

## INTERPRETATION AND THE RULE OF TRUTH OF ST. IRENAEUS

**Adonis Abelard O. Gorospe**

Asian Theological Seminary  
Philippines

Irenaeus lived in the second century, probably around 115 to 202 A.D.<sup>1</sup> He knew the martyred church father, Polycarp, as a boy<sup>2</sup> and together with Pothinus, was a disciple of Polycarp. When Polycarp made Pothinus a bishop, Irenaeus was the latter's presbyter. Irenaeus succeeded Pothinus as bishop around CE 177 and it was after this time that he began his great labor against heresy, *Detection and Overthrow of the Pretended but False Gnosis*. Written between A.D. 182 and

---

<sup>1</sup> *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, S.V. "Irenaeus," places Irenaeus's date of birth at around 115 A.D. W. Wigan Harvey, in his edition of *Sancti Irenaei, Episcopi lugdunensis, Libros quinque adversus haereses*, Tom. I (Cantabrigiae: Typis Academicis, 1857; republished, Ridgewood: Gregg Press Incorporated, 1965), cliv-clv, suggests 130 A.D. as a likely date. Robert M. Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 2, deduces from *Heresies* that "boy" for Irenaeus could mean 15 years of age, thus placing his date of birth at around 140 AD.

<sup>2</sup> Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 2; Eusebius, *Church History*, V, 20, 5-8.

A.D. 188,<sup>3</sup> Irenaeus' major work to combat Gnostic heresy is often referred to by its shorter title, *Adversus Haereses*, or *Against Heresies*. The work consists of two parts, the first of which gives a detailed description of the heretical sect, the Valentinians, and discusses its beginnings. The second part refutes the Gnostic doctrine using reason, the church's doctrine of God and Christ, and the sayings of the Lord, concluding with a treatise on the resurrection of the flesh, a doctrine which the Gnostics denied.<sup>4</sup> In the course of this discussion in *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus presents his understanding of the nature of Scripture and how it is to be interpreted in opposition to the way the Gnostics misinterpreted it.<sup>5</sup>

## I. The Gnostics and Their Teaching

Irenaeus's main opponents, the Valentinians, included the disciples of Valentinus and those of Ptolemaeus.<sup>6</sup> Valentinus of Alexandria (A.D. 135-165) began the sect of the Valentinians when he was frustrated in his bid to be bishop of Rome in A.D. 141. One of his disciples, Marcus the magician, taught in the Rhone Valley area

---

<sup>3</sup> Introductory note to *Irenaeus Against Heresies*, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, American Reprint of the Edinburgh Edition, Revised and Chronologically Arranged, with Brief Prefaces and Occasional Notes by A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. I: *The Apostolic Fathers - Justin Martyr - Irenaeus* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973), 309-13. Henceforth, all references to this work and the works of other church fathers will be in Scripture format.

<sup>4</sup> Johannes Quasten, *The Beginnings of Patristic Literature*, Patrology 1 (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1992), 288-89.

<sup>5</sup> For a fuller discussion of the following content of this paper, see Adonis Abelard O. Gorospe, "The Rule of Truth of St. Irenaeus," M. A. thesis, Ateneo De Manila University, 1997; Also Gorospe, "The Rule of Faith and the Interpretation of Scripture in the Church: A Study of the Primary Writings of Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen on the Rule of Faith and Its Use in the interpretation of Scripture in the Church," Ph.D. dissertation (Ateneo De Manila University, 2007), 94-140.

<sup>6</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, Preface, 2.

where Irenaeus ministered.<sup>7</sup> Aside from these Valentinians, another key opponent was Marcion.<sup>8</sup> The Church Fathers lumped Marcion and Valentinus together as the "archheretics" of the age. Their supporters could be found in Asia and Egypt even late into the fourth century.<sup>9</sup>

The Gnostics actually affirm that the Creator "is the fruit of a defect and describe him as being of an animal nature, and as not knowing the Power which is above him."<sup>10</sup> When these heretics are corrected from the Scriptures, they deny the authority of these same Scriptures. For the Gnostics, the tradition of the church which is embodied by the Scriptures is not the true tradition because it is in written form. The true tradition was handed down through a living voice<sup>11</sup> and is concealed in mystery, made known only to those whom the Gnostics consider worthy to receive the truth.<sup>12</sup> The Gnostics cite Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 2:6 to support their claim that they speak with wisdom to those who are perfect. By this, they claim that the special revelation of Christ to each individual apostle was preserved by the unbroken succession of teachers and pupils such that each Gnostic teacher received the unadulterated truth directly from the apostles.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 13.

