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*Inspiration and Inerrancy in the Ancient Church**

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The Ancient Church uniformly regarded the divine inspiration and authority of the Scriptures as a given.¹ One possible exception might be the Syrian exegete Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350–428)—or “Teddy the Mop,” as my *Doktorvater* John Egan was wont to call him! In Theodore’s case, his rejection of the allegorization of the Song of Songs as a love song between Christ and his people appears to have involved serious questions about this one text’s canonical status and inspiration.²

* Adapted and quoted from “*Fundamentum Et Columnam Fidei Nostrae*” by Michael A. G. Haykin in *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith?* edited by James K. Hoffmeier and Dennis R. Magary, © 2012, pp. 137-46. Used by permission of Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers, Wheaton, IL 60187, www.crossway.org.

¹ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, “The Church Doctrine of Inspiration” in Carl F.H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1958), 207; Richard Lovelace, “Inerrancy: Some Historical Perspectives” in Roger R. Nicole and J. Ramsey Michaels, ed., *Inerrancy and Common Sense* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980), 20. See also H.B. Swete, *The Holy Spirit in the Ancient Church. A Study of Christian Teaching in the Age of the Fathers* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1912), 381.

² For a summary of the details, see Manlio Simonetti, “Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350–428): A Special Contribution” in Charles Kannengiesser, ed., *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis: The Bible in Ancient Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), II:806–8. In Theodore’s judgment, the Song of Songs was “a poem written for the occasion of Solomon’s marriage to his Egyptian wife” and was not fit for public reading (M.F.

An apt summary of the Ancient Church's thought about the inspiration of the Scriptures is often found in a phrase from the third article of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed: "We believe...in the Holy Spirit...who spoke through the prophets."³ The entire pneumatological clause of this codification of Trinitarian doctrine was deeply informed by the thought of Basil of Caesarea (c. 329–379), who made frequent mention of the Spirit's authorship of the Bible. For example, in his refutation of the radical Arian Eunomius of Cyzicus (died c. 393), penned in the early 360s, Basil referred over and over again to the Spirit's inspiration of Scripture.⁴ He cited John 1:1 and Ps 109:3 at one point and called these texts "the very words of the Holy Spirit."⁵

About fifteen years later, when Basil was defending the full deity of the Holy Spirit against the Pneumatomachian Eustathius of Sebaste (c. 300–377), he expressed amazement that Eustathius, who believed that the Bible was "God-breathed [2 Timothy 3:16] because it was written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit," was reticent to confess the divine honour due to the Spirit.⁶ For Basil, Scripture was worthy of our total respect because it came from the divine source of the Spirit.

Wiles, "Theodore of Mopsuestia as Representative of the Antiochene School" in P.R. Ackroyd and C.F. Evans, ed., *The Cambridge History of the Bible* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970], I:495–96).

³ Timothy P. McConnell, *Illumination in Basil of Caesarea's Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 147, 157; Matthew R. Crawford, *Cyril of Alexandria's Trinitarian Theology of Scripture* Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 71.

⁴ McConnell, *Illumination in Basil of Caesarea's Doctrine*, 154–55. For what follows about Basil, I am indebted to McConnell, *Illumination in Basil of Caesarea's Doctrine*, 155–58.

⁵ *Against Eunomius* 2.17.

⁶ *On the Holy Spirit* 21.52.

Again, in a pastoral letter that Basil wrote to a widow, who had had a troubling dream, the bishop of Caesarea reminded her that she had the “consolation of the divine Scriptures” and thus would “not need us or anyone else to help you see your duty; sufficient is the counsel and good guidance you already have in the Holy Spirit.”⁷ To heed the teaching of the Scriptures is to be instructed and counselled by the Spirit.

Now, Basil would have been well aware that this view of the Spirit’s inspiration of the Scriptures had been central to the Church’s teaching from the beginning.⁸ In the early second century, Justin Martyr (c. 100/110–c. 165) cited Ps 72 as proof of his Christological reading of the Old Testament and described it as having been “spoken to David by the Holy Spirit.”⁹ Later in that century, Theophilus, the bishop of Antioch in Roman Syria (fl. 180), who was actually converted through the reading of the Old Testament,¹⁰ maintained that the writers of the Old Testament were:

Men of God, who carried in them the Holy Spirit and became prophets; they were inspired and made wise by God himself. They were taught by God, and became holy and righteous. That is why they were also considered worthy of receiving this reward of becoming God’s instruments and containing wisdom from him.¹¹

⁷ Letter 283, trans. McConnell, *Illumination in Basil of Caesarea’s Doctrine*, 157.

⁸ For Basil’s respect for tradition, see his *On the Holy Spirit* 29.71–75, for example.

⁹ *Dialogue with Trypho* 34.1. See also W.A. Shotwell, *The Biblical Exegesis of Justin Martyr* (London: SPCK, 1965), 4–8.

¹⁰ *To Autolycus* 1.14.

¹¹ *To Autolycus* 2.9; see also *To Autolycus* 2.33.

