

Irenaeus of Lyons

The Story of Salvation

A treasure, hid indeed in a field, but brought to light by the cross of Christ.

The year 177 AD saw a wave of persecution break over the Christian churches at Vienne and Lyons in southeastern France. Someone at the time wrote a letter describing the trials of these communities to their sister churches in Asia Minor; the fourth-century historian Eusebius of Caesarea has preserved a large part of this letter for us.¹ It depicts in vivid detail the mob fury that fell upon Christians old and young, women and men alike, as well as the imprisonment, torture, and executions which followed. Among those to perish was the ninety-year-old bishop of Lyons, Pothinus.

One member of the community who escaped martyrdom was a presbyter named Irenaeus. He came originally from Smyrna, where, as a boy, he had encountered Polycarp, whom Irenaeus thought to be a disciple of John the Evangelist. While the Christians at Lyons were being savaged, Irenaeus found himself at Rome, bearer of a letter to

1. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* V, 1-3.

Pope Eleutherius concerning Montanism. Upon his return home, he was elected to succeed Pothinus, and he remained bishop of Lyons until his death approximately twenty-five years later.

The experience of persecution marked Irenaeus deeply. Still, unlike the apologists before him, he did not devote his energies to trying to win tolerance for Christians from the civil authorities. Instead, he took up his pen to oppose the other major threat to the church of his day—Gnosticism. Irenaeus entitled his major work *On the Detection and Overthrow of Knowledge Falsely So-Called*. It is more commonly referred to as *Against Heresies*.² One other of his writings survives in its entirety, the *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*,³ which was rediscovered in 1904.

During his episcopate, Irenaeus emerged as the most important theologian of his time. Indeed, the eminent patrologist Johannes Quasten identified Irenaeus as “the founder of Christian theology” because Irenaeus “unmasked Gnosticism as pseudo-Christian” and also because, in performing this service, he emerged as “the first author to express in dogmatic terms the whole of Christian doctrine.”⁴ From a somewhat different angle, Irenaeus has also been lauded as the first theologian of salvation history.⁵ As for his soteriology, in the influential work *Christus Victor*, Gustaf Aulén chose Irenaeus as his preferred witness to the classic idea of the atonement, which is the centerpiece of the book. He found in Irenaeus “the first patristic writer to provide us with a clear and comprehensive doctrine of the Atonement and redemption,” while for Aulén, “his strength lies in the fact that he did not, like the Apologists and Alexandrians, work along some philosophical approach to Christianity, but devoted himself

2. Citations from Book I will be taken from the English translation by Dominic J. Unger, with further revisions by John J. Dillon, in St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against the Heresies*, Vol. 1, Ancient Christian Writers no. 55 (New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 1992). Unless otherwise indicated, citations from Books II–V will be taken from the English translation in volume I of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, eds. A. Roberts and D. Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).

3. Citations will be taken from the English translation by Joseph P. Smith in No. 16 of the Ancient Christian Writers (New York: Newman, 1952).

4. J. Quasten, *Patrology*, Vol. 1 (Utrecht: Spectrum, 1950), 294.

5. Alfred Bengsch gathers citations to this effect in *Heilsgeschehen und Heilswissen* (Leipzig: Sanct Benno, 1957), XIII–XIV.

altogether to the simple exposition of the central ideas of the Christian faith itself.”⁶

In the pages that follow, our study of Irenaeus’s soteriology will unfold in three steps. First, under the heading “Myth and Counter-Myth,” we propose a modest revision of the terms in which Irenaeus’s achievement is to be understood and appreciated. Second, using Aulén as a foil, we address the soteriological question in Irenaeus’s work in the classical form of the question: how, according to Irenaeus, did Jesus Christ effect the salvation of the world? Third, however, in light of our first section, we may recast the soteriological question and articulate it in a new form. If, as we shall suggest, Irenaeus’s achievement lay primarily in constructing the first comprehensive Christian narrative of salvation, then we can move beyond asking how Christ, as a figure within that story, effected salvation—the soteriological question in its classical form—to ask further how Irenaeus’s story of salvation becomes a saving story. In this manner, we can transpose the soteriological question from its classical form to a contemporary, post-critical form.