<sup>8</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* III, 4.3.

<sup>9</sup> Terrance L. Tiessen, *Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelized*, ATLA Monograph 31 (Metuchen and London: Scarecrow Press, 1993), 39.

<sup>10</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* III, 9, 2. Tiessen, *Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelized*, 38.

<sup>11</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* III, II, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Jean Danielou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture*, A History of Early Christian Doctrine before the Council of Nicaea 2 (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd / Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), 143, and R. P. C. Hanson who cites several examples of this proof, *Tradition in the Early Church* (London: SCM Press, 1962), 22-23.

<sup>13</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 25, 5; III, 2, 1-2; Cf. Juan Ochagavia, *Visibile Patris Filius: A Study of Irenaeus' Teaching on Revelation and Tradition*, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 171 (Romae: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1964), 168-69; Tiessen, *Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelized*, 50-51. But see PHEME PERKINS, *The Gnostic Dialogue: The Early Church and the Crisis of Gnosticism* (New York/ Ramsey/ Toronto: Paulist Press, 1980), 195-96. She has an interesting discussion wherein she affirms that the Gnostics also teach that "gnosis is Jesus' teaching to all the apostles and is their true legacy to the Church."

The living tradition received directly from Christ and the apostles is far superior to the tradition preserved in the Scriptures precisely because of the Gnostic understanding of a secret apostolic tradition which was preserved by succession.<sup>14</sup> This secret apostolic tradition is the proper key to the correct understanding of Scripture.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the Gnostics can claim their erroneous interpretation of Scripture as apostolic tradition while giving the impression that they are carefully preserving the teachings of the Lord.<sup>16</sup>

Irenaeus plainly perceives the Gnostics as a threat to the faith of the church, charging that these men "falsify the oracles of God, and prove themselves evil interpreters of the good word of revelation."<sup>17</sup> Though some came from the ranks of the church, the Gnostics nevertheless hold to doctrines which depart from the apostolic tradition. Hence, Irenaeus considers them as heretics who teach a false religion and whose teachings are worse than the heathen.<sup>18</sup> These teachings are a serious threat because the Scriptures, which preserve the true apostolic tradition, can no longer be used as a basis for truth.<sup>19</sup> The Gnostics challenge the authority of the church as the keeper of the tradition handed down from the apostles through the succession of bishops.<sup>20</sup> They even challenge the authority of the apostles themselves, claiming

---

<sup>14</sup> R. P. C. Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church* (London: SCM Press, 1962), 24-25. Hanson cites several examples of the Gnostic claim to a secret tradition as well as the Gnostic Ptolemaeus whose *Letter to Flora* mentions "the apostolic tradition which we also have received by succession, while all the time we measure every word (or teaching) by the teaching of the Saviour."

<sup>15</sup> Danielou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture*, 143.

<sup>16</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 8, 1; I, 9, 1; I, 30, 14.

<sup>17</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Preface, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Tiessen, *Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelized*, 35, 37-38.

<sup>19</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* III, 2.1.

<sup>20</sup> Tiessen, *Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelized*, 188-9. Cf. H. E. W. Turner, *The Pattern of Truth* (London: A. R. Mowbray & Co., 1954; Reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1978), 197-200, for the Gnostic approaches to tradition and the Church fathers' reply.

that Gnostic teachers alone have the pure knowledge of its secret or hidden mystery through their tradition.<sup>21</sup> Thus the Gnostics claim to be wiser even than the presbyters and apostles of the church.

