INTRODUCTION

My family and I stood before the chain-linked fence gazing at the remains of an old Roman amphitheater in Lyon, France. I held in my hand a book containing an ancient letter describing the Christian martyrs who died on these grounds in A.D. 177. The letter, likely written by a presbyter named Irenaeus, depicts a series of brutal persecutions that ravaged the ancient Christian community in Lyons and the neighboring city of Vienne. This letter was addressed to a certain Eleutherus, the bishop in Rome (c. A.D. 178-189), and mentioned that the church leadership in Lyons "requested our brother and companion Irenaeus to carry this epistle to you." Irenaeus was highly esteemed in the church of Lyons. The letter calls him a "presbyter of the church" and requests that Eleutherus consider Irenaeus "as one who is zealous for the covenant of Christ."[1]

Excepting these occasions of persecution, the second century was a relatively stable time, known as the Antonine era, when

1. Eusebius, *The History of the Church: A new translation*, 5.4.2. Translations of this letter are from: Eusebius of Caesarea, *The History of the Church: A New translation*, Translated by Jeremy M. Schott (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019).

the Roman Empire was at its height. Thanks to Roman rule, Irenaeus remarks that the world is at peace, and "we can travel and sail without fear."[2] But the church was also growing slowly. Through the missionary efforts begun by Paul and the other apostles, Christian leaders were evangelizing throughout the ancient world. The church was embedded within the fabric of the empire, even though they lived as citizens in the world, they followed a different pattern of life that destabilized the religious and philosophical ethos that bound the Roman world together. By the late second century the Romans and the Gallic tribes in the region of Lyons had had enough. They conspired and turned their fury upon the Christians.

As my family and I stared at the crumbling remains of the stadium seating encircling the arena, it was easy to imagine the crowd gathered, cheering for the death of the Christians. I slowly began to read aloud the account of the persecution. The ominous opening lines capture the extreme cruelty of the persecution: "Now, then, the magnitude of the oppression in this place, the extent of the Gentiles' rage against the saints, and what the blessed martyrs endured, we are not capable of describing accurately in speech nor can they be comprehended in writing."[3] And they did suffer. "For the adversary attacked with all [his] might," the letter continues, "offering already a kind of preview of when he will come with impunity."[4] These ancient Christians were barred from civic life, not only were they "shut out of buildings, baths, and agoras," the text reads, but the Christians report that "we were universally banned from appearing in any place whatsoever."[5]

2. *Haer* 4.30.3. Translations of *Against Heresies* 4 are taken from: Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies (Books 4 and 5)*, translated by Dominic J. Unger and Scott D. Moringiello. Ancient Christian Writers 72. New York: Newman, 2024.
3. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.1.4.
4. Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 5.1.5.
5. Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 5.1.5.

Gazing at the large circular dirt-covered pad where these martyrdoms took place, we listened to the stories of suffering. Christians with names like Vettius Epagathus, Maturus, Sanctus, Blandina, Attalus, Alexander, and Pothinus. Each made bold confessions of Christ before the jeering crowd. Pothinus, the elderly bishop of the church in Lyons, was already over ninety years old and must have been one of the earliest members of the community. The letter culminates in the martyrdom of Blandina, a woman who was the last one alive. When she was accused, she responded confidently, "I am a Christian, and there is no evil done amongst us," a response that encouraged others who were there. They showed her no mercy, she was tortured and ravished to the point that even the Roman authorities said there was nothing left to do to her.

Not all the Christians were faithful unto death. Some ten succumbed to the pressure and worshiped the pagan gods so they could go free. But many remained committed to Christ and reported that they felt that the grace of God "marshaled together the weak, and braced them with firm supports capable by their endurance of absorbing all the rage of the enemy that was directed against them."[6] Today, a stone pillar stands in the middle of the worn-down pad signifying those who had given their lives for the cause of Christ on this very spot.