The Muratorian Canon, which is probably to be dated around this time in the final decade or so of the second century, contains a distinct recognition of the unity of the four Gospels due to their authorship by one and the same Spirit:

“Though different points are taught in the several books of the Gospels, there is no difference as regards the faith of believers, since everything concerning the Lord’s nativity, passion, and resurrection is declared in all of them by one directing Spirit (*uno et principali Spiritu*).”¹²

Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260–339) has preserved a fragment from an early third-century work directed against the Adoptionism of a certain Artemon—it may have been written by the Roman presbyter Caius (*fl.* 190–220)—in which it is asserted that those who do “not believe that the divine Scriptures have been spoken by the Holy Spirit” are actually “unbelievers.”¹³

Origen, a man of prodigious energy when it came to biblical studies, was also firmly convinced that the:

Sacred books [of the Bible] are not the works of men, but...they were composed and have come down to us as a result of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit by the will of the Father of the universe through Jesus Christ.¹⁴

¹² Muratorian Fragment, 15–17.

¹³ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Church history* 5.28.18.

¹⁴ *On First Principles* 4.2.2 (G.W. Butterworth, *Origen: On First Principles* [1966 ed.; repr. Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1973], 272). See also *On First Principles* 4.2.7; 4.3.14.

The emphasis here is on the activity of the Spirit: it is the Spirit who has “composed” or “supervised” the formation of the Scriptures.¹⁵ Again, Origen can maintain:

Not only did the Spirit supervise the writings which were previous to the coming of Christ, but because he is the same Spirit and proceeds from the one God he has dealt in like manner with the gospels and the writings of the apostles.¹⁶

Moreover, this work of the Spirit extends to every letter of Scripture: “the wisdom of God has penetrated to all the Scriptures inspired by God, even down to the smallest letter.”¹⁷ The result is that the entirety of the Scriptures can be called “the words of God.”¹⁸ For Origen, then, the true author of both the Old and New Testaments is the Holy Spirit.¹⁹ A. Zöllig put it rightly when he stated:

[For Origen,] Holy Scripture has a divine nature, and this not simply because it contains divine ideas, nor because the breath of the divine Spirit breathes in its lines...but because it has God for its author.²⁰

¹⁵ Michael W. Holmes, “Origen and the Inerrancy of Scripture,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 24 (1981): 221.

¹⁶ *On First Principles* 4.2.9 (trans. Butterworth, *Origen: On First Principles*, 287).

¹⁷ *Philocalia* 2.4 (author’s translation).

¹⁸ *On First Principles* 4.1.7 (trans. Butterworth, *Origen: On First Principles*, 265).

¹⁹ In *Against Celsus* 4.71, Origen can state alternatively: “The Logos of God seems to have arranged the Scriptures” (trans. Henry Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953], 240).

²⁰ Cited Dan G. McCartney, “Literal and Allegorical Interpretation in Origen’s *Contra Celsum*,” *Westminster Theological Journal*, 48 (1986): 287.

In fact, the twentieth-century theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar has gone so far as to state that Origen “sacramentalized Scripture, stating that God’s Spirit dwells in it with the same real presence as it does in the Church.”²¹

When we turn to the patristic witness in the fourth and fifth centuries, we find the identical conviction. In his *Catechetical Lectures*, Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 313–386) explained the Church’s faith in the Holy Spirit’s relationship to the Bible thus:

The Scriptures were spoken by the Holy Spirit... He was in the prophets, and under the new covenant he was in the apostles. Such as dare to break in two the work of the Holy Spirit are to be abhorred. There is one God the Father, Lord of the Old Testament and the New. And there is one Lord Jesus Christ, prophesied in the Old Testament and present in the new. And there is one Holy Spirit, who proclaimed the things of Christ by the prophets, and then when Christ came, came down himself to make him known. Let no one therefore draw a line between the Old Testament and the New. Let no one say the Spirit in the Old Testament is not identical with the Spirit in the New. For whoever does so offends none other than that Holy Spirit who is honoured with one honour together with the Father and the Son...²²

In *The Letter to Marcellinus*, Athanasius’ (c. 299–373) classic reflection on the interpretation and spiritual value of the Psalms, the Egyptian bishop noted that the harmony of the Scriptures, whether

²¹ “Preface” to Rowan A. Greer’s very helpful introduction to Origen’s piety in his trans., *Origen: An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer, First Principles: Book IV, Prologue to the Commentary on the Song of Songs, Homily XXVII on Numbers* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), xiii.

²² *Catechetical Lecture* 16.2–4, *passim*.

