

CHAPTER ONE

Who Was Irenaeus?

An Introduction to the Man and His Work

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Who was Irenaeus? This chapter will attempt to provide some sort of an answer to that rather complex question while, along the way, introducing some of the key literature that helps to articulate the study of Irenaeus.

We could try to answer it by looking at the bare bones of the little that is known of his life: he came from the East, was bishop of Lyons in the 180s, and wrote a monumental *Against the Heresies*. But that sort of an answer would not give us a handle on why he really matters—on why the question is of more than antiquarian interest in the first place.

Or we could give an answer in terms of his “achievement,” which might involve us in talking about his role in the development of the very notions of orthodoxy and heresy or his contribution to a doctrine of “apostolic succession” or an understanding of the role of tradition in the life of the Church. But there are at least two problems there. One is the obvious fact that that sort of an approach means treating him as a sort of disembodied mind—“notions,” “doctrine,” “understanding”—rather than as one passionately engaged in the struggles and in the dramas of the world he lived in. And the other is the rather subtler danger of viewing him only from our end, as it were, for focusing on such “achievements” inevitably means privileging the problems and questions of later ages and that in turn means both belittling and distorting his thought by trying to wedge it into later categories. And the Irenaeus we are then left with is an inevitably divisive character because in the foreground as we look at him are issues that have caused and continue to cause division both within the Church and among the churches.¹

So I would like to approach the question from another angle—by looking at the first more or less coherent account we have of Irenaeus and seeing how it does and how it does not fit the a priori questions we might be tempted to raise. That earliest account comes from the *Historia Ecclesiastica* of Eusebius of Caesarea, the first edition of which was produced shortly before the year 300.²

Eusebius tells us that Irenaeus (1) had in his youth been a “hearer” of Polycarp of Smyrna and (2) became bishop of Lyons in Gaul sometime around 180. He gives (3) a

catalogue of Irenaeus's own writings, at least those "that have come to our knowledge" (*HE* V.26) and (4) an account of the books Irenaeus accepted as canonical. He is (5) suspicious of Irenaeus's views on chiliasm and the thousand-year reign of Christ but (6) knows him as a man of peace—which is, after all, what the name "Irenaeus" means—and as one who was active and influential in the ecclesiastical affairs of his day.

Those six points deserve to be looked at one at a time.

Polycarp of Smyrna

First, Polycarp. Irenaeus twice says that he knew Polycarp. In a letter that Eusebius quotes but which is otherwise lost to us, Irenaeus reminds the Florinus to whom it is addressed that "I saw you when I was still a boy, in lower Asia" and recounts how "I can speak of the place in which the blessed Polycarp used to sit and converse and how he would go out and come in and his manner of life and his bodily appearance and the talks he gave to the people and how he described his association with John and with the others who had seen the Lord and how he recalled their words" (*HE* V.20.5-6). That takes us back to the middle of the second century, if not slightly earlier, since Polycarp was martyred—burned alive in the arena in Smyrna—at the age of eighty-six on a date that appears to be 23 February 157.³ Polycarp is important to Irenaeus because he thinks that through him he is himself linked to the apostolic age.⁴

And there we come to one of the central elements of Irenaeus's theology—the role of the bishop and succession from the apostles. For him the bishop is above all a teacher, a publicly accredited witness to the teaching of the apostles. It is easy for us to misunderstand that and to read him as if he were speaking of authority and some kind of juridical power.⁵ He is not. While a later theology⁶ came to affirm that the bishops *are* what the apostles *were*, Irenaeus wants to say that the bishops *teach* what the apostles *taught*. That can be clearly seen from his enumeration of the successive bishops of Rome in *Haer.* III.3.3.⁷

The Roman church, he thinks, was "founded and established by the two most glorious apostles Peter and Paul," and he lists the bishops from Linus to Eleutherus, who "now holds the episcopacy in the twelfth place from the apostles." There are twelve names in his list. In other words, Peter and Paul kicked off the succession at Rome but were not themselves bishops of Rome—indeed, there is no reason to think that he assumes they were "bishops" in any real sense at all. It is the job of the bishops to *teach* what the apostles *taught* rather than to *be* what the apostles *were*.