When I finished the letter, we all stood gazing down upon the soil, wondering how the Christian community managed to pick up the pieces and carry on. Irenaeus took over the leadership of the church in Lyons after these events and this biography explores his vision for ministry that led him and others through these tumultuous times. For those who are unfamiliar with Irenaeus' writings, I hope this biography serves as a good introduction to one of the most fascinating theologians in the early church. For those more familiar with his work, I try to synthesize his contribution from a few perspectives that are

6. Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 5.1.5.

not often discussed, such as his theological method, vision of the spiritual life, his view of citizenship, and his perspective on pastoral ministry. I hope these approaches provide some fresh perspectives on Irenaeus' important contribution.

Biography

But before I move on to explain these features of Irenaeus' thought, I want to begin with a few points of background. We have very limited details about Irenaeus' life, but there are enough data points to make some general observations. Irenaeus was born between A.D. 130–140. in the town of Smyrna, located in Asia minor.[7] Not much is known about his early years, but at some point, he encountered the preaching of Polycarp (d. A.D. 155–56). Polycarp was a well-known Christian leader in Asia Minor, who reportedly had conversations with the Apostle John. He wrote at least one letter that is extant, Polycarp's letter to the Philippians, and his final moments were recorded in an ancient account known as the *Martyrdom of Polycarp.*

In a letter to a friend named Florinus, Irenaeus describes the impact his interactions with Polycarp had upon him.[8] The occasion for the letter is Florinus' growing interest in the various Gnostics sets that have been pilfering through the church. Irenaeus recalls hearing Polycarp and other presbyters describing their conversations with certain apostles and others who were familiar with the apostolic community. "For I knew you [Florinus] when I was still a boy in lower Asia, with Polycarp," Irenaeus writes, "when you were doing splendidly in the kingly hall, and trying to garner his respect."[9] This appears to be a kind of discipleship setting, where Polycarp is instructing a group on the apostolic teaching. Irenaeus provides a detailed account saying, I remember the events of that time better than what

7. Eric Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 2.

8. The *Letter to Florinus* is recorded in Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 5.20.4–8.

9. Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 5.20.5. See also *Haer*. 3.3.4.

has happened recently."[10] He describes the way he was moved by Polycarp's words and the persuasives of his character of his life and ministry. He also recounts the conversations Polycarp had with the apostle John and others who were eyewitnesses of the Lord's ministry. Speaking of Polycarp, Irenaeus writes, "I listened to it all diligently, recording it not on papyrus, but in my heart. And by the grace of God, I always ruminate on them truly."[11] From these descriptions, it seems that Irenaeus spent a rather significant amount of time with Polycarp, absorbing his instruction.[12]

At some point, Irenaeus made his way west to Rome and then up to Lyons to join the community on the outskirts of the Roman Empire. We do not know the path he took to get there. He was probably interacting with Christian leaders in Asia Minor and it is possible that he accompanied Polycarp on some of his visits to Rome, such as the time Polycarp visited Rome two years before his martyrdom, to discuss the dating of Easter.[13] Whatever the case, by the latter half of the second century, Irenaeus finds himself working with the church in Lyons. He describes his community as those who "live among the Celts."[14] Lyons was the principle city of the region and fertile ground for planting and building a Christian community. The martyrs of Lyons, mention above, seem to include founders of the church, so the church must have been planted in the early to mid-second

10. Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 5.20.6.

11. Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 5.20.7.

12. John Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 63.

13. *Haer* 3.3.4. Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 5.24.12–17. All translations of Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3 are taken from: Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies, Book 3*. Translated by Dominic J. Unger and Irenaeus M. C. Steenberg. Ancient Christian Writers 64 (New York: Newman, 2012).

14. *Haer* 1.pf.3.

century.[15] We know little about Irenaeus' death, but there is no doubt about the impact he has had on the church.

Writings

Irenaeus was clearly educated, theologically astute, and deeply immersed in Scripture. Besides Polycarp, he mentions interactions with a variety of Christian leaders and texts including Papias, Justin Martyr, *1 Clement,* Ignatius of Antioch, *Shepherd of Hermas,* and other elders of the church. I assume that he learned a great deal from these and other Christian theologians of the era. We also know, as I mentioned above, that Irenaeus had interactions with Eleutherus, the bishop in Rome and Victor who followed him in that position.

