

THE FITTINGNESS AND HARMONY OF SCRIPTURE: TOWARD AN IRENAEAN HERMENEUTIC

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Irenaeus of Lyons is widely regarded as the first Catholic theologian. His refutation of the Gnostics set the pattern for Christian orthodoxy in the Patristic era and beyond. Certain of his interpreters, however, find him to be rather unsophisticated hermeneutically and to use Scripture apart from any overarching interpretive strategy. For example, Manlio Simonetti writes,

It is understandable that Irenaeus, not having any clear hermeneutical principle of his own, should in his opposition to the Gnostics have attacked their interpretation of Scripture at the level of content rather than at the level of exegetical theory (2.20–25) and should therefore have felt it necessary to resort to the principle of authority: the Catholic Church alone is the touchstone of truth in the interpretation of Scripture in that it is the storehouse of authentic apostolic tradition.¹

By contrast, I contend that a determining factor in Irenaeus' use of Scripture is what Osborn calls his 'aesthetic' criterion.² Shaping much of Irenaeus' biblical exegesis is his concern to display the 'harmony' (*consonantia*) and 'fittingness' of the Scriptures and, *mutatis mutandis*, the Christian faith itself. In contrast to his opponents who, in his estimation, violently fragment the Scriptures by conforming them to their alien teaching, Irenaeus aims to subvert them through a presentation of the beauty of Scripture's internal coherence and unified harmony. After examining Irenaeus' description of the interpretive error made by the heretics and his alternative approach, an analysis of three vignettes will serve to illustrate how the concern for harmony and fittingness plays out. Interaction with secondary literature will be left to the endnotes in order to allow the reader of the main body of the text to hear Irenaeus' own voice as well as possible.

I. THE FRAGMENTED IMAGE

As Irenaeus makes clear in the first book of *Against Heresies*, his opponents are of wide variety.³ What unites them, and what can presumably allow Irenaeus to address them together in one volume, is their common error in the interpretation of Scripture.⁴ The fundamental mistake of the heretics has been their use of the statements of Scripture without regard to their overall shape. In particular, some of his opponents rely on private mystical knowledge which they claim Christ has revealed through parables to those qualified to understand.⁵ Instead of paying careful attention to the outward form in which the biblical expressions are found originally, they reconfigure sentences, phrases and words in Scripture according to their secret revelations. The Scriptures are 'adapted' to these

alien ideas and thereby ‘abused’ and ‘injured’.⁶ Part of the content of their mystical revelations included the notion that the various prophets of the Old Testament, and even Jesus himself, spoke different things depending on which deity was influencing them at the time.⁷ By attributing different sayings to the inspiration of multiple deities, they fragment and tear apart the Scripture. By beginning with sources alien to Scripture the heretics must wrench the biblical expressions from their proper place to fit with their doctrine. Irenaeus describes how they ‘disregard the order and the connection of the Scriptures, and so far as in them (*sic*) lies dismember and destroy the truth’.⁸

Irenaeus vividly illustrates his opponents’ practice of biblical interpretation through an analogy in which he portrays the heretics breaking into pieces the ‘beautiful image’ of a king constructed by a ‘skilful artist’ out of precious jewels. The heretics then re-arrange the gems to fit together into the form of a dog or a fox – ‘and even that but poorly executed.’ These counterfeit artists point to the jewels used by the original and true artist in order to deceive the ignorant by persuading them that the ‘miserable likeness of the fox’ was, in fact, the image of the king. ‘In like manner do these person patch together old wives’ fables and then endeavour, by *violently* drawing away from their *proper* connection, words, expressions, and parables whenever found, to adapt the oracles of God to their baseless fictions’.⁹ In another illustration he compares the exegesis of the heretics to a pastiche.¹⁰ In order to point out the foolishness of their approach, Irenaeus takes lines drawn from Homer’s *Odessey* and *Iliad* and detaches them from their original narrative shape, reordering them according to a form entirely different from their original structure. By separating the Homeric expressions from their overall shape and twisting them ‘from a natural to a non-natural sense,’ the expressions no longer refer to their original subject.¹¹ Only someone who is well acquainted with Homer’s writings and their original order would know that the deviant arrangement is a counterfeit. The form and structure of Scripture, which the heretics have neglected, is for Irenaeus the interpretive key to its correct use.

II. RECONSTRUCTING THE IMAGE

In contrast to the violence of forcing Scripture to conform to foreign ideas, Irenaeus describes the importance of reading Scripture in harmony with the ‘hypothesis’ internal to Scripture itself.¹² This hypothesis is the rule of truth received from the Church. The framework provided by the rule enables one to detect the disorder inflicted on Scripture by its Gnostic interpreters:

In like manner he also who retains unchangeable in his heart the rule of the truth which he received by means of baptism, will doubtless recognise the names, the expressions, and the parables taken from the Scriptures, but will by no means acknowledge the blasphemous use which these men make of them.¹³

