

One God, the Creator, Maker, and Nourisher of this Universe:  
Irenaeus Against the Valentinians

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Divinity  
with a Concentration in Historical Theology

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Johnson City, TN

2022

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## Abbreviations

ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
<i>AH</i>	Irenaeus, <i>Adversus haereses</i>
<i>Ad Autol.</i>	Theophilus, <i>Ad Autolyicum</i>
ANF	Ante-Nicene Fathers
<i>Dial.</i>	<i>Dialogue with Trypho the Jew</i>
SC	<i>Sources Chrétiennes</i>

## Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the conflict between Irenaeus and his Valentinian opponents. In it I argue that Irenaeus turns to the doctrine of creation in his opposition to the Valentinians as a means to reveal the foundational error of their teaching. The doctrine of creation covers a broad spectrum of ideas, from discussions surrounding creation *ex nihilo* to the status which the non-human creation is given. It is a significant theological theme in early Christianity, which accounts for its complexity and prevalence. In this thesis, I am focusing specifically on the conflict between Irenaeus and the Valentinians regarding the creative activity of God—that is, God as Creator. This is typically an unstated starting point for the early Christian discourse surrounding the other elements included in the doctrine of creation. With respect to this specific second-century conflict, however, the identity of the creator God is *not* a shared presupposition. It is, in fact, one of the central points, or as Irenaeus says, “heads,” of the Valentinian teachings he refutes.

Irenaeus and the Valentinians shared a philosophical environment, a solidifying Christian corpus of texts, and even shared similarity in their theological vocabulary—Father, Salvation, Only-Begotten, Church, etc., but despite these similarities, the reception and interpretation of all these different elements are at the forefront of the dispute. Irenaeus’s conflict with the Valentinians is focused on his concern regarding their “specious argumentation, craftily patched together.”<sup>1</sup> Through these arguments they “bring many to ruin by leading them, under the pretense of knowledge, away from Him who established and adorned this universe, as if they had something more sublime and excellent to manifest than the God who made heaven and all things

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<sup>1</sup> *AH* 1.pr.1 (trans. ACW 55:21).

in them.”<sup>2</sup> The teachings of the Valentinians are not minor aberrations from the Christian tradition. They are erroneous at a foundational level.

There are multiple groups and specific teachers who are named by Irenaeus through the entirety of *Against Heresies* (*AH*). For that reason, I have chosen to narrow my focus to just one of these opponents, with full knowledge that many of Irenaeus’s arguments are addressing more than one group at a time. There are two main reasons why I have chosen to focus specifically on the Valentinians. First, they are the opponents he names at the outset of the work and he identifies them as the reason for him taking up the task of writing the treatise that became *AH*.<sup>3</sup> He further specifies that he is writing against the followers of Ptolemaeus “whose school may be described as a bud from that of Valentinus.”<sup>4</sup> Although his focus shifts between different heretics throughout the entire work the initial focus is on the patchwork arguments offered by this group of Valentinians.<sup>5</sup>

A second reason why Irenaeus’s opposition to the Valentinians is of particular interest is because of their shared background. In second-century Rome Valentinus was a prominent Christian teacher and at one point a candidate to become the bishop.<sup>6</sup> In book three Irenaeus says that Valentinus “came into the Church and made a confession, but continued on in this wise: sometimes he taught in secret, then again made a confession.”<sup>7</sup> He was clearly an influential

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<sup>2</sup> *AH* 1.pr.1 (trans. ACW 55: 21).

<sup>3</sup> *AH* 1.pr.2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *AH* 1.pr.1.

<sup>6</sup> David Brakke, *The Gnostics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 100.

<sup>7</sup> *AH* 3.4.3 (trans. ACW 64:35).

figure in Christian circles and “evinced an optimistic openness, even missionary zeal, toward others, whether they were Christians outside his immediate community of followers or not Christians at all.”<sup>8</sup> Valentinus, and his varied disciples, were in some way connected to the Christian community, particularly in Rome. They did not break off from the Christians and sequester themselves apart from the Christian tradition, instead they viewed themselves as offering another interpretation of the Christian Scriptures which they sought to share with others.

Irenaeus accuses the Valentinians of “falsifying the Lord’s words” and of being “wicked interpreters.”<sup>9</sup> They “strive to weave ropes of sand” and in doing so craft a system estranged from the witness of the Church.<sup>10</sup> His opponents “try to set up their fabrication by misusing the Scriptures,” utilizing a specious exegesis.<sup>11</sup> In doing all of this, Irenaeus considers them as deceivers on par with the serpent as they “raise up blasphemers against the Creator” and in doing so “disallow the salvation of God’s workmanship.”<sup>12</sup> The focus of this thesis is not to give a historical account of the teachings of Valentinus or the differences among his disciples. Instead my focus will be on what Irenaeus presents in *AH* as his response to their teachings. For Irenaeus, the Valentinians are deceivers and distorters of the truth and their teaching regarding the Creator God is a foundational error that puts them at odds with the Christian tradition in which Irenaeus stood.