His writings shows a broad awareness of the religious and philosophical communities in the ancient world. He is familiar with the philosophical traditions, especially the writings of Middle Platonism. He mentions such philosophers as Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Homer, Democritas, and Hereclitus.[16] The opening book of *Against Heresies* records a Homeric cento that was a common literary exercise in a Grammaticus, an ancient grammar school.[17] He demonstrates interactions with various Gnostics groups that were practicing their faith in this region around the Rhone.[18]

But he is humble about his education too. He claims that he is not "accustomed to writing books, or practiced in the art of rhetoric."[19] Living among the Celts, he must "transact practically everything in a barbarous tongue," so the reader should not expect to find the "rhetorical art, which we have

15. Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 19.

16. See *Haer* 2.14.1–9.

17. *Haer* 1.9.4. All translations of *Against heresies* 1 are taken from: Irenaeus. *Against the Heresies, Book 1.* Translated by Dominic J. Unger and John J. Dillion. Ancient Christian Writers 55. New York: Newman, 1992.

18. Haer 1.13.7.

19. *Haer* 1.pf.2.

never learned, or the craft of writing, in which we have not had practice, or elegant style and persuasiveness, with which we are not familiar."[20] But this self-deprecation, too, may be part of his rhetorical moves.

The early Church historian Eusebius gives a summary of Irenaeus' writings in his possession that suggest he has more literary skills than he is letting on. Most of these writings are no longer available to us, but they show Irenaeus' extensive literary output. Eusebius mentions a work titled, *On Knowledge*, which was written against the Hellenes, a work Eusebius describes as a book of various discussions, in which he mentions the Letter to the Hebrews and the so-called Wisdom of Solomon, setting down certain passages from them."[21] He also wrote two letters to Florinus, one entitled *On Monarchy or the Fact That God Is Not the Maker of Evils*, and another entitled *On the Ogdoad*, which he wrote when Florinus was turning to Valentinianism.[22] Eusebius also mentions another letter written to Victor, one that was about Florinus, and a text called *On Schism* about Blastus.[23] Finally, the letter mentioned at the opening of this chapter, the *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyons to the Churches of Asia and Phrygia*, was likely penned by Irenaeus.[24]

Only two of Irenaeus' works survive, but they demonstrate two key concerns of his ministry: discipleship and apologetics. The first work, entitled *The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, is shorter, only one hundred paragraphs.[25] The word "demonstration" *(epidexis)* is a common rhetorical term meaning a proof or exhibition, in this case Ireaneus offers a demonstration or proof of the apostolic preaching. The work is

20. *Haer* 1.pf.3.
21. Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 5.26.
22. Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 5.20.1.
23. Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 5.20.1.
24. Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 5.1–3.
25. Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 5.26.

written to a friend named Marcianus, who is likely a Christian leader involved in the training of new converts, or a process known as "catechesis" (Greek for "teaching" or "instruction"). Even a cursory reading of the *Demonstration* reveals a substantial depth of biblical knowledge. Irenaeus traces the storyline of Scripture, discusses the unity of the covenants in Christ, and explains how Christ fulfills many passages from the prophets. He also discusses the church, with allusions to the story of Acts and frames the work with references to the heretical teaching that is circulating. All of these literary features help frame Irenaeus' perspective on the content and purpose of catechetical instruction.

Irenaeus is most widely known for his longer and more substantial work entitled, *The Refutation and Overthrowal of Knowledge falsely so-called*, though it is often referred to by its shorter title, *Against Heresies*.[26] This work is a massive five-volume refutation of the various streams of Gnosticism and other heretical leaders and communities that were vying for cultural influence in the ancient world. The first book catalogs the different heretical leaders and groups. It reads like a set of Wikipedia entries for the different streams of Gnosticism and includes a discussion of their origins, key leaders, and worldview, along with Irenaeus' own personal commentary on the ways they deviate from the Scriptures. The second book examines some key points of doctrine in their systems and explains the ways they differ from the church's theological vision. The last three books offer reflections upon different theological issues that help explain the error of the Gnostics. In the past, many scholars have criticized the structure and coherence of this work, Irenaeus' writing is profoundly complex in places. But more

26. *Haer* 4.pf.1; Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 5.7.1. Originally written in Greek, these texts mostly survive in translations including Latin, Armenian, Syric, and some Greek fragments.

recent scholarship has found unity within the complexity.[27] To understand Irenaeus' writings, a reader needs to sit with them for a while, mulling over his theological perspective.