This rule provides the complementary image by which to re-arrange the jewels of Scripture according to their proper position and so expose the disorder of the heretics. The rule is not, like the sources of the heretics, alien to the Scriptures. Rather, the Church has received the teachings of the faith from Christ himself, the original source of the rule, as they were handed on by the apostles and their close disciples; these are the very people who wrote the New Testament texts that the heretics twist to fit their foreign ideas.¹⁴ To certain members of the Church is given the task to ‘bring out the meaning’ of the difficult Scriptures and to ‘accommodate them to the general scheme of the faith’.¹⁵ It is assumed

by Irenaeus that the clarity of the central ideas of Scripture, along with the core teachings of the faith that have been passed down through the succession of bishops are mutually confirming; these confirmed truths provide the framework for the correct understanding of the more difficult passages. The remainder of *Against Heresies* can be read as a presentation of how the jewels of Scripture ‘fit’ in their proper position according to the ‘design’ provided by the Church’s rule of truth, thus displaying the overall and original harmony of Scripture in contrast with the confusion of the heretics. Irenaeus writes, ‘But when he has restored every one of the expressions quoted to its proper position, and has fitted it to the body of the truth, he will lay bare, and prove to be without any foundation, the figment of the heresies’.¹⁶

In particular, books two through five of *Against Heresies* serve as an extended biblical theology in which the teachings of the heretics are refuted and the logical coherence of Christian faith expressed through a harmonious exegesis of Scripture.¹⁷ Irenaeus’ argument proceeds on two related fronts. First, Irenaeus aims to show through Scripture that, by virtue of the Word of God becoming flesh and suffering, he has mediated humanity to communion with the Father who is the creator of the world. This establishes the goodness of creation because the material world can no longer be thought of as a product of defect, but as created, assumed, and redeemed by the work of the Son and Spirit who are the ‘two hands’ of the one God. Second, Irenaeus establishes that this one faith is shared in common throughout the Church’s various Scriptural texts – the Law, the Prophets, the Gospels, the Epistles, and the Apocalypse of John.¹⁸ The different dispensations spoken of in the Scriptures require that Irenaeus’ theory of Scripture’s harmony avoid any suggestion that it speaks monotonously. When set beside the fragmentation and confusion of his opponents’ teachings, the force of Irenaeus’ exposition of the one faith of the Church and Scripture stands out in stark contrast by virtue of its overall consistency, harmony, and, one might add, beauty.

The qualities of harmony and fittingness are derived from the one God who creates through his Word and Wisdom. As Irenaeus declares, ‘Now God shall be glorified in His handiwork, fitting it so as to be conformable to, and modeled after, His own Son’.¹⁹ In contrast with the chaos and fragmentation of creation that he discerns in the teaching of the Gnostics, Irenaeus describes to the correct manner in which one might detect the harmony and unity of divine artistry:

But since created things are various and numerous, they are indeed well fitted and adapted to the whole creation; yet, when viewed individually, are mutually opposite and inharmonious, just as the sound of the lyre, which consists of many and opposite notes, gives rise to one unbroken melody, through means of the interval which separates each one from the others. The lover of truth therefore ought not to be deceived by the intervals between each note, nor should he imagine that one was due to one artist and author, and another to another, nor that one person fitted the treble, another the bass, and yet another the tenor strings; but he should hold that one and the same person [formed the whole], so as to prove the judgment, goodness, and skill exhibited in the whole work and [specimen of] wisdom. Those, too, who listen to the melody, ought to praise and extol the artist, to admire the tension of some notes, to attend to the softness of others, to catch the sounds of others between both these extremes, and to consider the special character of others, so as to inquire at what each one aims, and what is the cause of their variety, never failing to apply our rule, neither giving up the [one] artist, nor casting faith in the one God who formed all things, nor blaspheming our creator.²⁰

Scripture, as a creation of the one God, exhibits the aesthetic harmony and fittingness imprinted by God’s Word and Wisdom. The tensions between the notes, the difference in their tone and their special character requires the interpreter to attend to Scripture within

the context of the whole. Only within this whole can the particular passages be rightly understood.²¹

Based on the theological assumption of Scripture's unity and harmony, Irenaeus describes a method for interpreting the more obscure passages that do not appear at first to fit with the Bible's overall shape. In the first place, one must focus on those elements that God has 'subjected to our knowledge' and put within our grasp of comprehension.²² From these clear and unambiguous sections one can then interpret the passages that present themselves with less clarity.²³ Failure to apply this principle results in every reader of Scripture interpreting according to their own inclination. In such case there is no longer a single rule of truth but only opposition and antagonism between the grains of sand that are private 'systems of truth'.²⁴ Sometimes, however, a satisfactory explanation of Scripture simply is not achievable. Then, counsels Irenaeus, we must leave the explanation in the hands of God; the barrier to understanding is not the fault of the Scriptures, which are perfect, but due simply to the wide chasm that separates the inferior knowledge of humans from God.²⁵ By grasping firmly the rule of faith and leaving some questions in the hands of God, the ambiguous passages harmonize with the clear ones and through the 'diversified utterances [of Scripture] there shall be heard one harmonious melody in us, praising in hymns that God who created all things'.²⁶ This unity and harmony is based on the one Christ who is the 'treasure hidden in a field' of parables and types.²⁷ Attention to the one and only Christ, presented both in the clear passages and also through the rule of truth, opens the way to understand the remaining enigmas of Scripture.