He thinks that he could in principle produce such a succession list for all the churches, but the only other example he even sketches in is Smyrna, where Polycarp, who "had been taught by the apostles and had conversed with many who had seen the Lord" was "established as bishop by apostles"—Polycarp, "whom we also saw when we were young" (*Haer.* III.3.4).

Eusebius dutifully copies Irenaeus's list of twelve names (*HE* V.6.1-5), but he does so without surprise. It has for him simply become self-evident that there should be in each of the major sees a chain of bishops leading back to the apostles.

But in selling the other part of his package—the role of the bishop as teacher—Irenaeus was in the end to be less successful. His model was based at least in part on

the contemporary understanding of the “successions” in the schools of philosophy and medicine. The idea was that in each generation there had been a nameable individual who could be regarded as the official head of the school—Aristotelians, Stoics, Epicureans, and the like—and therefore as its official spokesperson.⁸

For Irenaeus, the bishop was an official spokesman—the nameable, identifiable individual you could go to in each city to find out what the apostles had taught. But even by the time of Eusebius that picture of the bishop as spokesman and witness was being displaced by a more juridical model, one based on the idea of a succession of authority. Hence the significance of the claim that the apostles had themselves been the first members of the various chains of episcopal succession: the bishops had in effect become what the apostles were.

Hence the importance of Polycarp for Irenaeus. It seems natural to infer as a corollary that Irenaeus was himself from Smyrna—the modern Izmir on the Aegean coast of Turkey—though he nowhere says so explicitly. Nor does Eusebius, who had little interest in anything like biography in the modern sense and who in any case would have had no source of information other than what he had read in Irenaeus himself.

It is in any event clear that Irenaeus was from the East. He thought and wrote in Greek and has links both personal and theological with Asia Minor.⁹ But at some point he came west, from Smyrna in the Roman province of Asia to Lugdunum—the modern Lyons—capital of the province of Lugdunensis.

Lyons

Irenaeus never mentions Lyons either, though he does say that he dwells “among the Celts” and “busies” himself “for the most part with a barbaric tongue” (*Haer.* I. pref. 3).¹⁰ The latter may be something of an exaggeration: the remark is made as part of a conventional apology for writing in a supposedly unpolished style.

The Lugdunum of Irenaeus’s day was in fact quite a polished and cultured city—a Roman “colony” and, until the mid-third century, the largest city north of the Alps. It was the religious and economic hub of the whole of Gaul. There leading figures of all the Gallic provinces met annually to offer sacrifice at the altar of Rome and Augustus.

It was also a cosmopolitan city. What had initially brought Irenaeus there we do not know, but he was following a route taken by many others from the East.¹¹ His flock must have consisted largely, though not exclusively, of immigrants. It was a Greek-speaking community in a Latin-speaking city nestled in the midst of a Celtic-speaking countryside. They would in no small part have been outsiders, strangers in a strange land, alienated culturally as well as religiously from the life of the city around them. And they were, for that reason among others, mistrusted and despised.

Around the year 180 or very shortly before a vicious local persecution erupted. It began with mob violence that led to Christians being rounded up by the civic authorities and finally to a number of them being cruelly executed in the amphitheater by the Roman governor of the province.¹²

There is a detailed account of the persecution in the long and moving letter from “the slaves of Christ who sojourn in Vienne and Lyons to the brethren throughout Asia¹³ and Phrygia who have the same faith and hope of redemption that we do,” a

document quoted at length by Eusebius in *HE* V.1.1—3.3. In the course of the persecution, the aged bishop Pothinos—“over ninety years of age” (V.1.29)—died in prison as a result of the maltreatment and torture to which he had been subjected. And he was succeeded by Irenaeus.