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<sup>8</sup> Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 104.

<sup>9</sup> *AH* 1.Pr.1 (trans. ACW 55:21): falsantes uerba Domini, interpretatores mali eorum quae bene dicta sunt effecti // ραδιουργοῦντες τὰ λόγια Κυρίου, ἐξηγηταὶ κακοὶ τῶν καλῶς εἰρημένων γινόμενοι (SC 264:18).

<sup>10</sup> *AH* 1.8.1.

<sup>11</sup> *AH* 1.9.1 (trans. ACW 55:45).

<sup>12</sup> *AH* 4.pr.4 (trans. ANF).

It is their distortion of many of the foundational beliefs of the Christian faith that sets the Valentinians apart from other heretics. As Hans Urs von Balthasar notes, “The fault here is not, as in the case of other heretics, a mistake on one point of doctrine, nor even, as in the case of the pagans and Jews, the absence of the crucial piece, which could however be supplied, but the falsification of the truth, of the elementary articulations of being itself.”<sup>13</sup> The Valentinians are accused of adapting Scripture to their own system. Their error at the foundational level—that is, in their understanding of God and the world which God created. They name the creator of the world a defective Demiurge and the world a mistake. M.C. Steenberg observes that for Irenaeus “the ‘why?’ of creation is bound up in the who ... It is an act proper to his goodness and love to create, and an absence of creation would deny this aspect of God’s being.”<sup>14</sup> A world crafted by a Demiurge who is so ignorant as to not even know that he is one deity of many is not a world to which one ought to pay heed or give care. Just as God’s goodness becomes reflected in the goodness of the created world, so too does the ignorance and defect of the Demiurge become manifest in the created world as it is understood by the Valentinians.

In the Valentinian system as described by Irenaeus, creation comes into existence due to a tragedy and deviation within the Aeons. It is unclear precisely what was meant by the term Aeon (αἰῶνα) in the general Gnostic sense. In his notes on the first book of *AH*, Dominic Unger surveys different uses of the term in the Hellenistic era, noting that in some mystery religions

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<sup>13</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, trans. Andrew Louth, Francis McDonagh, and Brian McNeil, vol. 2 (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1984), 40.

<sup>14</sup> M. C. Steenberg, *Irenaeus on Creation: The Cosmic Christ and the Saga of Redemption*, Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae* 91 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 22.

Aeon was a term used to refer to a variety of deities.<sup>15</sup> Whatever the precise origin of the term may be for the Valentinians, in their myth, as Irenaeus presents it, Aeon refers to spiritual beings who are paired male and female and presented in a hierarchy deriving from the first Aeon. This Aeon is given multiple names such as First-Beginning (προαρχήν), First-Father (προπάτορα), or, frequently, Profundity (βυθόν).<sup>16</sup> One of these Aeons is named Sophia<sup>17</sup> and her passion and desire to know that which was beyond her nature is the cause of material substance coming into being. This material is described as “a formless substance,” coming into being, and Irenaeus explains further that Valentinians understood that the “material substance took its beginning from ignorance and grief, fear and bewilderment.”<sup>18</sup> Sophia’s passion is followed by her attempt to return to her Father. It is in the emotion that led to her attempt to return to Father from whom she originated that the Valentinians locate the origin of the Demiurge. Her experience of fear and grief leads to the formation of material substance and out of her desire to return to the origin from which she departed comes the Demiurge.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Dominic J. Unger, “Notes,” in *St. Irenaeus: Against the Heresies*, Ancient Christian Writers 55 (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 131.

<sup>16</sup> *AH* 1.1.1 (trans. ACW 55:23); (SC 264:28).

<sup>17</sup> For most all Aeons I will use an English translation of the Greek name the Valentinians gave them. For the sake of clarity when there are times when the same term is used frequently by Irenaeus I will use a Greek transliteration to refer to the Valentinian Aeon. Sophia is one of these instances. Irenaeus often uses Wisdom as a reference to the Holy Spirit, so I will retain the Greek transliteration for the Aeon Sophia.

<sup>18</sup> *AH* 1.2.3 (trans. ACW 55:25-26).

<sup>19</sup> *AH* 1.4.2.