## II. The Nature of Scripture

Because of his own understanding of the nature of Scripture, Irenaeus had to respond to the Gnostic challenge. The Scripture texts for Irenaeus are "the good words of revelation."<sup>22</sup> They are "perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God and His Spirit."<sup>23</sup> He refers to them as "the parables of the Lord, the sayings of the prophets, and the words of the apostles" and "the oracles of the Lord." In contrast, he refers to the teachings of the Valentinians as that "which neither the prophets announced, nor the Lord taught, nor the apostles delivered."<sup>24</sup>

Irenaeus finds harmony in all of Scripture,<sup>25</sup> believing it to be "perfectly consistent." The parables harmonize with "perfectly plain" passages and those statements whose meaning is clear explain the parables, presenting "one harmonious melody".<sup>26</sup> The Valentinians, however, "dismember and destroy" the truth by disregarding the inherent order and connection present in the Scriptures.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* III, II, 2. Tiessen, *Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelized*, 188-89.

<sup>22</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 3, 6.

<sup>23</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* II, 28, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 8, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Bertrand de Margerie, *The Greek Fathers, An Introduction to the History of Exegesis* 1 (Petersham, Massachusetts: Saint Bede's Publications, 1993), 55, 66. De Margerie explains that a correct interpretation for Irenaeus has "consonance" and is in harmony with other texts of Scripture. The basis for this exegetical rule lies in the understanding that, on the one hand, God cannot contradict himself. So there can be no contradiction between God, his Word and his Spirit who authored all Scripture. On the other hand, the Word authored the Old Testament and Christ is its meaning. Thus, Revelation history "obliges" the Christian exegete to clarify one Testament by means of the other.

<sup>26</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* II, 28, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 8, 1.

The Scriptures consist of "the writings of the evangelists and the apostles" and "the law and the prophets." The law and the prophets "contain many parables and allegories that can frequently be drawn into various senses, according to the kind of exegesis to which they are subjected."<sup>28</sup> Thus, Scripture contains "ambiguous passages" which the heretics endeavour to explain and, in the process, misinterpret.<sup>29</sup>

### **III. The Gnostic Misinterpretation of Scripture**

The Gnostic approach to Scripture is not the patient expounding of the meaning already contained in the text. Rather, the Gnostics have their own meanings which they read into the text.<sup>30</sup> They may pack their interpretations with abundant Scriptural references but they are not really creating doctrinal systems from the meaning of these verses. At best, the passages are the proof-texts and teaching platforms for heretical teachings.<sup>31</sup>

The Valentinians, for instance, misinterpret Scripture by adapting it to fit their teachings. This is the usual procedure of interpretation whenever Valentinians "find anything in the multitude of things contained in the Scriptures which they can adopt and accommodate to their baseless speculations."<sup>32</sup> In his work, *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus provides many examples of how this was done.<sup>33</sup> The Valentinians

---

<sup>28</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 3, 6.

<sup>29</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* II, 10, 1.

<sup>30</sup> Turner, *The Pattern of Truth*, 186.

<sup>31</sup> Turner, *The Pattern of Truth*, 194-6.

<sup>32</sup> Compare Harvey's Latin translation with Grabe's Greek text. Coxe gives an alternate translation: "And if there is anything in Scripture which is referred to by a definite number," *Libros*, 13.

<sup>33</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 3, 1-5; 1, 8, 2-5.

adapt the words of Scripture "to their own wicked inventions." From the writings of the evangelists and the apostles as well as the law and the prophets, they seek to prove their opinions using "perverse interpretations and deceitful expositions." Adapting Scripture to their own fictitious ideas "with great craftiness," they "lead away captive from the truth those who do not retain a steadfast [sic]faith in one God, the Father Almighty, and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God."<sup>34</sup>

Irenaeus considers Gnostic teaching as consisting of old wives' fables creatively combined with Scripture passages taken out of context, making it appear that these are the very teachings of Scripture itself. Deriving their beliefs from unwritten sources other than the Scriptures, the Valentinians use ingenious proof-texting to adapt "the parables of the Lord, the sayings of the prophets, and the words of the apostles" to their own unique teachings, making it seem probable that these have Scriptural support. But the adaptation of the "oracles of the Lord" to their opinions disregards the order and connection of the Scripture passages. The truth is dismembered and destroyed as passages are transferred and dressed up anew, "making one thing out of another."<sup>35</sup> Compiling "a set of expressions and names scattered here and there [in Scripture]," the Gnostics twist the meaning from a "natural to a non-natural sense." In contrast, anyone who possesses unchanged in his heart the rule of truth received at baptism will be able to restore the Bible verses misused by the Valentinians to their original settings and so refute the teachings of the heretics.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 3, 6.