How Irenaeus escaped the persecution is unknown. It was, like all persecutions before the mid-third century, local, random, and haphazard. Perhaps in its earlier stages he was simply able to lie low. Perhaps he had friends in high places in the city. But before it was over, he seems to have been sent as an envoy to Eleutherus, bishop of Rome. Eusebius refers to a letter written by the confessors of Lyons and Vienne from prison, awaiting execution, in which they commend Irenaeus, the bearer of the letter and still a presbyter, “as one who is zealous for the covenant of Christ” (*HE* V.4.2).

Irenaeus mentions martyrdom several times, by which the Church is “often weakened though she at once experiences increase in her members and becomes whole” (*Haer.* IV.33.9). But it is a striking fact that from his writings we would know nothing of this savage little persecution in Lyons and Vienne. The community of which he became bishop must have been devastated—deprived of many of its leaders and living in fear of its neighbors. But there is not a hint of that in the pages of Irenaeus. There is instead optimism—a calm assurance and a quiet confidence in the working out of God’s purposes in history.

That community was also rent by internal division. Within it he encountered a number of competing groups that can be loosely and imprecisely lumped together under the modern rubric of “gnosticism.” Irenaeus’s great work, which we call *Against the Heresies* and which he called *Refutation and Overthrow of Falsely-Named Knowledge*, was precisely an attempt to unmask and expose them.

Gnosticism has been the object of an enormous amount of scholarly discussion in recent decades, stimulated in part by the discovery in 1945–1946 of a large library of Gnostic texts in Coptic translation at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt.¹⁴ As a result of that find, it is now possible to hear for the first time since antiquity the voices of those Irenaeus was trying to refute and to compare his account of what they were saying with their own. It seems to me that on the whole Irenaeus comes rather well out of the comparison (though it is—like everything to do with Gnosticism—a complex problem and very different views on the matter have been expressed).¹⁵ On the whole, Irenaeus has a reasonably clear understanding of *what* the Gnostics are saying, though very little understanding of *why* they are saying it—and perhaps very little desire to understand. His purpose—so typically for antiquity—is refutation, not dialogue, and he has no sympathy at all for their project.

What was that project? The word *Gnosticism* is of course derived from *gnosis*, the stock, off-the-peg translation of which is “knowledge.” But it is, I think, a mistake, though a mistake often made, to assume that the key to the various gnostic systems¹⁶—the unifying factor that somehow holds them together—is therefore a claim to esoteric knowledge, the possession of which will enable the gnostic in due course to pass from this world to the pure spiritual realm beyond.

One problem is that making that move leads to a privileging of the mythologies of the various gnostic groups in the sense of taking that mythology literally—as a sort of

quasi-historical account—rather than as a poetic and indirect reflection on the nature of ultimate reality. That is in essence what Irenaeus does, and does very effectively. He begins his great refutation of the heresies with the version of gnostic myth associated with the school of Ptolemy, which was a spin-off of the highly influential system of Valentinian Gnosticism (*Haer.* I.1.1—8.5). There are, according to Ptolemy, thirty “aeons” that are at once separable cosmic entities and aspects of the fullness of divine being. As separable entities, they are arranged in quasi-sexual pairs and cascade down hierarchically from *Bythos* (“depth” or “abyss”) at the top to *Sophia* (“Wisdom”) at the bottom and as such play their various roles in the great drama of a pre-cosmic fall that leads to the tragic creation of our material world and the fragmentation and differentiation of spiritual being. But as aspects of divine reality, they together constitute the *pleroma* (“fullness”) of divine being and each expresses or represents a facet of that mysterious and transcendent reality.