III. THE FITTINGNESS OF THE FOUR

While Irenaeus expresses his interest to expose and uphold the harmony of Scripture throughout his treatise, we shall survey three vignettes – the fittingness of the four Gospels, of the virgin birth, and of the relationship of the Old and New Testament – in which the matter of harmony comes particularly to the fore. The first of these is his explanation for why there can only be four Gospels.²⁸ Though Irenaeus provides significant exposition of how each of the four canonical Gospels aligns with the teaching of the Old Testament and the proclamation of the Church, he does not argue at length against those Gospels put forward by the heretics. Instead, by displaying the common teaching of the canonical Gospels, and by pointing to the fact that each of the heretics use at least some of them fragmentarily, Irenaeus only needs to provide a rationale for why the number of Gospels should be limited to four.²⁹ For him, it is 'not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are'.³⁰ The criteria of this judgment, however, are not merely historical reliability or apostolic origin, but theological 'fittingness' that fixes the fourfold shape of the Gospel witness.³¹ In order to establish fittingness, Irenaeus points to the four zones of the world, the four principle winds from each of the world's corners, and the fact that the Church is spread throughout the entire world, the ground and pillar of which is the Gospel. The entire creation, as it is drawn together through the uniting teaching of the Church catholic, demands that the Church's teaching and foundation be fourfold in form.³² In contrast to the countless grains of sand upon which the heretics have built their edifice of teaching, the fourfoldness of the Church's Gospels attest to the stability and sturdiness of the Church's teaching.³³

Irenaeus also reflects on Psalm 80:1 and applies the words 'Thou that sittest between the cherubim, shine forth' to Christ. The four-faced cherubim of Ezekiel, when read together with the four 'living creatures' of Revelation, present a fourfold description of the significance of the life of Christ. The particularities of each of the living creatures align perfectly, for Irenaeus, with the emphasis of the beginning of each of the canonical

Gospels. The image of a lion reflects Christ's leadership and royal power; this is expressed in the Gospel of John's description of the Son's generation from the Father and work of creation. The image resembling a calf signifies Christ's sacrificial and sacerdotal order, best portrayed in the Gospel of Luke that begins with the account of Zechariah, the priest. The face of a man connects with Christ's advent as a human being, seen clearly in the Gospel of Matthew that sets out his earthly generations. The image of a flying eagle points to the gift of the Spirit given by Christ and the 'prophetic spirit coming down from on high to men;' the short and concise introduction of Mark best accords with the style of the prophets.

Such, then, as was the course followed by the Son of God, so was also the form of the living creatures; and such was the form of the living creatures, so was also the character of the Gospel. For the living creatures are quadriform, and the Gospel is quadriform, as is also the course followed by the Lord.³⁴

While the content of a valid Gospel required both apostolic origin and coherence with the apostolic theological tradition, the fourfold form of the Gospel is fixed. 'For since God made all things in due proportion and adaptation, it was fit also that the outward aspect of the Gospel should be well arranged and harmonized'.³⁵

IV. THE FITTINGNESS OF THE VIRGIN BIRTH

In the second vignette, Irenaeus displays the criteria of fittingness and harmony with particular force in his exposition of the doctrine of the virgin birth.³⁶ The doctrine functions strategically in Irenaeus' overall exposition of biblical teaching; it unites the Old Testament prophets with the Gospels, the letters of Paul, and the teaching of the Church by revealing agreement on a substantial teaching which was denied by Irenaeus' opponents. The most crucial Old Testament text to which Irenaeus appeals is Isaiah 7:14. However, in order to counter the Jewish objection to this passage – that the Hebrew term 'young maiden' should be preferred over the Greek term 'virgin' – Irenaeus argues from the legends surrounding the inspiration of the Septuagint.³⁷ Other features of the prophecy in Isaiah, including the argument that mentions the 'belly' of David (rather than his 'loins'), show that there is no male involvement in the conception of the promised child.³⁸ Indeed, nearly any text of the Old Testament Scriptures that lends itself to speak of the ambiguity of human descent is seen as fulfilled in the virgin birth.³⁹ Irenaeus also finds support for the virgin birth in a series of Old Testament prophecies that he takes to predict that the salvation of God takes its origin from Bethlehem.⁴⁰ His assumption of the inner coherence of Scripture leads him to draw together any text that fits into this harmony. Seemingly disparate texts, when viewed from the perspective of the shape of the whole, come to 'fit' together.

The virgin birth also functions as a crucial lynch-pin in Irenaeus' Adam/Christ and Eve/Mary typologies.⁴¹ The 'analogy' between the first and second Adam expresses the inner logic of God's plan of salvation. Christ's work was a 'recapitulation' of the sin of Adam. The heretics, by denying that God was truly united to flesh in Jesus Christ, undo this analogy and thus destroy the coherence of God's saving action that spans the testimony of Scripture. The Adam-Christ analogy is crucial to the prior Christian conviction that the God of creation is the Father of Christ through whom it is redeemed.⁴² Just as Adam was formed from virgin soil, so was Christ born of a virgin womb.⁴³ Irenaeus explains, 'And as the protoplast himself, Adam, had his substance from untilled and as yet virgin soil . . . so

did He who is the Word, recapitulating Adam in Himself, rightly receive a birth, enabling Him to gather up Adam [into Himself], from Mary, who was as yet a virgin'.⁴⁴ Furthermore, 'in accordance with this design,' just as through the disobedience of the betrothed virgin Eve came death, so through the obedience of the betrothed virgin Mary came life.⁴⁵