“prophecy or legislation or the record of history,” was due to the fact that “one and the same Spirit” was involved in the writing of each of these sections of the Bible.²³ Theodoret (393–460), bishop of Cyrus, a city about sixty miles northeast of Antioch and whose series of biblical commentaries encompassed most of the Old Testament as well as the books of the Pauline corpus, was equally certain that all of the Bible was divinely inspired. It was “the innermost sanctuary of the most Holy Spirit.”²⁴ Thus, he was confident that “all the prophets are instruments of the divine Spirit” and anyone who disputed this was “making war on God.” Most probably he had Theodore of Mopsuestia in mind when he upheld the inspired nature of the Song of Songs in a lengthy preface to his commentary on that Old Testament book and argued that to take any other position was to slander the Holy Spirit.²⁵

A final witness to this uniform perspective on the Scriptures may be found in Cyril of Alexandria (c. 376–444), who employed the adjective θεόπνεθτος literally hundreds of times almost exclusively in connection with the Bible.²⁶ Thus, in his commentary on Isaiah, for instance, Cyril argued that all of “the divinely inspired Scripture” needs to be regarded in a real sense as one book. The reason was patent: it “has been spoken through the one Holy Spirit.”²⁷

²³ *The Letter to Marcellinus* 9.

²⁴ Questions on the Octateuch, pref

²⁵ Cited Jean-Noël Guinot, “Theodoret of Cyrus: Bishop and Exegete” in Paul M. Blowers, ed. And trans., *The Bible in Greek Christian Antiquity* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 164–65.

²⁶ Crawford, *Cyril of Alexandria’s Trinitarian Theology of Scripture*, 76–77.

²⁷ *On Isaiah* 29.11–12, cited Crawford, *Cyril of Alexandria’s Trinitarian Theology of Scripture*, 67.

If the Ancient Church as a whole thus regarded the primary author of the Bible as the Holy Spirit, was the inerrancy of the Scriptures equally considered normative? In a word, yes.

The famous affirmation of Augustine (354–430) that he believed the authors of Holy Scripture were “completely free from error” and that if he did find something in the Bible that seemed “contrary to the truth,” it was because there was a textual problem, or the translator was at fault, or he himself was deficient in understanding, is especially remarkable for its detail.²⁸ Yet other authors can also be found who essentially affirmed that inspiration entailed inerrancy.

In what follows in this paper, I wish to look at one author who is equally adamant that the inspired Scriptures are without error, and that is the second-century theologian Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130/140–c. 200). First, I wish to put him in his historical context and then sketch his life. Then, we look at his teaching regarding the inerrancy of the Bible.

The Historical Context of Irenaeus

The discovery of a cache of fifty or so Gnostic texts at Nag Hammadi in 1945 proved to be the major catalyst in the emergence in the twentieth century of the study of Gnosticism as a significant academic discipline. And as that discipline has matured over the years, these texts have confirmed in the minds of some scholars that the earliest communities of professing Christians were truly diverse bodies.²⁹

Yet, while an attentive reading of these texts does reveal some clear differences between the various Gnostic communities, such a

²⁸ Letter 82.

²⁹ See, for example, David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

reading also makes evident that they shared a number of commonalities over against their opponents in the Ancient catholic church. The majority of the Gnostics were essentially committed to a radical dualism of immateriality and matter. The former was divine and wholly good, while the latter was irredeemably evil. They were essentially hostile to monotheism, since they postulated the existence of a variety of divine beings. Through an upheaval within the supreme divine being, which the various Gnostic systems explained by means of an atemporal myth, elements of the divine became trapped within material bodies. These material bodies and the entire material realm were the work of a lesser divinity (the demiurge), understood as either the God of the Old Testament or even Satan. Since awareness of the divine element's entrapment in the human body was not immediately known, knowledge of one's true state was needed, which, for most Gnostic systems, involved Jesus as the revealer, and hence his role as saviour. Central to this entire quest was an eschatology that entailed escape from all materiality and temporality.³⁰

Combating Gnosticism involved the finest of the earliest Christian thinkers, from Justin Martyr to Origen, but it is intriguing that what is probably the most significant reply to the leading heresiarchs of the second century, Valentinus (*fl.* 138–166)³¹ and Marcion (*fl.* 150s–160s),³²

³⁰ For this mini-morphology of Gnosticism, I am indebted to Christoph Marksches, *Gnosis: An Introduction*, trans. John Bowden (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 16–17; Robert A. Segal, “Religion: Karen L. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*” *Times Literary Supplement* (November 21, 2003): 31. For a selection of Gnostic texts, see Werner Foerster, ed., *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts*, trans. R. McL. Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972 and 1974), 2 vols.

³¹ According to Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.4.3, Valentinus came to Rome during the episcopate of Hyginus (c. 138–c. 142) and was there till that of Anicetus (c. 155–c. 166). For Valentinus and his followers, see especially Marksches, *Gnosis*, 89–94; Einar Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the ‘Valentinians’* (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Ismo Dunderberg, *Beyond Gnosticism: Myth, Lifestyle, and Society in the School of Valentinus* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

came from Irenaeus, a missionary theologian who complained about his ability to write theology. Although Greek was his mother tongue, he reckoned that he had spent far too much time among the Celts of Gaul speaking Gaulish, a Celtic language now extinct, and thus he believed he had lost any real facility he had had with his own language.³³

Moreover, he claimed that he had never formally studied rhetoric and that he had neither the literary skills nor the “beauty of language” necessary for the task of a theologian.³⁴ And yet many later students of his thought rightly believe him to be a truly gifted expositor of what

In an interesting venture into virtual history, Dunderberg has also written an article about what “Christianity” would have looked like if Valentinus’ heresy had been successful in subverting orthodoxy. As with all virtual history, the further away in time Dunderberg’s speculations are from Valentinus’ actual lifetime, the more “sci-fi-ish” they get. See his “Valentinus and His School: What Might Have Been”, *The Fourth R* 22, no.6 (November–December 2009): 3–10.