Irenaeus provides massive philosophical and scriptural refutation of the Gnostic myths, though he is also convinced that merely setting out their content will expose them as self-evident nonsense. And he can enjoy himself in the process, as when he parodies portentous-sounding Valentinian terminology with a myth of his own—the myth of the great primal aeon Gourd—inevitably reminiscent, for devotees of the cartoon strip *Peanuts*, of the Great Pumpkin whose return each Halloween was awaited so faithfully by Linus. In any event, Gourd with his companion Super Emptiness emits Cucumber and Melon, from whom all the lower melons descend. “If,” Irenaeus asks tartly, “it’s right to postulate names however you please, what’s to stop us from using words”—like Gourd, Cucumber, and Melon—“that are far more plausible and actually in use and understood by everybody?” (*Haer.* I.11.4).

It is effective rhetoric and, as Irenaeus gets his teeth into parodying Valentinian language, actually quite funny. But a Valentinian would scarcely recognize it as getting at what he was in fact trying to say.

The problem is that the *gnosis* to which *gnostics* lay claim is really something much more like “insight” than simple factual or quasi-factual knowledge. The Gnostic came to an epiphanic understanding of his or her place in the grand scheme of things—a spark of the divine trapped in a material body in a material world that is both distasteful and ultimately meaningless and without purpose. It is a view of reality for the radically alienated, and it should perhaps occasion little surprise that it came to appeal to so many of the lonely and frightened men and women of the rapidly growing cities of the second century of our era.

The Writings of Irenaeus

Eusebius enumerates eight works of Irenaeus and quotes excerpts from four of them. (There is an annotated list—The Writings of Irenaeus—at the beginning of this volume.) Only two have come down to us and neither in the original Greek. His magnum opus, in five books, which we call *Against the Heresies* and which he called *Refutation and Overthrow of Falsely-Named Knowledge*, survives as a whole only in an ancient Latin version,¹⁷ and even that is not quite complete. There are extensive fragments in Greek and Armenian, and the whole of books IV and V is preserved in

a literal Armenian version, which is perhaps as old as the fifth century.¹⁸ *Haer.* was probably written shortly after 180—say around 185.

The other work to survive is the *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, known to Eusebius (*HE* V.26) but unknown to modern scholars until the publication of an Armenian version in 1907. It is largely catechetical in character and focuses on types and prophecies of Christ in the Old Testament. It is impossible to pin down the date of composition, though it is clearly the later of the two works.¹⁹

Both surviving works are at least in part pastoral in nature and both are at least in part directed to the needs of Irenaeus's own community, and that is as true of *Against the Heresies* as it is of the *Demonstration*. It is important to emphasize that since *Haer.* is sometimes regarded as the first work of systematic theology. And it is true that it deals with a range of theological problems and doctrinal questions that had never before been presented with such coherence and in such depth. But it is far from systematic in structure and exposition, and there is much more scriptural exegesis than there is "abstract" discussion.

Irenaeus is convinced that the heretics, whether motivated by vainglory and arrogance or simply blind (*Haer.* III.3.2; IV.26.2), are bent on seducing—sometimes literally (I.13.7)—the simple faithful, and it is his purpose in *Against the Heresies* to try to prevent that. That shows through, for example, in a prayer inserted into the exposition of book III.

And therefore I invoke you, O Lord, God of Abraham and God of Isaac and God of Jacob and Israel, the one who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God who in the abundance of your mercy showed your good pleasure to us that we should know you—you, who made heaven and earth and rule over all things, who are the only true God, above whom there is no other god, you, who through our Lord Jesus Christ give us also the gift of the Holy Spirit—grant to everyone who reads this writing that he may know that you alone are God, and be strengthened in you, and keep away from every heretical and godless and impious opinion. (*Haer.* III.6.5)

Irenaeus's response to what he sees as the threat of "heretical and godless and impious opinion" is predicated on an unwavering conviction of the goodness of God and the goodness of the world he has made, in which and through which he acts in revelation and redemption. The whole history of humankind, from Adam and Eve on, is a single, coherent story that finds its focal point in Christ and that will find its culmination when he comes again.

