

Preface

IRENAEUS OF LYONS (c. 130–202) was the greatest theologian to arise in the Church¹ since the time of the apostles. His *Against Heresies*² is a masterpiece of ancient Christian literature, written by one schooled by another who was trained by the apostle John; in this work, consequently, readers have access to the teaching of a spiritual grandson of the apostle John. This alone would make it enormously important, but even apart from that circumstance, *Against Heresies* is profoundly significant: it is the first major defense and presentation of the Christian faith. Undeniably, it is a classic work; like many other classics, though, it is more often praised than read.

This neglect is regrettable but understandable. For one thing, the work is a massive tome. Written by Irenaeus in five books, it was easily the longest and most elaborate work produced by any Christian author before the third century. In the only complete English version, *Against Heresies* runs to more than 250 pages of dense, double-columned print.³

Even so, many lengthy patristic works find numerous readers. A more significant reason this major work goes unread probably is the fact that it begins and for a long time continues with Irenaeus' painstaking description (book 1) and thorough refutation (book 2) of Gnostic teaching. In the English version, this treatment extends to nearly 100 pages,⁴ mak-

1. In this volume, "Church" refers to the Church as a whole (which is, typically, Irenaeus' focus); "church(es)" refers to a local congregation(s).

2. The full title is *A Refutation and Subversion of What Is Falsely Called Knowledge* (alluding to the apostolic warning in 1 Tim 6:20); it is commonly known and cited, though, as *Against Heresies* (hereafter *AH*).

3. This English version appears in *ANF* 1:315–567.

4. *ANF* 1:315–413.

ing it about 40 percent of the entire work. Gnosticism had made much of ogdoads, decads, duodecads, and other number-fascinations; it concocted elaborate hierarchies for the universe; it assumed certain common pagan philosophical notions; and its various practitioners amalgamated these with elements of the Old Testament Scriptures, Christ's life and teachings, and apostolic writings to produce a bewildering variety of versions of ostensibly Christian teaching. Irenaeus had carefully researched the various Gnostic movements that claimed to be Christian, and he found it necessary to present those views in both their commonalities and in their far more considerable diversities, and then carefully to refute them. He did the job well, but unless one is a scholar of Gnosticism, the first two books of *Against Heresies* frankly make for thoroughly mind-numbing reading.

Irenaeus' laudable purpose was to help others in his day recognize that Gnosticism, in all its varieties, could not be accepted as Christian; to drive home that point required painstaking presentation of his opponents' views. Those who encountered Gnosticism as a living problem may well have found this thorough presentation stimulating and helpful, and it unquestionably had profound influence: within two generations of the publication of Irenaeus' tome, Gnosticism had virtually disappeared from Christian circles. To be sure, the entire credit for this cannot be accorded to *Against Heresies*; other Christian authors also opposed and wrote against Gnosticism. Even so, none of them offered anything approaching the depth and breadth of Irenaeus' treatment, and they relied on it for some of their own argument.

Separated from that experience by nearly two millennia, though, with Gnosticism nothing more than a possibly interesting ancient aberration, for a reader in the present day the first two books of *Against Heresies* are hardly riveting. Those who turn to Irenaeus' tome out of a desire to become familiar with another writing of one of the church fathers, or to find doctrinal or spiritual stimulation from classics of Christian writing, will almost certainly find the first major chunks of Irenaeus' presentation tedious.