<sup>35</sup> "Literally, 'reading from things unwritten,'" Coxe in Roberts and Donaldson, 326, note 4. "de iis quae non sunt scripta legentes"; ξ γράψων ν γινώσκοντες; Cf. Harvey, *Libros*, 66, note 4: "ξ γράψων, written, but not Scripture." Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 8, 1.

<sup>36</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 9, 4.

#### IV. The Rule of Truth

In the light of the way the Gnostics misuse Scripture, Irenaeus asserts that one determines scriptural truth from Gnostic error by means of the church's rule of truth. The Greek formula literally translated, "the canon of the truth" or "the rule of the truth," occurs frequently in Irenaeus's writings.<sup>37</sup> What is the meaning of this phrase?

An analysis of the passages from *Adversus Haereses* and *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* yields the conclusion that the "rule of truth" (or "rule of faith") is a "body of truth"<sup>38</sup> which is "a condensed summary, fluid in its wording but fixed in content, setting out the high points" of the faith of the Church "in the form of a rule."<sup>39</sup> Irenaeus "cites it in several different forms, which use different shapes, different selections of details, different stereotyped phrases, but which cover essentially the same ground."<sup>40</sup> Trinitarian in structure in its fuller form, the rule "brought out the inherent unity of creation by the almighty Father with the economy of redemption, sanctification, and revelation, as realized by the Son and the Holy Spirit."<sup>41</sup> The rule was open to adaptation when there was need to emphasize aspects of the transmitted faith denied by heretics. Against the Gnostics, Irenaeus emphasized in particular the fundamental truth of the one God and Father who created all things, as well as the true Incarnation of God's Son to save humanity.

---

<sup>37</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 9, 4; III, 11, 1; III, 12, 6; etc. for the formula. Yves M. J. Congar observes that the phrase occurs ten times, *Tradition and Traditions: An Historical and A Theological Essay* (London: Burns & Oates, 1966), 26. Turner simply says it occurs freely in Irenaeus's writings, *The Pattern of Truth*, 349. Jean Danielou cites several instances where the characteristic formulation occurs, *A History of Early Christian Doctrine before the Council of Nicea*, vol. 2: *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), 153.

<sup>38</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 9, 4; II, 27, 1.

<sup>39</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 2nd edition, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 37; cf. Tiessen, *Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelized*, 202, n. 26. See Gorospe, "The Rule of Truth of St. Irenaeus," 51-59, and "The Rule of Faith and the Interpretation of Scripture in the Church," 110-117 for the full analysis of passages.

<sup>40</sup> Frances M. Young, *The Making of the Creeds* (London: SCM Press/Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1999), 9.

<sup>41</sup> Jared Wicks, "The Rule of Faith," *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, S.v. .



## V. The Content of the Rule of Truth

In *Adversus Haereses*, Irenaeus gave a clear summary of the beliefs of the Church in seven separate instances. Two other summaries can be found in the *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*.<sup>42</sup> The first summary is the longest and perhaps the most representative of all the summaries Irenaeus gave. The summary proceeds thus:

The Church, though dispersed throughout the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith: [She believes] in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations of God, and the advents, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the ascension into heaven in the flesh of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and His [future] manifestation from heaven in the glory of the Father "to gather all things in one," and to raise up anew all flesh of the whole human race, in order that to Christ Jesus, our Lord, and God, and Saviour, and King, according to the will of the invisible Father, "every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess" to Him, and that He should execute just judgment towards all; that He may send "spiritual wickednesses," and the angels who transgressed and became apostates, together with the ungodly, and unrighteous, and wicked, and profane among men, into everlasting fire; but may, in the exercise of His grace, confer immortality on the righteous, and holy, and those who have kept His commandments, and have persevered in His love, some from the beginning [of their Christian course], and others from [the date of] their repentance, and may surround them with everlasting glory.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 37, lists three passages in *Against Heresies* (I, 10, 1f.; I, 22, 1; V, 20, 1) and one from *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* (Kelly uses the Greek title *Epideixis*, 6). In *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd edition, (New York: David McKay Co., 1972), 77-80, he lists four additional passages from *Against Heresies* (III, 1, 2; III, 4, 2; III, 16, 6; IV, 33, 7) and another from Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, 3.