³² According to Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.4.3, Marcion was principally active in Rome during the episcopate of Anicetus. For two recent overviews of Marcion’s life and teaching, see Marksches, *Gnosis*, 86–89; Paul Foster, “Marcion: His Life, Works, Beliefs, and Impact,” *The Expository Times*, 121 (March 2010): 269–80. There were significant differences between Marcion and the Gnostics, and in many ways Marcion should not be classified as a Gnostic. On this, see the brief summary by Marksches, *Gnosis*, 88–89.

³³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.pref.3. For discussion of Irenaeus and Gaulish, see also C. Philip Slate, “Two Features of Irenaeus’ Missiology”, *Missiology* 23, no.4 (October 1995): 433–35.

³⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.pref.3. All translations from *Against Heresies* are by the author unless otherwise indicated. For the Greek and Latin text of *Against Heresies*, I have used Adelin Rousseau, et al., ed., *Irénée de Lyon: Contre les hérésies*, 5 vols. (Sources chrétiennes, vols. 100.1–2, 152–153, 210–211, 263–264, 293–294; Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1965 [vol.4], 1969 [vol.5], 1974 [vol.3], 1979 [vol.1], 1982 [vol.2]).

On Irenaeus’ claim to have no knowledge of rhetoric, see Robert M. Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (London: Routledge, 1997), 46–53; M. A. Donovan, *One Right Reading? A Guide to Irenaeus* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 10–11; Eric Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 3–4.

would become the core of orthodox Christianity.³⁵ There is a vigour and winsomeness about him that makes many students of his extant works wish that far more was known about his life than is available.³⁶

A Brief Sketch of the Life of Irenaeus

There seems to be no consensus in patristic scholarship about the place of Irenaeus' birth. There is a good likelihood that it was Smyrna (the modern Turkish city of Izmir), since he heard Polycarp of Smyrna (69/70–155/6) preach there when he was young and Polycarp appears to have been something of a Christian mentor to him.³⁷ His date of

³⁵ W. Brian Shelton, "Irenaeus" in Bradley G. Green, ed., *Shapers of Christian Orthodoxy: Engaging with Early and Medieval Theologians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 15–16.

³⁶ F. R. Montgomery Hitchcock, "Irenaeus of Lugdunum," *Expository Times* 44 (1932–33): 167. Cyril C. Richardson was surely right when he stated, "The significance of Irenaeus cannot be overestimated" ("Introduction to Early Christian Literature and Its Setting" in his trans. and ed., *Early Christian Fathers* [The Library of Christian Classics, vol. 1; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953], 18). It needs noting that there are some, however, who "find Irenaeus and what he stood for to be truly and genuinely unappealing" (C. E. Hill, *Who Chose the Gospels? Probing the Great Gospel Conspiracy* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010], 52). Hill details the dislike of certain contemporary scholars for Irenaeus and his thinking (*idem.*, *Who Chose the Gospels?*, 52–68).

For what follows in terms of a biographical sketch of Irenaeus, I have found the following sketches of his life helpful: Denis Minns, *Irenaeus* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1997), 1–9; Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 1–10; Donovan, *One Right Reading?*, 7–10; Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 1–7; Shelton, "Irenaeus" in Green, ed., *Shapers of Christian Orthodoxy*, 17–24; D. Jeffrey Bingham, "Irenaeus of Lyons" in his ed., *The Routledge Companion to Early Christian Thought* (London: Routledge, 2010), 137–39; Michael Todd Wilson, "Preaching Irenaeus: A Second-Century Pastor Speaks to a Twenty-First Church" (unpublished D.Min. thesis, Knox Theological Seminary, 2011), 60–76.

³⁷ *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 22.2 and "The Ending according to the Moscow Epilogue" 2; Irenaeus, Letter to Florinus (Eusebius, *Church History* 5.20.4–8); Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.3.4.

birth is also obscure, with suggested dates ranging from 98 to 147.³⁸ Most likely he was born between 130 and 140.³⁹ It is also quite possible that Irenaeus studied under Justin Martyr, either in Ephesus or later at Rome.⁴⁰

By the mid-150s, the time of Polycarp's martyrdom, Irenaeus was residing in Rome,⁴¹ where he may have come with Polycarp on the latter's visit to Rome in 153 or 154, two years prior to his death.⁴² It was during this time in Rome that Irenaeus had significant contact with the followers of Valentinus and Marcion, whose ideas Irenaeus would seek to refute in his *magnum opus*, *The Detection and Refutation of the Pseudo-Knowledge* (c.180), known today more simply as *Against Heresies*.⁴³

From Rome, Irenaeus travelled to Lyons (Latin: Lugdunum) in southern Gaul as a missionary. This move would have taken place before the mid-160s, when Justin Martyr was put to death in Rome for his faith in Christ.⁴⁴ Situated at the confluence of the Rhône and Saône rivers, second-century Lyons was a miniature Rome in many ways. A bustling cosmopolitan center of some seventy thousand or so in

³⁸ Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 2.