I. Myth and Counter-Myth

While Johannes Quasten correctly located the basis of Irenaeus’s significance in the comprehensiveness of his response to the gnostic threat, the terms in which Quasten framed his judgment require some recasting. When, writing more than a half century ago, Quasten found in Irenaeus an expression of the “whole of Christian doctrine,” he suggested a perspective which, though by no means simply invalid, could easily foreshorten Irenaeus’s significance. Irenaeus’s writings bear enormous import for the history of doctrine, but to view them exclusively or even primarily through the lens of dogma and doctrine risks neglect of the vast difference in form and content between Irenaeus’s writings and any medieval *summa* or post-Reformation manual of theses. Concentration on the doctrinal perspective only too

6. G. Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 17.

easily risks reducing Irenaeus's works to a source of proof texts for the kind of dogmatic theology which held the field when Quasten wrote.

Hence, the shift to salvation history as the context for gauging Irenaeus's importance, a shift already underway when Quasten wrote, proved an advance in that it drew attention to the prior narrative matrix from which doctrines arise. With regard to Irenaeus, it took fuller account of the actual content of his writings. Yet, as a contemporary theological movement, the salvation history approach also had its limits. Enthusiasm for the recital of God's mighty deeds obfuscated the critical questions evoked by that sort of discourse, but without an acknowledgement of those questions, salvation history lent itself to a theological positivism content to superimpose a string of divinely wrought "facts" upon or alongside the events of ordinary history.

Hence, because of insufficient critical reflection upon its central category, the theology of salvation history proved transitional, while the questions it evoked have generated a new conceptuality or set of categories.⁷ Laying open one avenue of development, Walter Ong has explored the correlations among communications media, psychological structures, and cultural stages.⁸ In the course of this work, Ong has come to stress the distinction between an oral-narrative mode of thought and the subsequent philosophic, analytic mode that becomes possible once written texts assume a dominant cultural position. Following up on Ong's suggestion, PHEME PERKINS has located the gnostics, and by implication, Irenaeus as well, in the former, oral-narrative mode.⁹ This suggestion sheds no little light on the frustration Irenaeus's allegedly rambling style and inconsistent thinking have occasioned among, at least, some of his systematically minded commentators,¹⁰ a frustration arising from neglect of the rhetorical devices which, as Mary Ann Donovan has demonstrated,¹¹ serve to

7. See Bradford E. Hinze, "The End of Salvation History," *Horizons* 19 (1991): 227-45.

8. See Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen, 1982).

9. PHEME PERKINS, *The Gnostic Dialogue: The Early Church and the Crisis of Gnosticism* (New York: Paulist, 1980), 9.

10. For an example, see John Hochban, "St. Irenaeus and the Atonement," *Theological Studies* 7 (1946): 525-57.

structure Irenaeus's prose. André Benoit helpfully reviews the sequence whereby modern studies of Irenaeus have paralleled developments in biblical criticism, moving from an ahistorical classical approach through source critical studies into renewed attention on the arguments and literary themes which inform Irenaeus's writings.¹²

In addition, critical reflection on the performance of assembling, reciting, and writing salvation history has brought to light the operation within that performance of the religious imagination expressing itself in the mode of symbolic discourse. From this perspective, salvation history, as a narrative expansion of symbolic religious discourse, constitutes formally a myth.¹³

Accordingly, we begin by suggesting a quite modest revision in our assessment of Irenaeus and our understanding of his achievement. We suggest that Irenaeus responded to the challenge of Gnosticism by forging diverse elements of the Christian tradition into a myth, the comprehensiveness of which matched those elaborated by the gnostics. We suggest further that the structure of this myth, governed by the notions of dispensation or economy, recapitulation, and the Pauline Christ-Adam typology, expresses Irenaeus's own creative originality. In a word, Irenaeus met the gnostic myth with a Christian counter-myth, a narrative expression of the significance of Jesus in the story of God and God's revelatory and redemptive dealings with humankind. But the proof of this contention lies in the pudding; in order to show that Irenaeus is telling a story of salvation, it will be necessary to ascertain what that story is.