Furthermore, the virgin birth was a fitting 'sign' and 'token' of the significance of Christ's advent.⁴⁶ First, the unexpected sign of the virgin birth is fitting to attest to the most unexpected work of God in salvation. Irenaeus writes, 'But in this that he said, 'The Lord Himself shall give you a sign,' he declared an unlooked-for thing with regard to His generation, which could have been accomplished in no other way than by God the Lord of all, God Himself giving a sign in the house of David'.⁴⁷ Second, the virgin birth is a fitting sign to express the primacy of God's action in salvation apart from the agency of human beings. Irenaeus explains, 'On this account, therefore, the Lord Himself, who is Emmanuel from the Virgin, is the sign of our salvation, since it was the Lord Himself who saved them, because they could not be saved by their own instrumentality'.⁴⁸ Third, the virgin birth is a fitting token of both the divine and human generations of Christ.⁴⁹ On the one hand, if Christ did not receive the substance of flesh from a human being, then his suffering and death did not extend to humanity's actual condition.⁵⁰ Thus, it is fitting that Christ be 'made of woman' (Galatians 4:4).⁵¹ On the other hand, because Jesus Christ is very Word of God made flesh, it would not be fitting for him to enter human existence through normal means. Instead, the incarnate Word received a birth that was suited to his preeminence.⁵² The virgin birth keeps Jesus out of line of the regular human generation by severing the biological connection to Joseph (from whose line no one will be a king).⁵³ Indeed, by denying the virgin birth, and by implication, the incarnation, salvation is forfeited.⁵⁴

V. THE HARMONY OF THE ECONOMY

In his display of the harmony of Scripture, certain problems caused Irenaeus to expend a significant amount of exegetical and synthetic energy. In this third vignette, we will examine the particularly crucial issue of the role and status of the Old Testament Law. On the surface, it would seem that the Law provided a means of salvation and ethical guidance that contrasts with the teaching of Jesus, Paul and the Church. The Marcionites, especially, made the charge that the God of Mosaic legislation was contrary to the God of Jesus.⁵⁵ Irenaeus' refutation of this position once again involved him in setting out the harmony of the Scriptures.⁵⁶ This time, however, he had to appeal to the way in which the harmony of Scripture presents itself through the melody of different voices. Irenaeus affirms that the writings of Moses (as well as those of the other prophets), quite literally, are the words of the pre-incarnate Christ.⁵⁷ The uniqueness of the Mosaic Law harmonizes with New Testament when both are seen as 'fitted for the times [at which they were given] . . . for the benefit of the human race'.⁵⁸ The dispensation of the Law of Moses lasted only until John, after which time Christ fulfilled its requirements. It is crucial, for Irenaeus, to interpret the dispensation of the Law within the overall economy of God's salvation. The various dispensations of the one, over-arching plan of God are ordered, at least in part, to God's educational intention for his creation.⁵⁹ During its time, the Law was implemented to 'instruct the soul by means of those corporeal objects which were of an external nature, drawing it, as by a bond, to obey its commandments, that man might learn to serve God'.⁶⁰ The aim of the Mosaic dispensation was the preparation and adaptation of humankind for the eventual service to God without the 'fetters' of 'bondage' and 'slavery'.⁶¹ During this particular period of education and adaptation, the Law was implemented to withhold God's people from excessive idolatry and to ensure that the race of Abraham might

continue as recognizable among the people of the earth.⁶² This helps to explain why the Law seems to prescribe certain precepts that appear to be without moral warrant (circumcision) and that run in tension with the moral ideal (divorce).

Rather than a sign of conflict within God or the world, Irenaeus describes the dispensation of the Law as the work of a 'wise Artist' and a skillful 'architect' that fit properly within his overall plan.⁶³ In fact, the entire Old Testament masterfully points to the advent and work of Christ, a fact that Irenaeus goes to great lengths to establish through a textured examination of the way the Law and Prophets '[typify], as it were, certain things in a shadow, and [delineate] eternal things by temporal . . .'⁶⁴ Typology is the means by which human beings learn the truth and correct service of God. The ceremonial aspects of the Law, for example, both point to Christ and prepare human nature for him: 'For by means of types they learned to fear God, and to continue devoted to His service'.⁶⁵ Rather than God needing the rituals and sacrifices of the Levites, the ceremonial laws were instituted for humankind, out of 'compassion to their blindness,' that by these outward means they might learn of proper faith, obedience, and righteousness.⁶⁶ If the Law has such a positive value in relation to Christ, then Irenaeus must also deal with the apparent criticism of the Law in the Scripture. These criticisms were due to those who, even in the days of the prophets, set up specious traditions that were contrary to the original Law of Moses. One of the works of Christ was to cut through the accretions of incorrect tradition in order to renew the original law of love of God and neighbour. He did this by extending and fulfilling the Law's true and noble intent.⁶⁷ Due to the fact that the Word is the Law's originator, fulfiller, and true interpreter, it cannot be looked at as an anomaly antagonistic to God's overall plan. Rather, children of the new covenant ought to continue to look to the Law as 'natural precepts' for moral guidance, but to do so as servants rather than as slaves under bondage.⁶⁸ By appealing to the Law's origin in the one Word of God and its suitability for a particular dispensation in God's plan, Irenaeus aimed to hold together the distinctiveness of the Mosaic Law from the gospel, but also maintain that one and the same God is the author of them all.⁶⁹