³⁹ Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 2.

⁴⁰ See Michael Slusser, "How Much Did Irenaeus Learn from Justin?" in F. Young, M. Edwards and P. Parvis, eds., *Studia Patristica* (Leuven: Peeters Press, 2006), 40:515-520.

⁴¹ *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, "The Ending according to the Moscow Manuscript" 2.

⁴² Irenaeus, Letter to Victor of Rome (Eusebius, *Church History* 5.24.11-18).

⁴³ The title of the treatise is based on the wording of 1 Timothy 6:20. On Irenaeus' encounter with disciples of Valentinus, see *Against Heresies* 1.pref.2. Irenaeus also had a collection of Gnostic works that he studied so as to better respond to his theological opponents. See *Against Heresies* 1.31.2.

⁴⁴ Hitchcock, "Irenaeus of Lugdunum", 168.

Irenaeus's day, it was the key port on the trade routes up and down the Rhône river. It was also a provincial capital, the heart of the Roman road system for Gaul, and the seat of an important military garrison. Similar to Rome, its population contained a large Greek-speaking element, and it was among this element that Christianity had become firmly established in the city.⁴⁵ For example, in an account of the martyrdom of a large number of believers from Lyons and nearby Vienne in 177 there were two individuals who were identified as coming from Asia Minor and who would therefore have been Greek-speaking: Attalus, whose family came from Pergamum, and a certain Alexander of Phrygia.⁴⁶

Irenaeus was away in Rome during this brutal outburst of persecution. When he returned to the Rhône valley, he found the leadership in the churches of Lyons and Vienne decimated. He was subsequently appointed bishop of Lyons, as the previous bishop, Pothinus (c. 87–177), had succumbed in prison after being beaten during the persecution.⁴⁷ Within a couple of years after his return to Lyons, Irenaeus was hard at work writing *Against Heresies*.⁴⁸

The final sight we catch of Irenaeus on the scene of history is a letter that he wrote to Victor I (189–198), bishop of Rome, seeking to defuse the Quartodeciman controversy. Differences between the

⁴⁵ For this overview about the city of Roman Lyons, I am indebted to Edward Rochie Hardy, "Introduction" to "Selections from the Work *Against Heresies* by Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons" in Richardson, trans. and ed., *Early Christian Fathers*, 347–48.

⁴⁶ Eusebius, *Church History* 5.1.17, 49.

⁴⁷ Eusebius, *Church History* 5.1.29–31.

⁴⁸ For the date of *Against Heresies*, see Robert M. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), 182–83; Donovan, *One Right Reading?*, 9–10.

church at Rome and various churches in Asia Minor regarding the dating of Easter had led the former to threaten excommunication of the latter if the eastern churches did not get into line with Roman practice. Irenaeus pled for tolerance and diversity of practice.⁴⁹

This display of irenicism appears to have been typical of the second-century theologian. When it came to the Gnostics and their thinking, though, Irenaeus was fiercely antagonistic of what he saw as sheer error.⁵⁰ At the heart of this antagonism was Irenaeus's deeply-held conviction about the perfection of the Scriptures and the fact that this perfection provided solid ground for saving belief in the meta-narrative of the Bible.

Scripturae perfectae

Norbert Brox has rightly noted that in “Irenaeus this principle stands at the beginning [of his thought]: that the Bible is in every respect perfect and sufficient.”⁵¹ Irenaeus's stress upon the perfection and sufficiency of the Scriptures is due in part to the strident affirmation by the Gnostics of the errancy of the Bible.

⁴⁹ Eusebius, *Church History* 5.23–25. On Irenaeus' role in this controversy, see also Roch Kereszty, “The Unity of the Church in the Theology of Irenaeus,” *The Second Century* 4 (1984): 215–16; Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 5–6. According to a late, and unreliable, tradition, first mentioned by Gregory of Tours (d. 594), Irenaeus died as a martyr (*The Glory of the Martyrs* 49). For a discussion of the claim that Irenaeus was martyred, see J. van der Straeten, “Saint Irénée fut-il martyr?” in *Les Martyrs de Lyon (177)* (Paris: Éditions du Centre national de la Recherche scientifique, 1978), 145–53.

⁵⁰ It was Eusebius of Caesarea who first described Irenaeus as a peacemaker, making a play on the meaning of his name. See Eusebius, *Church History* 5.24.18.

⁵¹ Norbert Brox, “Irenaeus and the Bible. A Special Contribution” in Charles Kannengiesser, ed., *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis: The Bible in Ancient Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), I, 486. On Irenaeus' bibliology, see also D. Farkasfalvy, “Theology of Scripture in St. Irenaeus,” *Revue Bénédictine*, 68 (1968): 319–33.