It is a story of the initiative of God in gradually drawing to himself a people, of their education, and of their growing up. In the Garden, Adam and Eve were children; that is why they didn't have sex before the Fall—they were too young. But through the theophanies of the Old Testament, which were appearances of the Son, humankind gradually became "accustomed" to the presence of God, and God became "accustomed" to dwell with humankind. And at last there came "the Word of God, Jesus Christ our Lord, who because of his surpassing love became what we are that he might equip us to be that which he is" (*Haer.* V. pref.).

Christ “recapitulates” in himself the whole of this saving history, drawing all human experience together and summing it up, as it were, under one head—“coming through the whole dispensation and recapitulating all things in himself. But included in all things is humankind, moulded by God. And therefore he recapitulated humankind too in himself—the invisible made visible and the incomprehensible made comprehensible and the impassible made passible and the Word made man, recapitulating all things in himself” (*Haer.* III.16.6). That is why, according to Irenaeus, the Lucan genealogy (Luke 3:23-38) includes seventy-two generations, corresponding to the seventy-two peoples and languages into which humankind was thought to have been divided after Babel and so to the seventy-two (or seventy—there are textual variants) evangelists of Luke 10:1 and 17. The message Luke is sending is one of universality and comprehensiveness, “joining the end to the beginning and signifying that he is the one who recapitulated in himself all nations that had been dispersed after Adam and all tongues and generations of humankind together with Adam himself” (*Haer.* III.22.3).

That is also why Irenaeus (following, he thinks, John 8:57) insists that Jesus lived to be nearly fifty (*Haer.* II.22.6)—that is, he became, according to the reckoning of the ancients, an old man,²⁰

for he came to save all through himself, all, I mean, who through him are reborn to God—infants and toddlers and children and young people and the elderly. So he passed through every age—made an infant among infants, sanctifying them; a small child among small children, sanctifying those of that age and becoming for them an example of piety and righteousness and obedience; a young man among the young, becoming an example to the young and sanctifying them to the Lord. And so he also became an old man among the elderly, that he might be the perfect teacher in all things.

And as a part of this drawing together of all things, “he came even unto death, that he might be ‘the first-born from the dead, the one who is first in all things’ (Col. 1:18), the prince of life, before all and preceding all.” (II.22.4)

That is the story told in *Against the Heresies*, and it is on that work that Irenaeus’s reputation depended, both in ancient and in modern times. It was the only work of Irenaeus known in the Latin West, and it was the only work to survive into the Byzantine world. The great ninth-century scholar and Patriarch of Constantinople, Photius, wrote for the benefit of his brother Tarasios a record of his voracious reading, and the entry on Irenaeus (codex 120 = 93b-94a) in the *Myrobiblion* or *Library*, written before 855, records only the *Haer.*, with a brief summary of the contents of the five books. That is, incidentally, the last certainly attested reference to an intact copy of Irenaeus in Greek.

Irenaeus and Scripture

One of Eusebius’s aims in the *Historia Ecclesiastica* is to record the books cited as authoritative by “the ecclesiastical writers of various times” (III.3.3), and in V.8 he discusses Irenaeus. He cites Irenaeus on the origins of the Septuagint (V.8.10-15) and the four Gospels (V.8.2-4) and notes his use of I John and I Peter as well as the Apocalypse of John (V.8.5-7).

For Irenaeus, the scriptures of the Old Testament point to Christ while the scriptures of the New contain his teaching and the authoritative teaching of the apostles, and the two cohere. That is of vital importance for him, since one of his central concerns is to affirm, against “gnostic” views and against Marcion, the unity of the old and the new—the Father of Jesus Christ is the one who made heaven and earth and the God of the New Covenant is identical with the God of the Old.

