonists (like Celsus), who acknowledge a loyalty to Plato. It is remarkable when we look at Celsus alongside Origen, or Marcus Aurelius alongside Tertullian, to find how similar is the logic of thought in opposing sides. Without this similar structure, there was no way in which attack or communication could take place. Irenaeus had taken many of his Platonic insights from Justin, who equally rejected any philosophical school, and insisted that truth was above and beyond particular allegiance.

The third method for tracking down an elusive thinker is to look at the points where his interpreters have disagreed vigorously. These points of *conflict* will show that he has given grounds for opposing views, and that his own view must be one which allows for interpretation in opposite directions.

Consider first the various interpretations of Irenaeus' use of image and likeness. Here it has been argued that Irenaeus makes no distinction between image and likeness, or that for him the image is distinct from likeness and permanent in face of the variable likeness. Many ways of identification have been followed because of the later Christian use of this phrase. There is an answer to the puzzle to be found in the Platonic relation of participation, assimilation or communion. A particular participates in a form and draws from the form its being and identity. It can never become the form, but can only become like the form. Plato talks, in his simplest account, about the bed, which the carpenter makes, as being a copy, image or likeness of the form of the ideal bed in heaven. In Irenaeus the image of God given in creation is the beginning of the process of

growing like God. Because it is part of creation it will remain in all humans; all will have the possibility of participation and assimilation to God. What Adam lost was the likeness to God, which sprang from his participation. The affinity which lay behind this assimilation remained. Participation means that which participates both is and is not the object or form in which it participates. So it is possible for man to participate in God and still fall far short of God. Likeness to God can grow in humans, but never cease to be likeness rather than identity.

Or again, consider the arguments that have raged about Irenaeus' thought on the nature of man. Is man body, soul and spirit, or is he body and soul to be enlivened by the spirit of God? Here again Irenaeus follows the tradition of Justin, that the soul is not life, but participates in life. Therefore, apart from the spirit of God, the soul cannot live. Man as a living being must be body, soul and spirit. But the spirit is not a part of man in the way in which his body and soul are parts. The spirit comes from God. How then, his interpreters have puzzled, is the spirit of man to be considered? Is it divine spirit or is it merely a part of a human being? For Irenaeus the relationship between man and the divine spirit is one of participation. Body and soul participate in the divine spirit. Their participation is not complete identity and therefore must be considered as a copy, a pledge, or a share. It is and it is not divine spirit; it is a participation.

These two examples show that Irenaeus used a Platonic move to explain the relation of man to God. Man's perception of God, by which he gained life, was his participation in God. No one would deny that the Platonic concept of participation is full of difficulties; however, Plato was aware of those difficulties and even after he had stated them in the *Parmenides* still used the notion of participation to govern the relation between particulars and forms. Irenaeus uses this relationship to express man's real but incomplete participation in the life of God.

It will become increasingly clear that Irenaeus draws from his Platonic paradigm not merely an outline which presents his ethics, metaphysics and logic as a dialectic which culminates in Christ as first principle, but also the notion of participation, which governs the second half of this book.

## 1.6 TRUTH AND BEAUTY: THE TWO CRITERIA

Irenaeus is an enthusiast, and an enthusiast betrays his motives by the way in which he writes. The dominant values of Irenaeus may be grasped when we stand back from the text. First, Irenaeus follows Justin as a lover of truth. He is concerned to argue and to expose error, just as Socrates was first interested in the love of truth, which he set above life itself. Justin had taken this theme in his apology to the emperor, just as Socrates had done in his apology.<sup>38</sup> The passion for truth, which marked the Platonic tradition, governs Irenaeus in his approach to heresy, following the aphorism ‘amicus Plato, magis amica veritas’. This is what moves Irenaeus from the beginning to the end of his work. He is concerned to argue, expose, illuminate and expound. Furthermore, he gives us his criterion for truth and sets out a rule, which contains the test of any proposition. Just as philosophers followed a rule, so Irenaeus has a rule which he is prepared to state.

The freshness of Irenaeus is due first to his passion for truth and, secondly, to his sense of beauty and proportion, which is needed because his source of truth is prophetic vision, not Platonic argument. He has a theological aesthetic which culminates in the vision of divine glory. The prophets speak as moved by the spirit and in description of their prophetic vision. This gives them immediate access to the mind of God. Therefore the interpreter of the bible must take the patterns of saving history and link them in a way that is fitting. The recurring argument in Irenaeus’ exegesis has been characterised as *decet – fieri potest – ergo est* (it is fitting – it is possible – therefore it is).<sup>39</sup> Like the philosopher of Plato, the interpreter who sees the divine dialectic, divides and joins the visions which come to him.