That was certainly my experience. On two occasions I decided to read through *Against Heresies*, only to get bogged down in the elaborate presentation and assessment of Gnosticism and, finally, to give up. I had heard that Irenaeus offered keen insights into the Christian faith, so that reading *Against Heresies* would be valuable, but I could not force myself to plow through the entire work. Along the way in the first two books,

Irenaeus made passing, brief observations about Christian teaching, but since his focus was on exposing the fallacies of Gnosticism, these observations were concise and sporadic. No matter how much I found those all-too-brief segments stimulating, both times I eventually succumbed and put *Against Heresies* aside. It was only with my third attempt a few years later that I was able to muster the dogged determination to work through the whole of Irenaeus' magnum opus. After slogging through the first two books, I found reading the last three much more inviting and intriguing. In them Irenaeus spends most of his effort on setting forth what Christians believe, and I found this material stimulating, thought provoking, and edifying. *Against Heresies* offers a profound, rich presentation of the Christian faith. It is not only valuable as a historical record of what Christians thought and taught less than a century after the last of the apostles had died (John, c. 95); it is also valuable in its own right as a presentation of Christian teaching.

After I finished reading through *Against Heresies*, I recognized that it would be beneficial if it could be condensed, by drastically cutting back on the specific interaction with Gnosticism, while still offering what Irenaeus had to say about the Christian faith. This would allow more readers to be exposed to and explore Irenaeus' teaching than would be likely otherwise. More was needed than just condensation, though. The only available English version was produced in the mid-nineteenth century, in a much more prolix and complicated writing style than is the norm in the present. Beyond that, as the editor of the volume in which it appeared noted, the English version came in segments, from three different scholars⁵; indeed, I found the styles different enough to be jarring as I read through the whole work. So, a significant revision of the English version would also be necessary in such a condensation.

Not long after I had come to this assessment, I learned that an abridgment and new translation of *Against Heresies* had been published.⁶ I eagerly bought the book and read through it. As I did so, though, I was deeply disappointed. In addition to significant problems in the introduction, the condensation still retained a considerable amount of the discussion of Gnosticism from books 1–2, and it excised far too much of Irenaeus' rich teaching on the Christian faith from books 3–5. I reviewed

5. These comments are found at ANF 1:310 n. 4.

6. This work is Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons*.

the work,⁷ urging that both Irenaeus and interested readers deserve better. In due course, I determined to try to offer it myself. This book is my attempt to live up to that determination.

I should explain how I have proceeded. My purpose throughout has been to make Irenaeus' presentation of the Christian faith accessible for readers. So, I have cut out most of the material in the first two books, keeping only a few brief segments on Gnosticism that seemed necessary to make sense of what Irenaeus teaches, but retained virtually all of what he presented of Christian teaching along the way in these two books. From books 3–5, which deal more expansively with the Christian faith, I excised Irenaeus' additional periodic engagements with Gnosticism, the pieces in which he belabors an argument (such as adding comments on additional Scripture references without appreciably furthering his point), and some of the various digressions Irenaeus occasionally takes. (Ancient authors did not have footnotes to handle such distractions.)

In the material that follows, I indicate where I have excised material. When the deletions were in a section (whether within or at the beginning or end of one), I have used ellipses to indicate them; the amount of material deleted varies, of course, among the sections. Where whole sections (occasionally, even chapters) were left out, this can be recognized by the gaps between the numbers at the end of the sections. (Readers should note that all the passages cited from *Against Heresies* in this preface and in the following introduction remain in the condensed version offered in this book.)

In that regard, I should explain how the respective sections are identified with these numbers. *Against Heresies* is comprised of five books; each book contains a number of chapters; each of the chapters is further subdivided into sections. In the material that follows, each section closes with its appropriate citation, enclosed in parentheses. Citations begin with the book number, followed by a colon; then the chapter number (or "pref" for the preface in the respective book), followed by a comma; and then the section number. Sometimes breaks in paragraphing have been introduced into sections, in order to clarify shifts in Irenaeus' focus or argument; readers may thus need to look a paragraph or two forward to find the identification for the particular section (which will appear, as noted, in parentheses at the end of each section).

7. Payton, "Condensing Irenaeus."

I have also extensively revised the English version, working through it five times. The first time, I worked through the English translation to simplify the grammatical constructions and the language used. In four subsequent efforts, I worked through my prior revisions to improve the result, with the goal of producing a faithful but contemporary idiomatic English rendering. In what follows, I trust that readers will find Irenaeus' presentation of the Christian faith in accessible, contemporary English.