Irenaeus' background and literary output reveals an active ministry life, forged amid an entrenched Roman culture. Irenaeus learned to navigate this world with faith and fortitude, and I believe his example can help guide us to do the same.

Summary of Chapters

This is an intellectual biography of Irenaeus, tracing some of the key themes that animate his ministry and spiritual life. In chapter one, I delve into Irenaeus' setting, explaining his perceptions of Jews, Greco-Roman philosophers, and Gnostics. Situated among these groups, Irenaeus' most intense criticisms were levied against the Gnostics; they present the pressing ministry challenges before him. The health of his community demanded a careful apologetic response to these groups percolating through the ancient world and, in different ways, these groups help Irenaeus articulate how to live the Christian life.

In chapter two, I start with first principles, explaining Irenaeus' perception of reality. God is the source of all truth, so only those who believe in God can comprehend truth. I also explain the general contours of Irenaeus' theological system, which he terms the rule of faith. The rule emerges from Scripture and offers a faithful summary of what Scripture teaches. Then I discuss Irenaeus' theological method, the interaction between faith and reason that guides his pastoral and apologetic efforts.

In chapter three, I discuss his vision of pastoral ministry. There are two essential ingredients to the pastoral life: sound teaching and a blameless life. The pastor should be an exemplar in wisdom and virtue, living an upright and holy life, and expounding the Scriptures in all faithfulness. Other essential

27. Mary Ann Donovan, *One Right Reading?* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical press, 1997), 7.

features of pastoral work include baptism, Eucharist, prayer, and martyrdom. Each of these prepare the faithful for the holy life, both in the present age and the age to come. He sees the essential role of the pastor in leading the congregation through tumultuous times, amid political leaders, philosophers, and heretics that are pulling the people of God in many different directions.

Chapter four considers his view of the human person, living under the transcendence and providence of God within the world God has created. I discuss the nature of the human person, which comprises both body and soul, but also requires the indwelling of the Spirit. I explain the essential concepts of the image and likeness of God as the bookends for the spiritual life; the whole human person, created body and soul in the image of God, is conformed to the likeness of God and fitted for beholding the glory of God. Finally, I discuss the concepts of recapitulation and resurrection that guide Irenaeus' economic view of human growth and maturity. Together, these theological perspectives lead to his vision of beatitude where the faithful are raised to new life and fitted for immortality.

Then, chapter five considers Irenaeus' vision of Christian citizenship and political theology. I show how his doctrine of God and doctrine of creation framed his vision of public life. Irenaeus believes God has appointed earthly rulers with a measure of authority to accomplish some specific things. Magistrates perform God's work by enacting laws that curtail sin and justly delving out blessings and curses. The magistrates will also be judged accordingly in the way that they rule. Under every and any political rule, Irenaeus calls the Christian to a virtuous life that produces the most virtuous citizens.

Chapter six brings all things together in a discussion of what I call the apologetic life. In Irenaeus' day, the spiritual life was an apologetic life oriented toward discernment of truth amid error and the good life amid other competing visions. This discussion

considers his depiction of the "spiritual disciple," who lives a discerning life, and judges all things and is judged by no one. I explain that the apologetic life is a life of fortitude and holiness, as well as discernment and persuasion.

Together these chapters show how Irenaeus and his community lived Christianly in a pagan world. Irenaeus was "zealous for the covenant of Christ," and like many in his community, prepared the people of God to defend the faith, even to the end. The example of these martyrs from Irenaeus' community reflects stories of faithfulness and I pray that the church today is inspired to model this same kind of commitment.