<sup>43</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I,10,1.

Using the first summary as the foundational affirmation and cross-referencing its affirmations with the other summaries cited by Irenaeus, the rule of truth appears to contain the following teachings:

(1) There is one God,<sup>44</sup> who is all-powerful,<sup>45</sup> and who is also called the Father<sup>46</sup> and Creator or Maker,<sup>47</sup> "who made all things by his Word, and fashioned and formed, out of that which has no existence, all things which exist."<sup>48</sup> These would include heaven and earth,<sup>49</sup> the sea,<sup>50</sup> and "all things that are in them."<sup>51</sup>

(2) There is one Christ Jesus,<sup>52</sup> the Son of God<sup>53</sup> "who became incarnate for our salvation."<sup>54</sup> He was born of a virgin, suffered and died, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven.<sup>55</sup> He will come in the future to be the Savior and Judge of all, rewarding the righteous and condemning all the wicked and the unrighteous.<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 10, 1; I, 22, 1; III, 1, 2; III, 4, 2, III, 16, 6; IV, 33, 7,

<sup>45</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 10, 1; I, 22, 1; IV, 33, 7; Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, 3.

<sup>46</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 10, 1; I, 22, 1; III, 16, 6; V, 20, 1; Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, 3, 6.

<sup>47</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 10, 1; III, 1, 2; III, 4, 2; Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, 6.

<sup>48</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 22, 1; IV, 33, 7.

<sup>49</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 10, 1; III, 1, 2; III, 4, 2. See also III, 3, 3.

<sup>50</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 10, 1.

<sup>51</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 10, 1; III, 4, 2.

<sup>52</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 10, 1; III, 1, 2; III, 16, 6.

<sup>53</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 10, 1; III, 1, 2; III, 4, 2; IV, 33, 7; V, 20, 1; Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, 3, 6.

<sup>54</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 10, 1; III, 16, 6; IV, 33, 7; V, 20, 1; Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, 3, 6.

<sup>55</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 10, 1; III, 4, 2; III, 16, 6; Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, 3.

<sup>56</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 10, 1; III, 4, 2; III, 16, 6; V, 20, 1.

(3) The church affirms its belief in the Holy Spirit<sup>57</sup> "through whom the prophets prophesied and the patriarchs were taught by God and the just were led in the path of justice, and who in the end of times has been poured forth in a new manner upon humanity over all the earth renewing man to God,"<sup>58</sup> of which all received as a gift<sup>59</sup> and by whom, together with the Word, God "makes, disposes and governs all things."<sup>60</sup>

From the three teachings mentioned above, the content of the rule of truth contains the Trinitarian faith of the church in one God as Creator, in one Jesus Christ as the Son of God who became human to unite humankind to God, and in the Holy Spirit who spoke through the prophets and who in these last times has been poured forth in a new manner for the renewal of humanity.<sup>61</sup>

In Book III of *Adversus Haereses*, Irenaeus set out to prove the main affirmations of the rule of truth<sup>62</sup> by refuting the error of the heretics by means of proofs from Scripture.<sup>63</sup>

In the process, he also shows the close connection between Scripture and the rule of truth. This connection is especially seen in several passages. The first is in Book III, chapter 1 wherein he speaks

<sup>57</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 10, 1; IV, 33, 7; Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, 3.

<sup>58</sup> Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, 6.

<sup>59</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* V, 20, 1.

<sup>60</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 22, 1.

<sup>61</sup> Irenaeus's Trinitarian summaries of the rule of truth present an economic Trinity, *Against Heresies* I, 10, 1; IV, 33, 7; V, 20, 1; *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, 5-7. Juan Ochagavia affirms that in the Trinitarian part of the *παράδοσις* or tradition, the Trinity is viewed "economically": "the Father, creating; the Son taking flesh and uniting man to God; the Spirit, guiding the prophets," *Visibile*, 190. Kelly refers to Irenaeus's vision of the Godhead as "the most complete, and also the most explicitly Trinitarian, to be met before Tertullian." He also classifies Irenaeus's presentation of the Trinity as "economic Trinitarianism," *Early Christian Doctrines*, 107-8; See also Young, *Making of the Creeds*, 37.