He accepts, as was normal in the early church, the Greek version of the Old Testament—the Septuagint—as authoritative and inspired, which means that he accepts the longer, Greek canon instead of the shorter, Hebrew one, including what came to be designated the Apocrypha or deuterocanonical books. And he gives a version of the story of the providential origin of the Septuagint²¹ when seventy elders from Jerusalem were sent to Ptolemy in Egypt and in isolation from one another miraculously produced seventy identical texts (*Haer.* III.21.2).

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 like our developed New Testament canon, containing four Gospels, Acts, the letters of Paul,²² 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation.²³ The number of Gospels is firmly pegged at four.²⁴ “Since there are four regions of the world in which we live and four universal winds and the Church has been spread over all the earth and the pillar and foundation of the Church is the Gospel and the Spirit of life, it is appropriate that it have four columns breathing out incorruptibility on all sides and kindling anew life for humankind” (III.11.8). In principle, the scriptures should suffice for teaching and instruction. In practice, though, there is a problem, for the “heretics” appeal to the same texts but, as Irenaeus sees it, distort their meaning. He uses (I.8.1) the analogy of a fine mosaic of the emperor which someone turns into the image of a dog or a wolf by prying loose the tesserae which make it up and rearranging them. The individual stones are the same, but a dog or a wolf is not what the emperor looks like.

How then do you know that you have the right picture? Here Irenaeus appeals to the notion of the Rule of Truth or Rule of Faith—where “rule” (*kanon* in Irenaeus’s Greek) is being used, not as in the “rules of football” or the “rules of chess,” but in the sense of a *ruler*, a straightedge, that will let you make sure a line is not crooked.

So Irenaeus thinks of the Rule of Truth as a sort of summary or condensation of what is taught in the scriptures. It is not something in competition with them nor does it stand over against them. Indeed, he can say that “we follow the one and only Lord as our teacher and have as a rule of truth his words” (*Haer.* IV.35.4). We might say that the relation of scripture to the rule of truth is rather like the relation of a jigsaw puzzle to the picture on the box. The picture is not a substitute for the full puzzle, but it does help you make sure you are putting the pieces together properly.

Concretely, the rule of truth is a sort of proto-creedal summary of the faith. It is not a fixed form of words but a set of propositions that Irenaeus articulates in roughly similar ways. He can, for example, wax eloquent about “barbarian tribes” who have no written scriptures in their own language but who “carefully guard the old tradition, believing in one God, the maker of heaven and earth and of all the things in

them and in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who because of his surpassing love for that which he had fashioned underwent birth from the Virgin, himself uniting in himself humankind to God, and who suffered under Pontius Pilate and rose and was taken up in glory—who will come in glory as the Saviour of those who are being saved and the judge of those who are being judged and send into eternal fire those who pervert the truth and who despise his Father and his own advent” (*Haer.* III.4.2).

Or, more lapidarily, he can speak of “a sound faith in one God almighty, from whom are all things, and a firm assent to the Son of God, Christ Jesus our Lord, and to the saving plan²⁵ through which the Son of God became man, and assent as well to the Spirit of God, who supplies the knowledge of the truth and who presents to humankind in each generation the saving plans of the Father and the Son, as the Father wills” (*Haer.* IV.33.7).²⁶ Scripture and the rule of truth, then, go together: both express and enshrine the teaching of the apostles. But there is a third mechanism as well—a third line of defense, as it were—for making sure you have the faith right since the apostles left successors in the churches, to whom “they handed on their own teaching role” (*Haer.* III.3.1). And there we come back to the position of the bishop and the notion of succession from the apostles.

Even if there were a dispute on some small point, would it not be necessary to have recourse to the most ancient churches, in which the apostles dwelt, and to receive from them what is certain and clear on the question at issue? And what if the apostles had not even left us any writings at all, would it not be necessary to follow the structure of the tradition which they handed on to those to whom they entrusted the churches (*Haer.* III.4.1)?