The Valentinians believe that the Demiurge “became Father and God of all things outside the Fullness, inasmuch as he is the Maker of all ensouled and material beings.”<sup>20</sup> In this system the material substance of the world and the one who creates from it is the result of an accident. Irenaeus says, “they speak the same language we do, but intend different meanings.”<sup>21</sup> The difference lies in the grief and tragedy of an unintentional creation. Irenaeus writes of their system, “We have here, then, a great tragedy and a phantasy, as each one of them pompously explains—one this way, another that way—from what kind of passion and from what element, material substance took its origin.”<sup>22</sup> Balthasar writes that Valentinian tragedy regarding the origins of the created world puts them “in unambiguous opposition to the Christian view of the world. For the Christian, God’s creation, in its material and spiritual totality, is ‘very good.’ But, for Gnosticism, the world always comes into existence as the result of a tragic accident, a disaster, a fall.”<sup>23</sup> Affirming that this good Creator is the One God who made all things of his will and whose Word incarnate brings salvation to the entirety of creation is of primary importance for Irenaeus. The conflict between Irenaeus and the Valentinians begins here with the questions of “who is the Creator?” and “how did this world come to be?” For both of them, their answers are found from the Scriptures and philosophical arguments and traditions. Yet, they come to different conclusions, or reflect different receptions, because at the core the Valentinians

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<sup>20</sup> AH 1.5.2 (trans. ACW 55:33-34): Patrem itaque et Deum dicunt factum eorum quae sunt extra Pleroma, Fabricatorem esse omnium psychicorum et hylicorum//Πατέρα οὖν καὶ Θεὸν λέγουσιν αὐτὸν γεγονέναι τῶν ἐκτὸς τοῦ Πληρόματος, Ποιητὴν ὄντα πάντων ψυχῶν τε καὶ ὑλικῶν (SC 264: 78-79).

<sup>21</sup> AH 1.pr.2 (trans. ACW 55:21).

<sup>22</sup> AH 1.4.3 (trans. ACW 55:31).

<sup>23</sup> Hans urs von Balthasar, *The Scandal of the Incarnation: Irenaeus Against the Heresies*, trans. John Saward (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1981), 2.

are placing their system *upon* the Scriptures in contrast to the Christian system which is derived from them and the tradition which has been passed down.

Connected to the view of creation and its Demiurge as originating in an accident is Valentinian soteriology. John Behr notes that the teaching of the Valentinians regarding salvation “differentiates between an inner circle of the ‘spiritual’, and an outer circle of ‘psychics’ who remain beholden to an impoverished understanding of the Scriptures.”<sup>24</sup> They differentiate humanity into three—the animal, the material, and the spiritual.<sup>25</sup> It is the spiritual who are saved, “not by conduct, but by nature, and so will be saved entirely and in every case.”<sup>26</sup> The system or *hypothesis* which undergirds the Valentinian hope for salvation is not rooted in the Christian tradition but in their adaptations of the words of Scripture and teachings that are unwritten.<sup>27</sup> The Valentinian view of the created world as a place from which the spiritual must be saved is founded on the belief that creation is definitively not good and not worth redeeming nor capable of being redeemed. The created world is deprived of intentionality and the creator is a Demiurge who is devoid of goodness. The Valentinians believe “material substance is

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<sup>24</sup> John Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity*, Christian Theology in Context (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 31.

<sup>25</sup> *AH* 1.7.5.

<sup>26</sup> *AH* 1.6.2; (trans. ACW 55:37).

<sup>27</sup> The Latin for *AH* 1.8.1 reads that the Valentinian argument is derived from “non sun scripta legentes” whereas the extant Greek reads “ἐξ ἀγράφων ἀναγινώσκοντες” (SC 264: 112). Whether the case is that Irenaeus is arguing that the Valentinians derive their argument from unwritten sources or from sources that he did not consider to be Scripture is not the point here. What is clear, from either of these readings, is that Irenaeus is accusing the Valentinians of deriving their system from *outside* of the Christian tradition rather than from within it.

incapable of receiving salvation” and thus they, the ones who have received perfect knowledge about God will be saved from their current entanglement in the material world.<sup>28</sup>

The identification of one God who is the Creator of the world is of primary importance for Irenaeus. In book three he writes, “The following are the cardinal points (*principia*) of the Gospel: They proclaim one God, the Maker of this world—He who was announced by the prophets, and who established the economy of the law through Moses, who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; and they are not aware of any other God or any other Father besides this one.”<sup>29</sup> The Valentinian tragedy of creation precludes the salvation of the created world, because this creation came about as an error and through ignorance. The conflict over cosmogony and the identity of the Creator God features prominently in the first two books of *AH* and sets the basis for Irenaeus’s refutation of his opponents through Scripture found in book three. My discussion in chapter one focuses on the way in which Irenaeus structures *AH* and the conflict between the Christian and Valentinian *hypotheses* with respect to their reading of the Scriptures. I pay special attention to the way in which the structure and his argument center on God as Creator. The second chapter explores the philosophical atmosphere of the second century as an exploration of their shared context and to demonstrate the ways they each adapted philosophical arguments to their cosmological convictions. In chapter three I turn to the integral role of Irenaeus’s argument about the Creator God in the economy of salvation.