<sup>62</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* III, 1-2; III, 5, 1-3; III, 6, 1-5; III, 24, 1.

<sup>63</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* III, Preface; III, 24, 2; III, 25, 7.

of the apostles "through whom the Gospel has come down to us, which they did at one time proclaim in public, and at a later period, by the will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith."<sup>64</sup> He then affirms that all four evangelists handed down to us "that there is one God, Maker of heaven and earth and announced by the prophets, and one Christ, the Son of God."<sup>65</sup> These are the two main teachings contained in the rule of truth.<sup>66</sup> This reveals the close connection between Scripture (the Gospels) and the rule of truth.

The second passage showing the close connection between Scripture and the rule of truth identifies the prologue to John's Gospel as that disciple's attempt to establish the rule of truth in the Church.<sup>67</sup> Again, this closely relates the content of the prologue with the content of the rule of truth. This raises an important question: Is the content of the rule of truth identical with the content of Scripture?

A study of Irenaeus's statement in *Against Heresies* I, 9, 4 shows that the content is connected to Scripture and is used to correctly interpret it. Yet the rule of truth is not the same as Scripture and exists as a body of truth alongside of it.<sup>68</sup> The rule of truth is "a synonym for the tradition of the apostles, in condensed form, preserved and proclaimed by the Church."<sup>69</sup> It does not communicate content distinct from the content of Scripture, but is "simply a condensation of the message contained in it."<sup>70</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* III, 1, 1.

<sup>65</sup> Ochagavia, *Visibile*, 186.

<sup>66</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* III, 1, 2.

<sup>67</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* III, 11, 1.

<sup>68</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* III, 4, 1-2.

<sup>69</sup> Tiessen, *Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelized*, 202. Cf. Ochagavia, *Visibile*, 204 and Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 37. The context of both *Against Heresies* 1, 9, 5, ("the truth proclaimed by the Church") and *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* 3 ("the rule of faith") is obviously the rule of truth.

<sup>70</sup> Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 39.

## VI. The Source and Preservation of the Rule of Truth

According to Irenaeus, the church received the rule of truth "from the apostles and their disciples."<sup>71</sup> Irenaeus further adds that the apostles, "through whom the Gospel has come down to us, which they did at one time proclaim in public, and at a later period, by the will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith," also "declared to us that there is one God, Creator of heaven and earth, announced by the law and the prophets; and one Christ, the Son of God."<sup>72</sup> This implies that the rule of truth, being apostolic in origin, is not only authentic but also authoritative and salvific in quality.<sup>73</sup>

Upon receiving it, the church carefully preserved the rule as one tradition without any addition or deletion.<sup>74</sup> Irenaeus further explains that, although the church may have been dispersed throughout the world and uses different languages, she hands down the tradition "with perfect harmony, as if she possessed only one mouth."<sup>75</sup>

The role of the church is to receive, preserve and the pass on of tradition. Thus, tradition is the apostolic deposit of faith which the church had received, preserved and continues to universally proclaim.<sup>76</sup> This is an important point for Irenaeus to make in response to the challenge that the Gnostic heresy makes against the faith of the church. The Gnostics question the authority of the written Scriptures, appealing to another tradition which they deem more accurate. This

---

<sup>71</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 10, 1.

<sup>72</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* III, 1, 1-2.

<sup>73</sup> Note *Against Heresies* III, 1, 2: "If anyone does not agree to these truths . . . he . . . stands self-condemned, resisting, and opposing his own salvation, as is the case with all heretics."

<sup>74</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 10, 2; IV, 33, 8.

<sup>75</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 10, 2-3.