VI. CONCLUSION

The concern to display the harmony and fittingness of Scripture in response to the fragmentation of the heretics stands behind the entirety of Irenaeus' argument in *Against Heresies*. While he does not reach the heights of complexity in his articulation of a hermeneutical theory that Origen and Augustine would later, attention to Irenaeus' aesthetic criteria shows that he was anything but unsophisticated on this front. With a few recent exceptions, it has been the failure of modern theology to mute the employment of aesthetic criteria in hermeneutics. Certain streams of modern theology, both on the theological 'left' and the theological 'right,' have been particularly apt to divorce beauty from her two sisters, the true and the good. According to Hans Urs von Balthasar, when this tendency is carried over into the reading of Scripture, fragmentation is the result. Only by giving beauty her due and uniting the sisters together, in a manner not unlike that of Irenaeus, may Christian truth be shown to be persuasive.⁷⁰ Irenaeus' notions of 'harmony' and 'fittingness' stem from his fundamental Christian conviction of the unity of the one God who created the world through his Word and Wisdom. Scripture naturally displays these qualities because of the object to which the Scriptures bear witness and the One from whom they originate. As such, a true reading of Scripture will also display a certain beauty that goes beyond, but does not stand apart from, logical and grammatical/lexical analysis. It is this beauty that Irenaeus unveiled 'against the heretics.'

Notes

1 Manlio Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*, trans. John Hughes (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 23. This assessment is appropriated by Kyle Keefer, *The Branches of the Gospel of John: The Reception of the Fourth Gospel in the Early Church* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2006), 50–3.

2 Eric Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 18–20, cf., 193–210. Osborn provides an overview of the struggle in modernity to find unity in the ‘jungle’ of Irenaeus’ work. One of the problems, as he describes it, has been to analyze Irenaeus’ writing with reference only to ‘logic’ (Koch) at the expense of ‘aesthetic,’ and *vice versa* (Houssiau). Osborn convincingly shows how both logic and aesthetic criteria work together for Irenaeus. *Ibid.*, 9–24.

3 As my concern in this paper is to exposit an element of Irenaeus’ approach to the interpretation of Scripture, I will confine myself to his own description of those he is trying to refute and acknowledge that his description may not be adequate to account for the actual teaching of these groups. For a helpful survey and introduction to Irenaeus’ Gnostic opponents, particularly the Valentinians, see Robert M. Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (New York: London, 1997), 11–28.

4 Irenaeus calls the heretics against whom he writes ‘evil interpreters of the good word of revelation.’ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, volume 1, ed. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 1.Preface.1. Hereafter, *AH*.

5 *AH* 1.III.1. In addition to private mystical knowledge transmitted orally, some of the Gnostics formed their own texts. Irenaeus mentions two: the Gospel of Judas and the Gospel of Truth. See *AH* 1.XXXI.1 and *AH* 3.XI.9.

6 *AH* 1.III.6; 1.VIII.1; 1.IX.1, 3.

7 *AH* 1.VII.3

8 *AH* 1.VIII.1. In order to manifest the ‘perversity’ of the heretics’ interpretation of John’s prologue, Irenaeus appeals to the way in which they must violate the ‘order’ and ‘uniformity’ of the structure of John’s prologue, the respect of which reveals something of John’s true meaning. *AH* 1.IX.1–2.

9 *AH* 1.VIII.1 (Emphasis mine). Irenaeus charges that by their practice of biblical interpretation the heretics ‘frigidly and perversely pull to pieces’ the power and dispensations of God and are ‘cutting Him up piecemeal.’ *AH* 1.XVI.3 and *AH* 1.XV.3.

10 A pastiche is a form of parody defined as ‘an imitation or forgery which consists of a number of motives taken from genuine works by any one artist recombined in such a way as to give the impression of being an independent original creation by that artist.’ M. Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern and Post-modern* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 72. Cited in Osborn, *Irenaeus*, 158.

11 *AH* 1.IX.4.

12 The notion of a literary work’s ‘hypothesis’ (a summary of the plot or structure) was taken from ancient rhetoric. See Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 47–49; John H. O’Keefe and R. R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2005), 33–36.

13 *AH* 1.IX.4.

14 *AH* 1.X.1. For Irenaeus’ summary statement of the transmission of the Scriptural faith, see *AH* 3.1.2–3.IV.2. Hans von Campenhausen explains that the succession of bishops who have handed on the deposit of faith are worthy to be followed, not because their position is specially anointed itself, but because they have so carefully preserved the living faith. See Hans von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries*, trans. J.A. Baker (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, Publishers, 1997), 172–3.

15 *AH* 1.X.3.