So the scriptures are in principle sufficient for all our needs, and they have a richness and a complexity that can be explored in depth—as Irenaeus does throughout both *Adversus haereses* and the *Demonstration*—but the central truths they contain are transmitted by other means as well.

The Millennial Reign of Christ

There was one element of Irenaeus’s thought that Eusebius deeply regretted. Eusebius was an enthusiastic admirer of the heavily Platonizing third-century Alexandrian exegete and theologian Origen, to whom most of the sixth book of the *Ecclesiastical History* is devoted, and his own theology can be described as in a Platonizing tradition. That meant, among other things, that he felt very uncomfortable when confronted with what he saw as an overly literal, overly physicalist view of the resurrection body and the Kingdom of God.

Such a view was associated with much of the earlier theological tradition, especially that connected with Asia Minor. One figure who comes in for particularly heavy criticism here is the early second-century elder Papias of Hierapolis. Papias, though a man of venerable antiquity, had recorded certain “strange teachings of the Saviour and some other things quite mythical in character. And among them he says that there will be a period of a thousand years after the resurrection from the dead when the Kingdom of Christ will subsist in bodily fashion on this very earth” (*HE* III.39.11-12).

This was, Eusebius tells us, a consequence of the fact that Papias was a man “of very little understanding, as one can conclude from his books,” but sadly his antiquity had persuaded “ever so many of the ecclesiastical writers to adopt an opinion similar to his own,” including even Irenaeus (III.39.13). This is probably one of the things Photius had in mind in the ninth century when he appended to his brief summary of the contents of *Haer.* the warning that in some of Irenaeus’s writings “precision of truth with regard to the doctrines of the Church is defiled with spurious words—a thing which you must watch out for carefully” (*Bibliotheca*, codex 120 = 94a).

Irenaeus certainly did hold such views.²⁷ There will, he thinks, be a first resurrection of the just and an earthly Kingdom, “which is the beginning of incorruptibility, and through that Kingdom those who are worthy gradually become accustomed to receive God. . . . For it is right that they receive the fruits of endurance in that very creation in which they laboured or were afflicted, tested in every way and approved through their endurance, and that they be made alive in that very creation in which they were killed, and that they reign in that very creation in which they bore enslavement” (*Haer.* V.32.1).

That earthly Kingdom will last a thousand years. Christ taught that “those who have done good things will rise first, then so will those who are to be judged, as the book of Genesis has it that the sixth day—that is, the six-thousandth year—is the consummation of this age and then comes the seventh day of rest. . . . that is, the seventh thousand year period of the Kingdom of the just, in which they will practice for incorruptibility, when the creation has been renewed for those who have been preserved for this” (V.36.3).

In that last sentence, Irenaeus may well have been thinking of his friends who had been so brutally killed in the amphitheatre in Lyons. It was, in any event, heady stuff. The former passage is preserved, as is the whole of the last five chapters of *Haer.*, in only one of the Latin manuscripts (*Vossianus lat.* F 33), while the latter is omitted even there and found only in the Armenian version. Eusebius was not the only one who disliked that kind of language. Later scribes felt they had to bowdlerize the text as well.

But we, from our perspective—excited by different things and frightened by different things—can see how that sort of millennial view simply underlines once again the importance of the body for Irenaeus. The real “me” is not, as various gnostic groups would have it, some spark of the divine imprisoned within my flesh, nor is it, as much of the Platonist tradition would have it, a *nous* more or less fortuitously attached to a physical shell. Men and women are, rather, bodily creatures.²⁸ So we were made and so we will remain. Irenaeus regularly refers to humankind as God’s *plasma*—a thing he has formed—with an allusion to the verb used in the Septuagint text of Gen 2:7: “And God formed/moulded the human being, dust from the earth.”