<sup>76</sup> Tiessen, *Salvation*, 192, brings this point out very clearly in his discussion of Irenaeus' use of *tradere* and *paradosis*.

superior tradition, according to the Gnostics, is one which they received by divine revelation. The revelation was not handed down in writing but viva voce.<sup>77</sup> For the Gnostics, one who is ignorant of this unwritten tradition will not find the truth in the Scriptures.<sup>78</sup>

Against this erroneous claim by the Gnostics, Irenaeus responds with a strong warning:

If anyone do [sic] not agree to these truths, he despises the companions of the Lord; nay more, he despises Christ Himself the Lord; yea he despises the Father also, and stands self-condemned, resisting and opposing his own salvation, as is the case with all heretics.<sup>79</sup>

Irenaeus appeals to the tradition received from the apostles by the church<sup>80</sup> because this is, for him, "the only true and life-giving faith." The basis for this belief is his understanding that

the Lord of all gave to His apostles the power of the Gospel, through whom also we have known the truth, that is, the doctrine of the Son of God; to whom also did the Lord declare: "He that heareth you, heareth Me; he that despiseth you despiseth Me, and Him that sent Me."<sup>81</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> Ochagavia, *Visibile*, 167-69.

<sup>78</sup> It would appear that Gnostics find no authority in any written text whatsoever. Tiessen, *Salvation*, 189, cites Perkins' evaluation that even Gnostic writings make no claim to authority. Truth is not found in any written text for the hermeneutic of Gnosticism is "still the hermeneutic of an oral tradition." But cf. Ochagavia, *Visibile*, 172-73, n. 169, and 192. He lists evidence that casts doubt upon the assumption that all Gnostic traditions were orally transmitted. There is evidence to show that "the gnostic traditions were not necessarily 'oral traditions'" (Ochagavia, *Visibile*, 173, n. 169). Ochagavia, however, also cited as counter-evidence the Gnostics' own claim given by Irenaeus in *Against Heresies* III, 2, 1.

<sup>79</sup> From the context, "these truths" refer to the truths affirmed by the Gospel and, therefore, affirmed as well by the rule of truth contained in it. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* III, 1, 2.

<sup>80</sup> Danielou writes that "it is never the Apostles, but only the Church which does the receiving", citing *Against Heresies* II, 9, 1; III, 2, 2; III, 3, 2; III, 3, 3; and III, 5, 1 as examples to clarify this point, *Gospel Message*, 145; cf. Tiessen, *Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelized*, 192.

<sup>81</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* III, Preface; cf. Luke 10:16.

The tradition received from the apostles was preserved by "means of the successions of presbyters in the churches,"<sup>82</sup> a succession of bishops which has continuously preserved the tradition from the time of the apostles such that all the churches believe the same faith. Thus, the church, in opposition to the Gnostic teachers, has its own living tradition which is distinct from written Scriptures. This "tradition of the truth" which the church hands down is easy to obtain for the apostles, "like a rich man [depositing his money] in a bank," placed in the hands of the Church "most copiously all things pertaining to the truth: so that every man, whosoever will, can draw from her the water of life."<sup>83</sup> This living tradition makes Scripture clear when it is read in the presence of the presbyters who possess the "apostolic doctrine."<sup>84</sup>

The rule of truth is the principal content of this apostolic tradition.<sup>85</sup> The apostolic tradition preserved and transmitted by the church, of which the rule of truth is the principal part, is complete and cannot be found elsewhere. Believers would do wisely to diligently "lay hold of this tradition of the truth" to settle disputes over important questions among themselves.<sup>86</sup>

By means of the rule of truth, the true meaning of Scripture is understood and the true doctrine of God is expounded. As Irenaeus has written,

True knowledge is [that which consists in] the doctrine of the apostles, and the ancient constitution of the Church throughout all the world, and the distinctive manifestation of the body of Christ according to the successions of the bishops, by which they have handed down that Church which exists in every place, and has come even unto us,

---

<sup>82</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* III, 2, 2.

<sup>83</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* III, 4, 1.

<sup>84</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* IV, 26, 5; IV, 32, 1.

<sup>85</sup> Danielou, *Gospel Message*, 153; Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, 28.