16 *AH* 1.Preface.1–2. Cf., 1.XXXI.3–4; 5.XX.1. As von Balthasar has aptly described, ‘In Irenaeus apologetics and dogmatics are totally one, because the indissolubility of the inner necessity and harmony between the triune God, the decree of salvation in Christ, Scripture and the Church together with its tradition is both the real content of the *intellectus fidei* and the only convincing proof of Christian truth *ad extra*.’ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*. Volume II: Clerical Styles, ed. John Riches (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1984), 43. Osborn agrees: ‘It was not enough for Irenaeus . . . to set the rule of faith beside the Gnostic myth and make an unreasoned choice; an effort was needed to show that the renewing of the mind to which Paul had pointed (Rom. 12:2) was able to produce, from scripture and the rule of faith, a synthesis of greater coherence than the alternatives.’ Osborn, *Irenaeus*, 154.

17 To be precise, Book Two is devoted to refuting the specific heresies of the false teachers by showing the inconsistency of his opponents’ teaching and outlining the proper method of interpreting Scripture; books three to five function as the exposition of biblical and orthodox faith proper. *AH* 2.XXXV.4 and 3.Preface. For an overview of the difficulties in interpreting Book Two within the whole of the treatise, as well as a solution that accords along the lines above, see Richard A. Norris, Jr. ‘The Insufficiency of Scripture: *Adversus haereses* 2 and the Role of Scripture,’ in *Reading in Christian Communities: Essays on Interpretation in the Early Church*, edited by Charles A. Bobertz and David Brakke (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 63–79.

18 In a programmatic passage at the conclusion of Book Two, Irenaeus writes the following: ‘Now that the preaching of the apostles, the authoritative teaching of the Lord, the announcements of the prophets, the dictated utterances of the apostles, and the ministration of the law – all of which praise one and the same Being, the God and Father of all, and not many diverse beings, nor one deriving his substance from different gods or powers, but [declare] that all things [were formed] by one and the same Father . . . are all in harmony with our statements . . .’ *AH* 2.XXXV.4.

19 *AH* 5.VI.1. Cf., Osborn, *Irenaeus*, 159–61.

20 *AH* 2.XXV.1. Cf., ‘[H]is wisdom [is shown] in having made created things parts of one harmonious and consistent whole; . . . By this arrangement, therefore, and these harmonies, and a sequence of this nature, man, a created and organized being, is rendered after the image and likeness of the uncreated God, – the Father planning everything well and giving His commands, the Son carrying these into execution and performing the work of creating, and the Spirit

nourishing and increasing [what is made], but man making progress day by day, and ascending towards the perfect, that is, approximating to the uncreated One.' *AH* 4.XXXVIII.3.

21 *AH* 2.XXXVIII.3. Cf., *AH* 4.XXXII.1.

22 *AH* 2.XXXVII.1.

23 'These things are such as fall [plainly] under our observation, and are clearly and unambiguously in express terms set forth in the Sacred Scriptures. And therefore the parables ought not to be adapted to ambiguous expressions. For, if this be not done, both he who explains them will do so without danger, and the parables will receive a like interpretation from all, and the body of truth remains entire, with a harmonious adaptation of its members, and without any collision [of its several parts].' *AH* 2.XXXVII.1. Commenting on this passage, von Balthasar writes, 'Irenaeus is not here describing a literary work made up of different writings and chapters, but the symphony of being and history which is expressed in Scripture and has as its supreme law the recapitulation of mankind through the God-man.' von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord* II, 73.

24 *AH* 2.XXXVII.2–3. In another place, Irenaeus contrasts the teaching of the Church with that of the heretics; the Church's teaching is built on a rock, a 'well-grounded system which tends to man's salvation,' while the teaching of the heretics has been founded 'upon the sand, which has in itself a multitude of stones.' *AH* 3.XXXIV.1–2.

25 *AH* 2.XXXVIII.1–3.

26 *AH* 2.XXXVIII.3.

27 *AH* 4.XXXVI.1.

28 For a helpful description of the relationship between the 'rule of truth,' the 'principles of the gospel,' and 'the four-Gospels,' see Annette Yoshiko Reed, 'EYATTEAION: Orality, Textuality, and the Christian Truth in Irenaeus' *Against Heresies*', *Vigilae Christianae* 56 (2002), 11–46.

29 According to Irenaeus, the Ebionites favor the Gospel of Matthew, the Marcionites use a truncated Gospel of Luke, certain Gnostics who separate the suffering Jesus from Christ implement Mark, and the Valentinians make copious use of the Gospel of John. *AH* 3.XI.7.

30 *AH* 3.XI.8.

31 von Campenhausen reveals something of an historicist concern when he attempts to extricate Irenaeus from the charge of favoring theology over history by arguing that the argument for the four Gospels is merely a means to remove the 'appearance of contingency' from the historical process. While historical and apostolic origin is certainly of prime concern with Irenaeus, it does not address adequately why there can be *only* four Gospels. Indeed, for Irenaeus, theologically there *has* to be four Gospels and the means to establish *which* four is left to historical investigation. This is quite the opposite of the way in which Campenhausen has construed Irenaeus' reasoning. See Hans von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible*, trans. J.A. Baker (Mifflintown, PA: Sigler Press, 1997), 198–201.

32 *AH* 3.XI.8. Irenaeus also includes the four principle covenants in his analysis of the quadriform Gospels, the fourth covenant, that of Christ, summing up the others.

33 Osborne, *Irenaeus*, 177.

34 *AH* 3.XI.8.