One of the noteworthy characteristics of Irenaeus' great work is how thoroughly saturated it is with Scripture. Irenaeus relies on the Septuagint for his knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures, which he cites extensively. While the New Testament canon had not yet been established, the various writings that later came to comprise it were already in wide circulation among Christian churches. Irenaeus was the first patristic author to treat these writings as Scripture, and he referred to almost all of them⁸; his use of and deference to them as apostolic offers some interesting perspectives for New Testament studies.⁹ The editors of the only complete English edition identified some 1456 citations of or allusions to scriptural passages.¹⁰ As I carefully worked through *Against Heresies*, I noted several mistakes in their identifications but also recognized scores of quotations and allusions they had overlooked. For most of these, Irenaeus—like other church fathers before and after him—did not regularly indicate the book or chapter in Scripture to which he was referring. (Since the chapters were not divided into verses until a bishop in the Middle Ages undertook that task, Irenaeus could not have offered such specific locations.) In what follows, I have indicated the scriptural passages cited or alluded to by identifying them within square brackets. I recognized scores of other fleeting allusions (two or three words) to passages in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, but I did not identify them. While I may well have missed some further citations, I trust that the hundreds that are identified will help readers recognize and appreciate how deep and wide was

8. The only books eventually received in the NT canon that Irenaeus did not quote or allude to were Philemon and 3 John.

9. The way Irenaeus cites the books as written by apostles or their close associates challenges some critical scholarly views on apostolic authorship and dates of composition; it is especially noteworthy in that regard that Irenaeus clearly accepted the Pauline authorship of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus (collectively called the Pastoral Letters).

10. This is found at ANF 1:598–602.

Irenaeus' familiarity with Scripture, as well as enable those interested in pursuing the question to consider how he uses Scripture.

Since this volume offers a contemporary English version of *Against Heresies*, I have also adopted a contemporary version of the Bible for Irenaeus' Scripture quotations: for this I used the New Revised Standard Version [NRSV] (which includes the Apocrypha/deuterocanonical books that were part of the Septuagint Irenaeus used and to which he referred). In three places, the point Irenaeus was making depended on the distinctive reading found in the Septuagint; these are identified accordingly with LXX after the biblical reference.¹¹ In one instance, the reading in the older Revised Standard Version [RSV] fits the form of Irenaeus' citation better and is so identified.¹² In another instance, a different reading of the punctuation in the NRSV allowed Irenaeus' point; I modified the punctuation accordingly, indicating this in a footnote.¹³

As a great champion of the faith, Irenaeus deserves better from the Church than she has given him, for he has not received the ongoing, continued interest to which he has just claim. This neglect may ironically arise from his success in attacking Gnosticism: with the further efforts by some others (who relied significantly on *Against Heresies* for their arguments), Gnosticism soon disappeared as a major problem. Because of this, the Church needed less and less to consult *Against Heresies* for information about the Gnostics—with which the first two books, lengthy treatments themselves, are concerned. To get to the last three books, where Irenaeus offers a rich, compelling, profound, and stimulating presentation of the Christian faith, readers have had to plow through the tedious treatment about the Gnostics. Over time, even the recollection that his positive presentation of Christianity in those last three books offered great benefit faded. Though revered as a masterpiece of the Church's literature, *Against Heresies* was too often left unread.

I hope that this condensation of Irenaeus' magnum opus will serve to revive interest in it and will enable many readers to profit from his presentation of the Christian faith. In that small way, may this book help many to recognize and acknowledge the great gift the Church received in Irenaeus.

11. These are citations of Gen 3:8 (at AH 5:17,1), Deut 10:16 (at 4:16,1), and Jer 17:9 (at 4:33,11).

12. This is the citation of Isa 2:3–4 (at AH 4:34,4).

13. This is found in the citation of Mark 1:1–2 (at AH 3:11,8n6).