<sup>86</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* III, 4, 1-2.

being guarded and preserved, without any forging of Scriptures, by a very complete system of doctrine, and neither receiving addition nor [suffering] curtailment [in the truths which she believes]; and [it consists in] reading [the word of God] without falsification, and a lawful and diligent exposition in harmony with the Scriptures, both without danger and without blasphemy; and [above all, it consists in] the pre-eminent gift of love, which is more precious than knowledge, more glorious than prophecy, and which excels all the other gifts [of God].<sup>87</sup>

## **VII. The Relationship between Tradition and Scripture**

Irenaeus's understanding of the rule of truth as the key to the correct interpretation of Scripture is an important concept for understanding the relationship between Scripture and tradition.<sup>88</sup> Irenaeus was not concerned with the question whether Scripture and oral tradition are two independent and supplementary sources of authority or whether one is subordinate to the other. Irenaeus was concerned with divine revelation. According to Irenaeus, the Father revealed Himself in the Son and the Son proclaimed Him to the apostles. The apostles handed on the divine revelation to the churches by means of written Scripture and oral preaching. The bishops, to whom the apostles entrusted the churches, "preserved the 'truth' or 'faith' received from the apostles and handed it down faithfully."<sup>89</sup> Irenaeus "based his major defense of orthodoxy upon Scripture" which "certainly contained" the "truth" or "faith" received from the apostles. The Gnostic mishandling of Scripture, however, caused Irenaeus to appeal to the rule of truth, the tradition of the church containing the same body of truth as that found in Scripture and which is preserved

---

<sup>87</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* IV, 33, 8.

<sup>88</sup> Tiessen, *Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelized*, 204.

<sup>89</sup> Tiessen, *Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelized*, 204.



by the sure succession of bishops and affirmed by all churches everywhere. This tradition is not independent of Scripture nor is it additional to it. Rather both Scripture and tradition bear witness to the same truth of revelation as received, preserved and proclaimed by the church. Scripture confirms the tradition and the tradition interprets Scripture such that the church is maintained in truth.<sup>90</sup>

---

<sup>90</sup> Tiessen, *Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelized*, 204-5.

## ABSTRACT

What role does tradition play in the interpretation of Scripture in the church? Gnosticism challenged the authority of the church by claiming that each individual apostle received a secret revelation from the Lord which was preserved as oral tradition by the unbroken succession of teachers from the time of the apostles to that of the Gnostics. The Gnostics affirmed that Scripture is corrupt, not authoritative, and ambiguous, and that the Gnostics' own secret tradition provides its correct interpretation.

These two claims of the Gnostics led Irenaeus to restructure the sense of the word "tradition," so that it specifically refers to the Church's oral preaching as distinct from that contained in Scripture. Against the secret oral tradition of the Gnostics, he opposed the public oral tradition which was alive in the Church's proclamation of what had been received from the apostles, and was passed on by the bishops in the great sees going back to the apostles. For those who had no access to the Scriptures, it was sufficient for faith that they hear the Gospel proclaimed by the Church, i.e. the oral handing on of the teaching of the Apostles.

This tradition was expressed in what Irenaeus called "the canon of truth," a condensed summary which set out the key-points of the Christian revelation in the form of a rule, fluid in form but fixed in content. This rule and the tradition it summarized, not the secret tradition of the Gnostics, provides the correct interpretation of Scripture by the church because the content of this oral tradition is identical to the apostolic tradition preserved in Scripture.

## 撮 要

在教會詮釋聖經上，傳統擔當甚麼角色？諾斯底主義挑戰教會的權威，聲稱個別使徒從主那裏領受祕密啟示，而這些啟示透過口述傳統，從使徒時代的教師，無間斷地流傳至諾斯底主義者的時代。諾斯底主義者堅定認為，聖經是殘缺的，意義模稜兩可，並不權威，而諾斯底本身的祕密傳統始能正確詮釋聖經。

諾斯底主義者的兩項聲言，使愛任紐重構「傳統」這詞的理念，讓這詞特別指向教會的口述講道，與聖經所載者有別。愛任紐不贊同祕密口述傳統，反對教會宣稱從使徒承接的口述傳統仍然存在，由主教從追溯至使徒時代的偉大教區所傳遞。對那些沒法接觸聖經的人，他們得以透過教會所宣講的福音而信道，其實已經足夠。教會宣講的福音，便是從使徒的教導流傳下來的口述。

愛任紐稱這傳統為「真理的正典」，言簡意賅地開列基督信仰啟示的關鍵，成為一套形式靈活，內容扎實的信仰守則。總的來說，由於口述傳統與聖經所保留的使徒傳統相同，故此，能讓教會正確詮釋聖經的，乃「真理的正典」所敘述的法則和傳統，而非諾斯底的祕密傳統。