The gnostic movement against which Irenaeus took up his pen was widespread and appeared in many forms.¹⁴ There were Jewish gnostics,

11. Mary Ann Donovan, *One Right Reading? A Guide To Irenaeus* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1997).

12. A. Benoit, *Saint Irénée: Introduction à l'étude de sa théologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1960), 10–43.

13. For a fuller statement regarding the terms religious imagination, symbol, and myth as general theological categories, see W. Loewe, "Toward a Responsible Contemporary Soteriology" in *Creativity and Method: Essays in Honor of Bernard Lonergan, S.J.*, ed. Matthew L. Lamb (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1981), esp. 220–21. Julie Canlis takes umbrage at my use of the category, counter-myth, in "Being Made Human: The Significance of Creation for Irenaeus' Doctrine of Participation," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58/4 (2005): 434–54, at 435.

14. *The Nag Hammadi Library*, ed. James M. Robinson (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), 1–10.

and Plotinus would find the movement subverting Platonism as well. The first two of the five books into which Irenaeus divided the *Against Heresies* contain the fullest exposition of Christian Gnosticism, its variants, and other early heresies to be found in patristic literature.

In a Christian setting, gnostics honored the name of Christ and appealed to the apostolic tradition which related his deeds and sayings. They interpreted these, however, to fit their own comprehensive myth of God, the universe, and the redemption of humankind. Gnostics worshipped a hitherto unknown deity, far and completely removed from this world. They recounted how there had emanated from this deity a complex series of aeons to the number of thirty. These completed the *pleroma*, the realm of the divine. It counted among its inhabitants figures bearing such names as Only-Begotten, Word, Holy Spirit, Church, Christ, and Savior. The youngest aeon was Wisdom, and in one version of their story, gnostics related how, having been overcome by a passion to know the ineffable deity, she had nearly perished, and how her passion provided the original principle from which all matter was derived.

The gnostic myth reduced the creator God of the Old Testament to a Demiurge who came after and beneath the divine *pleroma*. He was regarded as imperfect, ignorant, and deluded, tainted by the matter which it was his business to order. Gnostics looked upon matter itself, including the human body, as evil. The true destiny of human beings, or at least, of that class of them who were born spiritual rather than animal or material, lay in ascending to the divine realm of pure spirit. Redemption for them consisted in *gnosis*, knowledge of one's spiritual nature and destiny. Christ descended from the *pleroma* to communicate this saving knowledge, but even on earth, he in no way degraded himself by real involvement with a human body. Gnostic Christology took dualistic forms. The heavenly Christ inhabited Jesus only temporarily, departing before the passion. For some gnostics, even Jesus, though distinct from the heavenly Christ, only appeared to be material. At the transfiguration, they explained, the non-physical character of his substance became evident. Like his body, his sufferings

were only apparent, so that of itself, his death possessed no saving efficacy.

If Irenaeus recounts gnostic beliefs in great detail, tedious apparently even to his contemporaries (I, 31/4) as well as to the modern reader, his goal is to refute them, and he considers their mere exposure to public scrutiny a major step to that end (I, 31/3). He also draws upon the broad repertoire of polemical devices standardized in the rhetorical manuals of the age.¹⁵ Thus, he underscores the novelty of gnostic teaching, lays bare the internal contradictions of its literal sense,¹⁶ and shows it to differ from teacher to teacher. The teachers themselves, he charges, are greedy and immoral persons who prey, especially on credulous women.