When confronted with biblical arguments against their views, the Gnostics, according to Irenaeus, maintained that the Scriptures cannot be trusted. They rejected key aspects of the Old Testament out of hand, while they were adamant that the apostolic documents of the New Testament were penned by men who could be mistaken and thus introduced contradictions into their writings. What alone could be trusted was the teaching from the apostles that had been passed down to them by word of mouth (*per vivam vocem*). And for support of this secret oral tradition, they adduced Paul's words in 1 Cor 2:6 ("we speak wisdom among the perfect").⁵²

Over against the Gnostic distortion of the Scriptures, Irenaeus reveals himself to be, as Reinhold Seeberg aptly put it, "the first great representative of biblicism."⁵³ The Scriptures are to be the normative source for the teaching of the Christian community. As Ellen Flesseman-van Leer noted, when "Irenaeus wants to prove the truth of a doctrine materially, he turns to Scripture."⁵⁴ They are the "Scriptures of the Lord" (*dominicus Scripturis*) and it would be absolute folly to abandon the words of the Lord, Moses, and the other prophets, which set forth the truth, for the foolish opinions of Irenaeus' opponents.⁵⁵ Given the Gnostic argument that the Scriptures had been falsified and the Gnostic propensity to fob off their writings as genuine revelation,

⁵² *Against Heresies* 3.2.1–2.

⁵³ "Irenäus...ist der erste große Vertreter des Biblizismus" [*Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* (2nd ed.; Leipzig: A. Deichert'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung Nachf., 1908), 290]. Though, note the caution by Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 172.

⁵⁴ *Tradition and Scripture in the Early Church* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1953), 144.

⁵⁵ *Against Heresies* 2.30.6. For the translation of the phrase *dominicus Scripturis*, see John Lawson, *The Biblical Theology of Saint Irenaeus* (London: Epworth Press, 1948), 23–24n4.

Irenaeus rightly discerned that a discussion of the nature of Scripture was vital.

Scholars disagree over the exact boundaries of Irenaeus's New Testament,⁵⁶ with some even asserting that Irenaeus was the creative genius behind the creation of the New Testament canon.⁵⁷ And there is also no essential agreement as to how Scripture relates to tradition in Irenaeus' thought.⁵⁸ But what is not disputable is his view of Scripture. The bishop of Lyons was confident that the "Scriptures are indeed perfect (*perfectae*)" texts because they were spoken by the Word of God and his Spirit.⁵⁹ Referring specifically to the human authors of various

⁵⁶ For differing perspectives on Irenaeus' canon, see, for example, G. Nathanael Bonwetsch, *Die Theologie des Irenäus* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1925), 40; Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 180–82; Brox, "Irenaeus and the Bible" in Kannengiesser, ed., *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*, 484; M.C. Steenberg, "Irenaeus, *Graphe*, and the Status of *Hermas*," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 53 (2009): 29–66; Andreas Köstenberger and Michael J. Kruger, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy: How Contemporary Culture's Fascination with Diversity Has Reshaped Our Understanding of Early Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 151–75.

⁵⁷ For example, see Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003), 74–142, and Arthur Bellinzoni, "The Gospel of Luke in the Apostolic Fathers" in Andrew F. Gregory and Christopher M. Tuckett, eds., *Trajectories through the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 49n17. According to Bellinzoni in this footnote: "Irenaeus...essentially created the core of the New Testament canon of Holy Scripture." But see the convincing riposte by Hill, *Who Chose the Gospels?*, 34–68.

⁵⁸ See, for instance, Juan Ochagavía, *Visibile Patris Filius: A Study of Irenaeus' Teaching on Revelation and Tradition* (Rome: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1964), especially 174–205; Dominic J. Unger and John J. Dillon, "Introduction" to *St. Irenaeus of Lyons: Against the Heresies*, trans. Dominic J. Unger and rev. John J. Dillon (New York: Newman Press, 1992), 8–11.

Also critical to note, but which I do not have space to deal with in this essay, is Irenaeus' emphasis on the role of the Church in the interpretation of Scripture. For this emphasis, see the helpful remarks of Brox, "Irenaeus and the Bible" in Kannengiesser, ed., *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*, 495–99.

⁵⁹ *Against Heresies* 2.28.2. See also *Against Heresies* 4.33.8.

books of the New Testament, Irenaeus asserted that they were given perfect knowledge by the Holy Spirit and thus were incapable of proclaiming error. Irenaeus argued:

After our Lord rose from the dead, and [the apostles] were clothed with power from on high when the Holy Spirit came upon them, [they] were filled from all [his power], and had perfect knowledge; they went out to the ends of the earth, preaching the good things that were [sent] from God to us, and announcing the peace of heaven for human beings... Our Lord Jesus Christ is the Truth and there is no falsehood in him, even as David also said when he prophesied about his birth from a virgin and the resurrection from the dead, "Truth has sprung from the earth" (Ps 85:11). And the Apostles, being disciples of the Truth, are free from all falsehood, for falsehood has no fellowship with the truth, just as darkness has no fellowship with the light, but the presence of the one drives away the other.⁶⁰

Here Irenaeus based the fidelity of the apostolic writings upon the absolute truthfulness of the Lord Jesus Christ and the conviction that truth and falsehood are polar opposites. From Irenaeus's standpoint, if Christ is the embodiment of truth, it is impossible to conceive of him ever uttering falsehood. By extension, the writings of his authorized representatives are also incapable of error. This quality of absolute truthfulness can also be predicated of the authors of the books of the Old Testament, since the Spirit who spoke through the Apostles also spoke through the Old Testament writers.⁶¹ Thus the Scriptures form a harmonious whole:

⁶⁰ *Against Heresies* 3.1.1; 3.5.1.