Irenaeus the Peacemaker

Eusebius says that Irenaeus was “appropriately named and a peacemaker by nature” (*HE* V.24.18). He is there talking about his intervention “in the name of the brethren throughout Gaul over whom he presided” (V.24.11) in the crisis provoked when Victor, bishop of Rome in the 180s, excommunicated the bishops of Asia who “thought

it necessary to observe the festival of the saving Pasch on the fourteenth day of the month” (V.23.1)—in other words, to keep the connection between the crucifixion and the Jewish Passover.

Irenaeus was among those who in response wrote to Victor “on behalf of the peace of the churches” (V.24.18), and Eusebius cites two substantial fragments of the letter (V.24.12-13 and 14-17).²⁹ This tells us on the one hand something of Irenaeus’s position as bishop of Lyons and on the other something of his character. But it also underlines his continuing connection with the churches and theology of Asia Minor.

Eusebius has another suggestive reference to that connection. The letter from the churches of Lyons and Vienne telling the tale of the persecution of 177 or so was, as we have seen, addressed to “the brethren throughout Asia and Phrygia who have the same faith in and the same hope of redemption that we do” (*HE* V.1.3). After his long extracts from the letter (V.1.1—3.3). Eusebius abruptly mentions “those around Phrygia who followed Montanus and Alcibiades and Theodotus”—that is, the beginnings of that ecstatic, charismatic, prophetic movement that came to be known as Montanism. After this brief and abrupt reference, Eusebius adds, “when there was disagreement about these matters, the brethren throughout Gaul again set out their own judgement, pious and most orthodox, about these things too, presenting also various letters from the martyrs who had been perfected among them, letters which they had written while they were still in prison to the brethren in Asia and Phrygia and also to Eleutherus, who was then bishop of Rome, acting as advocates for the peace of the churches” (*HE* V.3.4). Eusebius’s next sentence (V.4.1-2) affirms that “the same martyrs” recommended Irenaeus, then still a presbyter, to Eleutherus and shows that he was the bearer of the letter.

Eusebius expresses no connection between these events, but there obviously was one. He is, as so often, being coy. Irenaeus must have taken the letter describing the persecution at least as far as Rome, and he took in the same bag various letters about the developing controversy over the New Prophecy, “Montanism.”

For Eusebius, it is an open and shut case: Montanism is a heresy, and that’s all there is to be said about it. But that leaves him with a dilemma—a dilemma from which he escapes by simply ignoring it. The martyrs, of whom he of course approves, were clearly sympathetic to the New Prophecy, or at least open to its influence. And the letter from the churches of Lyons and Vienne was, after all, addressed to the brethren of Asia and Phrygia—the home and heartland of the movement. And that sympathy was presumably shared by Irenaeus, the bearer of the letters.

So here once again we see Irenaeus working for the peace of the churches. And we also see his openness to the working of the Spirit in his own time.³⁰ This is a far cry from the ruthless heresy hunter and jackbooted authoritarian that he has sometimes been represented as.

We began with an identikit picture of Irenaeus—orthodoxy and heresy, bishops and apostolic succession. We can see the massive influence Eusebius has had in the formation of that picture, but we can also see in the things that Eusebius privileges a picture that is much more complex. We are, I hope, left with the picture of a man of broad

sympathies and deep pastoral concern, firmly rooted in the traditions of his native Asia but immersed as well in the life and the problems of the church and the churches around him.

If we were to see in Irenaeus only a truculent polemicist or an authority figure with a hang-up about apostolic succession, we would do him a radical disservice. And if we were to take that line, we would also see him as an inevitably divisive character, for the simple reason that cluttering up the foreground would be issues that have caused and continue to cause disquiet among historians and dissent and division both within the Church and among the churches.

But if we take seriously the depth of his conviction that the Christian gospel is liberating as well as true and that it is for all men and women, we can see him as a figure of unity rather than of division. He proclaims the unity of God and the coherence of the world he has made, the unity of revelation and the integrity and meaning of human history, and—not least—the unity of all humankind as the men and women he has fashioned are called upon to grow up, together, in and into the presence of God.