Since each teacher assigns names of his own devising to the emanations which make up the divine *pleroma*, Irenaeus is emboldened at one point to follow suit. Having expounded the doctrines of Valentinus, Secundus, and another, unnamed gnostic teacher, Irenaeus proposes a system of his own. He begins plausibly enough:

There is a certain royal First-Beginning, First-unthinkable, First-non-substantial Power, First-ever-forward rolling (I, 11/4).

He then continues:

However, with this one there coexists a Power, which I call a Gourd; with this Gourd there coexists a Power, to which I give the name Utter-Emptiness. Now this Gourd and Utter-Emptiness, since they are one, brought forth a fruit, without bringing it forth—a fruit everywhere visible, edible, and delicious, which in our language we call a Cucumber. With this Cucumber there coexists a substantial Power, to which I give the name Pumpkin. These Powers—Gourd, Utter-Emptiness, Cucumber, and Pumpkin—begot the multitude of delirious Pumpkins of Valentinus (*Ibid.*).

15. PHEME PERKINS, "Irenaeus and the Gnostics: Rhetoric and Composition in *Adversus Haereses* Book One," *Vigiliae Christianae* 30 (1976): 193–200.

16. DENIS MINNS notes a certain disingenuousness on Irenaeus's part in this regard: "No stranger to allegory or symbolic language in his own exegesis and theological elaboration, he often seems quite unable to grant that the symbolic language employed by his opponents has its own grammar, different from that of logical or narrative discourse. He thinks it a triumph to show that what the Valentinians say in symbolic language looks very foolish when read not as symbolic but as factual narrative or geometric description. . . . This attempt to wrong-foot his opponents by reading as literal what they meant as symbolic characterizes the argument of Book II from the outset." D. Minns, *Irenaeus* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1994), 27–28.

Irenaeus can parody the gnostic myth in its literal sense as arbitrary, fanciful, and in the end, ludicrous—“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” (I, 16/3)—but his basic objection lies deeper. Quite simply, Gnosticism is false. Setting up an unreal deity, it heaps scorn on the only true God and draws men and women away from God. This gnostic falsehood becomes particularly insidious because of the plausibility it wins when it uses the common language of Christianity, while its claim to represent the secret, higher meaning of Christianity endows Gnosticism with the appeal of an esoteric doctrine reserved for select initiates.

What is at stake between Gnosticism and Christianity is the true story about God and humankind. For this reason, Irenaeus does not rest content to critique gnostic teachers with internal arguments and rhetorical devices. Against the gnostic corruption of Christianity, he is eager to set the record straight with a positive exposition of the truth of Christian faith.

Where is that truth to be found? Irenaeus invokes a range of authoritative sources.¹⁷ He can appeal to the rule of faith received at baptism, or to the tradition of the church, especially the teaching of the succession of bishops. He has recourse to the apostolic preaching and cites the four gospels and other apostolic writings as well as the law and the prophets. All these, he asserts, witness to the single, self-same Christian faith.

The fact remains, however, that none of these authorities by itself matches the comprehensive sweep of gnostic myth. Under the pressure of Gnosticism, a need was emerging to weave, from the diverse sources available, a single narrative statement of the truth about God and humanity.¹⁸ Irenaeus’s originality lies precisely here:

17. Philip Hefner, “Theological Methodology and St. Irenaeus,” *Journal of Religion* 44 (1964): 294–309.

18. P. Perkins helpfully suggests the relevance of W. Ong’s research on the correlations among communications media, psychological structures, and cultural stages. This suggestion comes into play when, in *The Gnostic Dialogue: The Early Church and the Crisis of Gnosticism* (New York: Paulist, 1980), 9, she remarks that “Gnostics generally use their abstractions in the oral, narrative mode rather than in the philosophic, analytic one.” Irenaeus, we are proposing, met the gnostic challenge in that same mode.