35 *AH* 3.XI.9. Cullman accuses Irenaeus of slighting the human circumstances in the formation of the fourfold Gospel with the effect that Irenaeus ends up implementing the same numerological method as the Gnostics he is trying to refute. Oscar Cullmann, *The Early Church*, ed., A.J.B Higgins (London: SCM Press, 1956), 50–52. For Irenaeus, the number four is derived theologically and aesthetically from the very economy of God in the history Cullman claims he neglects. The Gnostics, on the other hand, reverse the process and bend salvation-history to suit their numerology. Irenaeus writes, 'For this is an uncertain mode of proceeding, on account of their varied and diverse systems, and because every sort of hypothesis may at the present day be, in like manner, devised by any one; so that they can derive arguments against the truth from these very theories, inasmuch as they may be turned in many different directions. But, on the contrary, they ought to adapt the numbers themselves, and those things which have been formed, to the true theory lying before them. For system does not spring out of numbers, but numbers from a system.' *AH* 2.XXXV.1.

36 For a helpful survey of Irenaeus's biblical exegesis in the articulation of his doctrine of the virgin birth, see Bertrand de Margerie, S.J., *An Introduction to the History of Exegesis: I The Greek Fathers*, trans. Leonard Maluf (Petersham, MS: Saint Bede Publications, 1993), 64–70.

37 *AH* 3.XXI.1–2

38 *AH* 3.XXI.5

39 Some of these prophecies include Isaiah 53:8 ('Who shall declare His generation?'), Jeremiah 17:19 ('He is a man, and who shall recognize Him?'). *AH* 3.XIX.2. Special mention should be made of what Irenaeus takes to be a prophecy from Daniel 2:34 in which mention is made of a 'stone, cut out without hands [that] came into this world. For this is what 'without hands' means, that His coming into this world was not by the operation of human hands, that is, of those men who are accustomed to stone-cutting; that is, Joseph taking no part with regard to it, but Mary alone co-operating with the pre-arranged plan.' *AH* 3.XXI.7.

40 Irenaeus reads together Isaiah's prediction of salvation from Zion (Isaiah 33:20 and an unknown reference) with Micah's (Micah 7:2) and Joel's (Joel 3:16) prediction of the same salvation. Habakkuk, he believes, makes the prophecy even more specific by narrowing the place of salvation to the 'region toward the south' of Jerusalem (Habakkuk 3:3, 5). Interestingly, while Irenaeus goes to great lengths to locate the salvation of God in Bethlehem he does not make use of the prophetic text (Micah 5:2) explicitly used in the Gospel of Matthew to find the birthplace of Jesus in the Old Testament (Matthew 2:6).

41 Danielou has provided a helpful overview of the Adam-Christ typology that underscores the way in which Irenaeus sought to draw together the unity of the divine plan attested to in Scripture against his Gnostic opponents. Jean Danielou, S.J., *From Shadow to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers* (London: Burns & Oats, 1960), 30–47.

42 Irenaeus writes, 'For if the one [who sprang] from the earth had indeed formation and substance from both the hand and workmanship of God, but the other not from the hand and workmanship of God, then He who was made after the image and likeness of the former did not, in that case, preserve the analogy of man, and He must seem an inconsistent piece of work, not having wherewith He may show His wisdom.' AH 3.XXII.1.

43 AH 3.XVIII.7.

44 AH 3.XXI.10. For a helpful survey of Irenaeus's use of the figures of Mary and Eve in balancing the Adam-Christ typology, see M.C. Steenberg, 'The Role of Mary as Co-Recapitulator', *Vigilae Christianae* 58: (2004), 117–137.

45 'And thus also it was that the knot of Eve's disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary. For what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the virgin Mary set free through faith.' AH 3.XXII.4.

46 Attention to the sign-character of the virgin birth in Irenaeus is particularly helpful in light of modern theological assessments of the doctrine in Patristic theology, such as that of Wolfhart Pannenberg. Rather than the virgin birth providing a conclusive foundation upon which to erect the doctrine of the person of Christ, as Pannenberg mistakenly characterizes the entire post-Ignatian tradition, the virgin birth is used aesthetically/symbolically by Irenaeus to attest to Christ's two natures and his work, which are actually theologically established through other means. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus – God and Man*, 2nd ed. Trans. by Lewis L Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 149–50. More appropriate are the comments made by von Balthasar: the virgin birth is 'a sign by which Christ the recapitulator can be recognized.' von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord* II, 54.

47 AH 3.XXI.6; 3.XIX.3.

48 AH 3.XX.3; 3.XXI.5,7. Cf., 'And how shall he (man) escape from the generation subject to death, if not by means of a new generation, given in a wonderful and unexpected manner (but as a sign of salvation) by God – I mean that regeneration which flows from the virgin through faith?' AH 4.XXXIII.4.

49 AH 3.IX.1. Irenaeus explains that Isaiah 7 itself indicates that the subject of the virgin birth prophecy will be both divine and human: 'And He shows that He is a man, when He says 'Butter and honey shall He eat;' and in that He terms Him a child also, [in saying] 'before He knows good and evil;' for these are all the tokens of a human infant. But that He 'will not consent to evil, that He may choose that which is good,' – this is proper to God; that by the fact, that He shall eat butter and honey we should not understand that He is a mere man only, nor, on the other hand, from the name Emmanuel, should suspect Him to be God without flesh.' AH 3.XXI.4.