⁶¹ *Against Heresies* 3.6.1, 5; 3.21.4; 4.20.8; *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 49. See also Bernard Sesboüé, "La preuve par les Ecritures chez S. Irénée; à propos

All Scripture, which has been given to us by God, shall be found to be perfectly consistent...and through the many diversified utterances (of Scripture) there shall be heard one harmonious melody in us, praising in hymns that God who created all things.⁶²

A second major emphasis in Irenaeus's bibliology is the unity of the testaments, and by extension, the unity of the history of God's salvific work. Marcion's denial of the revelatory value of the Old Testament led Irenaeus to affirm that the God who gave the law and the God who revealed the gospel is "one and the same." One piece of proof lay in the fact that in both the Old and New Testaments, the first and greatest commandment was to love God with the entirety of one's being and then, to love one's neighbour as oneself.⁶³

Another line of evidence was the similar revelation of the holiness of God in both Testaments.⁶⁴ Irenaeus also urged his readers—which he hoped would include his Gnostic opponents—to "carefully read (*legite diligentius*)" both the Old Testament prophets and the apostolic writings of the New Testament, and they would find that the leading contours of Christ's ministry were predicted by the prophets of ancient Israel.⁶⁵ There is therefore a common theme that informs both Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles: Christ. He is that

d'un texte difficile du Livre III de l'*Adversus Haereses*," *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 103 (1981): 872–87.

⁶² *Against Heresies* 2.28.3. Elsewhere, Irenaeus speaks of the "order and continuity of the Scriptures" (*Against Heresies* 1.8.1).

⁶³ *Against Heresies* 4.12.3.

⁶⁴ *Against Heresies* 4.27.4–28.1.

⁶⁵ *Against Heresies* 4.34.1. See also *Against Heresies* 4.7.1; 4.9.1; 4.11.4; 4.36.5.

which binds together the covenants.⁶⁶ And this commonality speaks of one God behind both portions of Scripture. To reject the Old Testament is therefore tantamount to a failure to discern this Christological center of the entirety of the Bible and to show oneself as not truly spiritual, a strong indictment of the Gnostics and their exegesis.⁶⁷

Fundamentum et columnam fidei nostrae

Help in elucidating this unified history of salvation was especially found in the words of the Apostle Paul, particularly those Pauline texts that had to do with the unity of the Church.⁶⁸ Irenaeus viewed the Old Testament prophets as having an essential unity with the New Testament since, in his mind, they were actually members of the body of Christ. As Irenaeus explained:

Certainly the prophets, along with other things that they predicted, also foretold this, that on whomever the Spirit of God would rest, and who would obey the word of the Father, and serve him according to their strength, should suffer persecution, and be

⁶⁶ *Against Heresies* 4.9.1; 4.26.1. See in this regard Iain M. MacKenzie, *Irenaeus's Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching. A theological commentary and translation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 60–62.

⁶⁷ *Against Heresies* 4.33.15. Irenaeus had been asked—possibly by a Gnostic—if the ministry of Christ had been announced and typified in the Old Testament, what then was truly new about his coming? Well, Irenaeus explained, the difference was this: what had been a matter of types and predictions was now reality, the Lord himself had come among them, and filled his servants with joy and freedom. See *Against Heresies* 4.34.1.

⁶⁸ John S. Coolidge, *The Pauline Basis of the Concept of Scriptural Form in Irenaeus* (Protocol of the colloquy of The Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture, no.8; Berkeley, California: The Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture, 1975), 1–3; Richard A. Norris, “Irenaeus’ Use of Paul in His Polemic Against the Gnostics” in William S. Babcock, ed., *Paul and the Legacies of Paul* (Dallas, TX: Southern Methodist University Press, 1990), 91–92.

stoned and killed. For the prophets prefigured in themselves all these things, because of their love for God and because of his word. For since they themselves were members of Christ, each one of them in so far as he was a member...revealed the prophecy [assigned him]. All of them, although many, prefigured one, and proclaimed the things that belong to one. For just as the working of the whole body is disclosed by means of our [physical] members, yet the shape of the total man is not displayed by one member, but by all; so also did all the prophets prefigure the one [Christ], while every one of them, in so far as he was a member, did, in accordance with this, complete the [established] dispensation, and prefigured that work of Christ assigned to him as a member.⁶⁹

The diverse predictive ministries of the Old Testament prophets were essentially part of the unity of the revelation of Christ. Irenaeus went on to borrow Pauline passages that spoke of the unity of the universal church in Eph 4 to describe the attentive reader's perception of the inerrant unity between the prophetic texts of the Old Testament and the texts that contain their New Testament fulfillment. In his words:

If any one believes in the one God, who also made all things by the Word, just as both Moses says, "God said, 'Let there be light', and there was light" [Genesis 1:3], and as we read in the Gospel, "All things were made by him, and nothing was made without him" [John 1:3], and similarly the Apostle Paul [says], "There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father, who is over all,

⁶⁹ *Against Heresies* 4.33.10, trans. Alexander Roberts and W.H. Rambaut in A. Cleveland Coxe, arr., *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus (Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol.1; 1885 ed.; repr. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903), 509, altered.

and through all, and in us all” [Ephesians 4:5–6]—this man will first of all “hold the head, from which the whole body is firmly joined and united together, and which, through every joint according to the measure of the supply of each several part, causes the body to grow so that it builds itself up in love” [Ephesians 4:16]. Then afterwards shall every word also seem consistent to him, if he will carefully read the Scriptures among those who are presbyters in the Church, among whom is the apostolic doctrine, as I have shown.⁷⁰

In another instance, Irenaeus applied 1 Cor 12:4–7, a passage that speaks of the diversity of the gifts in the body of Christ as being essential to the unity of the church, to the unity between the different prophetic ministries in the Old Testament and the saving work of Christ in the new covenant.⁷¹ As John Coolidge has rightly pointed out, it appears that, for Irenaeus, perception of the unity between the Testaments is concomitant to participation in the communal unity of the Church.⁷²

It is surely this use of Pauline statements about ecclesial unity to affirm the unity of the Scriptures that explains Irenaeus’s curious treatment of a phrase from 1 Tim 3:15. The church, the Pauline verse declares, is the “pillar and ground of the truth.” This striking statement becomes for Irenaeus an affirmation about the Scriptures. At the outset of Book 3 of *Against Heresies*, where Irenaeus explicitly rejected the claim by some of the Gnostics that the Apostles

⁷⁰ *Against Heresies* 4.32.1. On Irenaeus’ conviction of the vital importance of reading the Scriptures within the context of the church catholic, see also *Against Heresies* 3.24.1; 5.20.2.

⁷¹ *Against Heresies* 4.20.6.

⁷² *Pauline Basis of the Concept of Scriptural Form*, 3.

compromised the truth in their transmission of it, the missionary theologian defended the integrity of the “plan of salvation (*dispositionem salutis*)” as it had come down to him in the written text of the Bible. The oral message of the Apostles was identical to what was enshrined in the Scriptures and thus the latter could serve as “the ground and pillar (*fundamentum et columnam*) of our faith.”⁷³

Again, when Irenaeus insisted that there had to be four gospels, and only four, because of the four corners of the earth and the earth’s four winds—there being an aesthetic harmony between the four gospels and creation⁷⁴—he again stated that “the pillar and ground of the Church is the Gospel and the Spirit of life.”⁷⁵ The inclusion of the Holy Spirit here is not accidental, for if Christ is the common theme of all of the Scriptures; the Spirit is the One who perfectly inspired all of the authors of the Bible to speak of the one Saviour and that without error.

An Irenaean prayer

Irenaeus was confident that a humble listening to and reading of the inerrant Word of God would produce a faith that was “firm, not fictitious, but solely true.”⁷⁶ And one of his manifest goals in *Against Heresies* was to produce such a faith among his Gnostic opponents. Irenaeus’s fierce opposition to Gnosticism did not arise from a hunger for power, as some recent scholars have argued, but out of a genuine love for truth and a sincere desire for the spiritual well-being of his

⁷³ *Against Heresies* 3.1.1.

⁷⁴ Hill, *Who Chose the Gospels?*, 34–38.

⁷⁵ *Against Heresies* 3.11.8.

⁷⁶ *Against Heresies* 3.21.3. On humility as an interpretative principle, see *Against Heresies* 2.28.2–3.

fellow believers and their theological opponents.⁷⁷ This pastoral heart is well revealed as he prayed for the latter at the close of his third book of *Against Heresies*:

And now we pray that these men may not remain in the pit that they have dug for themselves, but...being converted to the church of God, they may be legitimately begotten, and that Christ be formed in them, and that they may know the framer and maker of this universe, the only true God and Lord of all. This we pray for them, for we love them better than they think they love themselves. For our love, as it is true, is saving to them, if they will receive it. It is like a severe remedy, taking away the excessive and superfluous flesh that forms on a wound; for it puts an end to their exaltation and haughtiness. Therefore we shall not tire in endeavoring with all our might to stretch out [our] hand to them.⁷⁸

May a similar pastoral spirit inform our commitment to inerrancy.

⁷⁷ *Against Heresies* 3.2.3; 3.6.4; 3.25.7. See also Marian Balwierz, *The Holy Spirit and the Church as a Subject of Evangelization According to St. Irenaeus* (Warsaw: Akademia Teologii Katolickiej, 1985), 50–57; Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 5; Bingham, “Irenaeus of Lyons”, in his ed., *Early Christian Thought*, 145.

⁷⁸ *Against Heresies* 3.25.7 (trans. Roberts and Rambaut in Coxe, arr., *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, 460).