he rose to the challenge of meeting the gnostic myth with an equally comprehensive counter-myth. For this purpose, his authorities provided an abundance of material, but Irenaeus was no mere compiler. A comprehensive narrative of the saving truth of Christianity remains his own achievement.¹⁹

This is not to deny that the form of Irenaeus's works is dictated by the apologetic and catechetical purposes that occasioned them, nor that he was also interested in the intelligibility of the narrative he was forging. The list of some fourteen questions which he proposes in I, 10/3 indicates that he was aware of having an original contribution to make on this score as well. But if Irenaeus does not simply recite his narrative as a well-ordered story with beginning, middle, and end, the elements and distinctive shape of his story do emerge from his response to Gnosticism and his elaboration of the truths of Christianity contested by it.

Irenaeus's project rests on the bedrock of Christian belief in God, one and triune, creator of all *ex nihilo*.²⁰ Against the gnostic tale of a *pleroma* with its multiplicity of *aeons*, Irenaeus cites the "rule of truth" received at baptism, which affirms the existence of "one God, the Father Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth and the seas and all things that are in them" (I, 10/1). According to this rule, the Father "created all things through His Word; He both prepared and made all things out of nothing. . . . He made all things by His Word and Spirit, disposing and governing them and giving all of them existence" (I, 22/1). Irenaeus reads Gen. 1:16 as a witness to the triune character of God

For with Him were always present the Word and Wisdom, the Son and Spirit, by whom and in whom, freely and spontaneously, He made all things, saying, "Let Us make man after Our image and likeness" (III, 20/1).

Against the gnostics, Irenaeus insists that the story can only

19. John P. Meier offers a complementary view on Irenaeus's originality. In *Antioch and Rome: New Testament Cradles of Catholic Christianity* (New York: Paulist, 1983), coauthored with R. E. Brown, Meier concludes a chapter devoted to Ignatius of Antioch with the remark (p. 78) that "Ignatius represents the first attested attempt to blend the major streams of NT thought into a coherent viewpoint that articulates the faith of the church catholic. . . . In this the bishop-theologian Ignatius . . . foreshadowed the much greater synthesis of Irenaeus of Lyons."

20. Henri Lassiât, *Promotion de l'homme en Jésus-Christ* (Strasbourg: La Maison Mame, 1974), 59–145.

properly begin with creation, not before. God exists eternally as Father, Son, and Spirit, but to inquire back before creation is, for Irenaeus, a vain endeavor. “If, for example, anyone asks, ‘What was God doing before He made the world?’ we reply that the answer to such a question lies with God Himself” (II, 28/31). Irenaeus was less successful in scotching another question of this sort:

If anyone, therefore, say to us, “How then was the Son produced by the Father?” we reply to him that no man understands the production, or generation, or calling, or revelation, or by whatever other name one may describe His generation, which is in fact altogether indescribable (II, 28/6).

Clearly, Arianism had not yet set the church on the way to Nicaea, and to Athanasius’s eventual clarification of the eternal begetting of the Son. In the end, though, that clarification would only reinforce the limit Irenaeus posted to what we can properly imagine about the inner life of God.

The Dispensation

Two terms play an especially prominent role in shaping Irenaeus’s narrative of God and humankind and in binding together its various elements. First, he frequently remarks that what his opponents fail to grasp, or what they distort, is the dispensation (*dispensatio, oikonomia*) of God. Or, he can make the same point using the term in the plural. Marcion, for example, is among those who mutilate Scripture in order that “they may set the dispensations of God aside” (II, 11/9). Similarly, in a positive vein, Irenaeus affirms that “the Son of God accomplished the whole dispensation” (IV, Pref/4), but he also makes reference to a plurality of dispensations. To give but a sampling, he mentions “the new dispensation of liberty” (III, 10/4), “the dispensation of the law” (III, 11/7), “the dispensation of the advent of this Person” (III, 16/3), “the dispensation of suffering” (III, 18/5), “the marvelous dispensation” of the virginal conception (III, 21/4), “the future