The standard of *to prepon*, what is fitting or appropriate, governs the coherence of biblical imagery. It has a long history in classical and Hellenistic thought.<sup>40</sup> The verb appears in Homer with the

<sup>38</sup> See my *Justin Martyr* (Tübingen, 1973), 77–86.

<sup>39</sup> J. Hoh, *Die Lehre des hl. Irenäus über das Neue Testament* (Münster, 1919), 112. Here Hoh says that this method could not refute Gnostic interpretation, because it was arbitrary and overdone. ‘Das Prinzip von der Tiefe der Schrift wird zu Tode geritten mit der (latent wirkenden) Schlussformel: decet – fieri potest – ergo est.’

<sup>40</sup> The following synopsis of a controversial and wide-ranging theme is indebted to Max Pohlenz, ‘τὸ πρέπον, ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des griechischen Geistes’, *NAWG.PH 1* (1933), 53–93.



elementary meaning of 'what appears or seems', but moves quickly to become a concept of value so that 'what seems' is 'what is seemly'. In Aeschylus, for example, certain behaviour is appropriate to grief, and victory is appropriate to mortals. The verb now occurs in the third person only, frequently impersonal, while the participle *prepon* continues to be used.

So it is common to speak of types of behaviour which are appropriate for the old, for the young, for man, for woman, for slave and for free. Plato especially develops this idea. Ion speaks of the essence of his art as enabling each to speak in an appropriate manner, whether man or woman, slave or free, ruler or ruled, and in the *Gorgias* Plato speaks of painters, architects and others as having the one concern to join different things together and to harmonise them in a way which is appropriate (*Gorg.* 503e–504a). In oratory, mere technical skill is not enough. The true orator also needs to combine a sense of time with what is fitting and what is new. Already by the year 400 BC aesthetic theory requires that poetry and prose follow proportion in arrangement of parts and in the adjustment to persons concerned and the object under discussion. For Plato *to prepon* must also be applied to music (*Republic* 399a), and Aristides Quintilianus later defines music as combining voices and movement in what is fitting (*On music* 4.1).

The Greek mind demands form, proportion and appropriateness between reality and appearance, between presentation and content, between parts and whole.<sup>41</sup> The important thing for the artist is not whether his working material is precious, but whether it is appropriate (*Hippias Major* 29of); beauty is defined in terms of *to prepon* (*Hippias Major* 293e). This is joined to what pleases ear and eye. An intellectual investigation for Plato is also governed by what is fitting. There is no mathematical or chronological limit to an inquiry, but only what is appropriate (*Statesman* 284e).

Aristotle uses the notion of what is fitting in his *Ethics*, and especially in his *Rhetoric* (3.1403b–4b; 1408ab). Good prose must steer a fitting course between poetry and common speech. In both prose and poetry, each topic is dealt with in an appropriate way. Rhetoric

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

must reflect the moral character and the feelings of the speakers and be appropriate to the object which is described. Theophrastus and Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*De compositione verborum* 10–13, 20) wrote similarly. Cicero also (*Orator ad M. Brutum* 71) speaks of *decorum*, by which subject matter, speaker and hearer are joined in an appropriate way. The one kind of oratory cannot be used to different persons at different times on different subjects.

Horace begins his *Ars poetica* with the demand that each element should have its appropriate place. A thing may be beautiful only in its place. Quintilian insists that in rhetoric every excellence requires its appropriate place. Only in relation to the whole can an individual excellence be exhibited (*Institutio oratoria* 11.1.2). Similarly in architecture, Vitruvius begins (*De architectura* 1.2) with order, disposition, rhythm, symmetry, decor and economy as the six excellences of design.

Fitness/appropriateness became a central value of classical culture. Beginning from what is appropriate to certain human groups, it moves to what is appropriate to personal identity, art and ethics. The end of this development does not emerge until the Hellenistic time. Only here does aesthetic perception gain a stature beside reason and intellect.

#### 1.7 THE FOUR CONCEPTS

At the end of a penetrating essay,<sup>42</sup> Hugo Koch acknowledged a coherence in Irenaeus' soteriology, which had been regarded as contradictory. Koch insisted, however, that this did not cancel all the contradictions of Irenaeus' intellectual jungle, for Irenaeus is not a man of concepts but of words and images. He brings his interpreters to despair, for no sooner have they clarified his ideas on a particular point, than he leads them out of sunlight into fog. 'He has precisely no concepts, but images, visions, impressions, moods and often nothing but words. Life, death, resurrection, immortality, incorruptibility, image and likeness, spirit – these words do not express consistently the same ideas, but are used sometimes in a

<sup>42</sup> Hugo Koch, 'Zur Lehre vom Urstand und von der Erlösung bei Irenaeus', *ThStK* 96–7 (1925), 183–214.