

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Irenaeus's Assault of Gnosticism

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Irenaeus's assault on Gnosticism was anything but the kind of cool, rational approach modern people might expect of a bishop or theologian. He clearly considered it foolish and sinister and wished to expose it once and for all as a complete corruption of the gospel in the guise of "higher wisdom for spiritual people." In order to expose Gnosticism, Irenaeus spent months and years studying at least twenty distinct Gnostic teachers and their schools. He found that the most influential one was the Valentinian Gnosticism that had taken hold among Christians in Rome through the teachings of a Gnostic leader named Ptolemaeus. Therefore, he focused on exposing that one as ridiculous and false with the hope that all the others would be crushed by the weight of its fall.

Irenaeus's approach to the critique of Gnosticism in *Against Heresies* was threefold. First, he attempted to reduce the Gnostic worldview to absurdity by showing that much of it was invented mythology with no foundation on anything other than imagination. This first strategy included exposing Gnosticism's inner contradictions and fundamental incoherence. Its truth claims conflicted with one another. Second, he attempted to show that the Gnostic claim to authority going back to Jesus and the apostles was simply false. Finally, he engaged Gnostic interpretation of Scripture in debate and showed it to be unreasonable and even impossible.

In the background of Irenaeus's polemical exposé of Gnosticism lie several assumptions. He clearly assumed that he had a special role and position as one tutored in Christianity by Polycarp, who in turn was mentored by John. Many of the Gnostics claimed that John was part of an inner group of Jesus' disciples who received from the Savior a "secret teaching" not available to most Christians because they were not spiritually fit to understand it. While they could find hints of their own worldview and gospel in apostolic writings, they had to rely on a secret oral tradition as the main source of their authority. Irenaeus assumed that if such a teaching existed, Polycarp would have known of it and would have told him about it. That none of the bishops of the Christians recognized or acknowledged it seriously undermined the Gnostics' claim.

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Another basic assumption underlying Irenaeus's critique of Gnosticism was that the Gnostics were the ones who broke the unity of the church. They were the schismatics. Irenaeus highly valued the church's visible unity that consisted in the fellowship of the bishops appointed by the apostles. The Gnostics stood outside of that and were parasites on it. For Irenaeus and many of his readers this was a major strike against them.

One difficulty often encountered in reading *Against Heresies* is the sheer volume of Irenaeus's recounting of Gnostic beliefs. It is easy to get bogged down in that and give up reading altogether. For example, Irenaeus explained the teaching of Valentinus regarding the origin of the world this way:

He maintained that there is a certain Dyad (two-fold being), who is inexpressible by any name, of whom one part should be called Arrhetus (unspeakable), and the other Sige (silence). But of this Dyad a second was produced, one part of whom he names Pater, and the other Aletheia. From this Tetrad, again, arose Logos and Zoe, Anthropos and Ecclesia. These constitute the primary Ogdoad ... There is another, who is a renowned teacher among them, and who, struggling to reach something more sublime, and to attain to a kind of higher knowledge, has explained the primary Tetrad as follows: There is [he says] a certain Proarche who existed before all things, surpassing all thought, speech, and nomenclature, whom I call Monotes (unity). Together with this Monotes there exists a power, which again I term Henotes (oneness). This Henotes and Monotes, being one, produced, yet not so as to bring forth ... the beginning of all things, an intelligent, unbegotten, and invisible being, which beginning language terms "Monad." With this Monad there co-exists a power of the same essence, which again I term Hen (One). These powers then—Monotes, and Henotes, and Monas, and Hen—produced the remaining company of Aeon.¹

Irenaeus stopped his laborious exposition of Gnostic metaphysics at this point and responded passionately with a parody of this so-called Christian view of creation based on allegedly higher knowledge and wisdom:

Iu, Iu! Pheu, Pheu!—for well may we utter these tragic exclamations at such a pitch of audacity in the coining of names as he has displayed without a blush, in devising a nomenclature for his own system of falsehood. For when he declares: There is a certain Proarche before all things, surpassing all thought, whom I call Monotes; and again, with this Monotes there co-exists a power which I also call Henotes,—it is most manifest that he confesses the things which have been said to be his own invention, and that he himself has given names to this scheme of things,

¹ Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 1.11 (selections) ANF 1.

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which had never been previously suggested by any other. It is manifest also, that he himself is the one who has had sufficient audacity to coin these names; so that, unless *he* had appeared in the world, the truth would still have been destitute of a name. But, in that case, nothing hinders any other, in dealing with the same subject, to affix names after such a fashion as the following: There is a certain Proarche, royal, surpassing all thought, a power existing before every other substance, and extended into space in every direction. But along with it there exists a power which I term a *Gourd*; and along with this Gourd there exists a power which again I term *Utter-Emptiness*. This Gourd and Emptiness, since they are one, produced (and yet did not simply produce, so as to be apart of themselves) a fruit, everywhere visible, eatable, and delicious, which fruit-language calls a *Cucumber*. Along with this Cucumber exists a power of the same essence, which again I call a *Melon*. These powers, the Gourd, Utter-Emptiness, the Cucumber, and the Melon, brought forth the remaining multitude of the delirious melons of Valentinus ... If any one may assign names at his pleasure, who shall prevent us from adopting these names, as being much more credible [than the others], as well as in general use, and understood by all?²

If Irenaeus's modern reader perseveres through the pages and pages of explanation of Gnostic systems and terminology, the reward is the occasional gem of wry humor and sarcasm that reveals something of Irenaeus's personality and abhorrence of Gnosticism's patently absurd worldview.

All of the major Gnostic sects and schools denigrated the physical creation and denied its origin in the supreme God of goodness and light. Most of them, including Valentinus's school, introduced levels of emanations from God of pure spirit and light who gradually fell away and somehow ended up creating the material universe, including human bodies wherein sparks of the divine (souls, spirits) are imprisoned and entrapped. Against this view of creation Irenaeus affirmed the Christian doctrine of God as both Creator and Redeemer of material as well as spiritual existence. Against the Gnostics he quoted John 1:3 and other Old Testament and apostolic passages (later to be included in the New Testament) that treat God as the Creator of all things through his Word and Spirit, and he discounted their own interpretations of biblical references to angels and spiritual powers and principalities as fabulous and incredible.³

² Ibid.

³ Olson, R. E. (1999). *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 71-73.

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