50 Irenaeus describes certain Gnostics as having taught that Christ 'passed through Mary just as water flows through a tube; and there descended upon him in the form of a dove at the time of his baptism, that Saviour who belonged to the Pleroma, and was formed by the combined efforts of all its inhabitants.' The Spirit of Christ was subsequently taken away when he was before Pilate so as to avoid suffering. See AH 1.VII.2. By contrast, Irenaeus views it as of primary importance that Christ truly took part in creation: 'But in every respect, too, he is man, the formation of God; and thus He took up man into Himself, the invisible becoming visible, the incomprehensible being made comprehensible, the impassible becoming capable of suffering, and the Word being made man, thus summing up all things in Himself; so that as in super-celestial, spiritual, and invisible things, the Word of God is supreme, so also in things visible and corporeal He might possess the supremacy, and, taking to Himself the pre-eminence, as well as constituting Himself Head of the Church, He might draw all things to Himself.' AH 3.XVI.6. Cf., AH 3.XVIII.7.

51 AH 3.XXII.1.

52 Irenaeus saw the virgin birth as the fitting generation of the human nature of he who is uniquely generated from the Father: '[H]e is Himself in His own right, beyond all men who ever lived, God, and Lord, and King Eternal, and the Incarnate Word, proclaimed by all the prophets, the apostles, and by the Spirit Himself . . . Now, the Scriptures would not have testified these things of Him, if, like others, He had been a mere man. But that He had, beyond all others, in Himself that pre-eminent birth which is from the Most High Father, and also experienced that pre-eminent generation which is from the Virgin, the divine Scriptures do in both respects testify of Him.' AH 3.XIX.2. Cf., 4.XXXIII.11.

53 Irenaeus points out that the Gospel of Matthew includes Joseph in the lineage of Jechoniah, whose line the prophet Jeremiah is reputed to have disinherited from kingship (Jeremiah 22:24–28). AH 3.XXI.9.

54 'But how could we be joined to incorruptibility and immortality, unless, first, incorruptibility and immortality had become that which we also are, so that the corruptible might be swallowed up by incorruptibility, and the mortal by immortality, that we might receive the adoption of sons?' AH 3.XIX.1.

55 AH 3.XII.12.

56 Norris has shown the great debt that Irenaeus owed to the Apostle Paul for his description of the Mosaic Law as a 'pedagogue,' the designation of the Law to a particular dispensation of God's overall, united plan, and the fulfillment of the Law in Christ. By showing the proper and rightful place of the Law in God's economy through Pauline-style argument, Irenaeus has refuted the Marcionites and the Valentinians out of one of their favorite authorities. See Richard A. Norris, Jr., 'Irenaeus' Use of Paul in His Polemic Against the Gnostics,' in *Norms of Faith and Life*, edited by Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999), 84–9.

57 Moses and the prophets each wrote about Christ; the law actually exhorted the Old Testament saints to believe in Christ. 'But by the law and the prophets did the Word preach both Himself and the Father alike [to all]' (AH 4.VI.6).

58 AH 3.XII.11. In regard to Valentinus, who, along with Marcion, posited a difference between the creator God and the Father of Jesus Christ, Irenaeus writes, 'Ignorance of the Scripture and of the dispensations of God has brought all these things upon them.' AH XII.12.

59 James L. Kugel and Rowan A. Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 167–8.

60 AH 4.XIII.2.

61 AH 4.XIII.2

62 AH 4.XVI.1–2.

63 AH 4.XVI.1; 4.XIV.2. 'For God does all things by measure and in order; nothing is unmeasured with Him, because nothing is out of order.' AH 4.IV.2.

64 AH 4.X-XI.

65 AH 4.XIV.3-4

66 AH 4.XVII.1-4.

67 AH 4.XII.1-2; 4.XIII.1.

68 AH 4.XIII.4. Irenaeus sums up his view of the Law in this way: 'Preparing man for this life, the Lord Himself did speak in His own person to all alike the words of the Decalogue; and therefore, in like manner, do they remain permanently with us, receiving by means of His advent in the flesh, extension and increase, but not abrogation These things, therefore, which were given for bondage, and for a sign to them, He cancelled by the new covenant of liberty. But He has increased and widened those laws which are natural, and noble, and common to all, granting to men largely and without grudging, by means of adoption, to know God the Father, and to love Him with the whole heart, and to follow His word unswervingly, while they abstain not only from evil deeds, but even from the desire after them.' AH 4.XVI.4-5.

69 'And all those other points which I have shown the prophets to have uttered by means of so long a series of Scriptures, he who is truly spiritual will interpret by pointing out, in regard to every one of the things which have been spoken, to what special point in the dispensation of the Lord is referred, and [by thus exhibiting] the entire system of the work of the Son of God, knowing always the same God, and always acknowledging the same Word of God, although He has [but] now been manifested to us; acknowledging also at all times the same Spirit of God, although He has been poured out upon us after a new fashion in these last times . . .' AH 4.XIII.15.

70 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, Volume I: Seeing the Form (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 659. Cf., 17-19. For a contemporary attempt to integrate von Balthasar's theological aesthetics into hermeneutical theory, see W. T. Dickens, *Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics: A Model for Post-Critical Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003).