Irenaeus returns to the theme of God as Creator throughout the entirety of *AH* as he addresses topics that would be more readily categorized as Christology, soteriology, or eschatology. He begins here not because it is a chronological starting point in his refutation of

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<sup>28</sup> *AH* 1.6.1 (trans. ACW 55:36).

<sup>29</sup> *AH* 3.11.7 (trans. ACW 55:55).

the Valentinians but because God's creation of the world is not an isolated event. Creation—God's creative act of making, forming, and ordering and sustaining the world—is only the beginning of the divine economy. This same God who made all things through the Word sent the Word incarnate in the flesh. The incarnate Christ, intimately involved in the material reality, is the center point of creation and its salvation. In failing to attribute the creation of the world to the one God who is the “Creator, Maker, and Nourisher of this universe”<sup>30</sup> the Valentinians have crafted a system incompatible with the economy of salvation, for it is one from which only the select few will be able to escape. Irenaeus himself says that he writes this refutation of the Valentinians so that “Perhaps, some of them can be saved if they do penance and convert to the one and only Creator and God, the Maker of the universe.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *AH* 1.10.3 (trans. ACW 55:50).

<sup>31</sup> *AH* 1.31.3 (trans. ACW 55:103).

## Chapter One

In this first chapter I explore the structure of Irenaeus's argument against the Valentinians and their *hypothesis*, specifically the places where their identification of the Creator God come into conflict. Of first importance in this discussion is the structure of *AH* and how the argument set forth in the first two books is in fact intentionally connected to the work as a whole. After this, I turn to explore the differences in the *hypotheses* presented by Irenaeus and the one he attributes to the Valentinians. Finally, I look at how the Valentinians and Irenaeus come into direct conflict in their reading of the prologue of John. This analysis demonstrates how the understanding of the identity of the Creator God is foundational to the divergent readings of Scripture evidenced by Irenaeus and the Valentinians.

### Structure of *Against Heresies*

A coherent structure of *AH* has been previously dismissed and the work has been "often characterized as tedious, repetitious, and unwieldy, and its author as inept."<sup>32</sup> More recently, Irenaeus has begun to receive rightful recognition as being a complex and careful thinker. At the beginning of each book Irenaeus sets forth his intentions, summarizes the goal of the previous book, and at the end looks ahead to the next after summarizing the argument he just made. W. C. van Unnik, after examining these prefaces with respect to what follows them, writes, "Irenaeus's plan was clearly devised and executed accordingly: the first book offers the relevant material to show what the Gnostics taught; the following four books contain the refutation along different lines of attack."<sup>33</sup> There was a clear purpose for the lengthy and meandering exploration of the

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<sup>32</sup> Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity*, 73.

<sup>33</sup> W.C. van Unnik, "An Interesting Document of Second Century Theological Discussion (Irenaeus, Adv. Haer. 1.10.3)," *Vigiliae Christianae*, no. 31 (1977): 199–200.

cosmological and theological systems of his opponents outlined in book one. He outlines at the outset what he understands to be their beliefs in order to focus the rest of the work on refuting their doctrines.

The intentionality of the whole work, though, is not without debate. What is contested with respect to *AH* is how much of it he intended to write at the outset. Behr argues that the first two books were all that Irenaeus intended to write, saying that they “thus correspond to the two key words of the title given the work by Irenaeus: ἔλγχος and ἀνατροπή, a ‘refutation’ or ‘exposure’, or rather, for Irenaeus, a refutation by exposure, and an ‘overturning’.”<sup>34</sup> He then asserts that the third book was not part of the original intention of the work. It was only when Irenaeus reached the end of the second book that he realized he would need to continue the argument in a third book. Contrary to this Anthony Briggman and Lewis Ayres both argue that there is an original and intentional structure to the work as a whole. Taking into account the span of time over which Irenaeus wrote *AH* Briggman says, “It would be better to affirm that a broad conceptualization or a general outline of the five books of *AH* existed from the start, while at the same time leaving room for a certain degree of formation with regard to the specific content of each portion of his work at the time of its composition.”<sup>35</sup> Ayres writes, “Book 2 was conceived as a refutation of the ‘heretical’ doctrines described in Book 1, while Book 3 is offered as a complementary set of proofs from Scripture.”<sup>36</sup> I am in agreement with Ayres and Briggman that before penning the entirety of his work Irenaeus had a basic plan in mind. What I am arguing in

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<sup>34</sup> Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity*, 75.

<sup>35</sup> Anthony Briggman, *Irenaeus of Lyons and the Theology of the Holy Spirit*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 7.

<sup>36</sup> Lewis Ayres, “Irenaeus vs. the Valentinians: Toward a Rethinking of Patristic Exegetical Origins,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 23, no. 2 (2015): 170.

this thesis is that part of this intentional structure is Irenaeus's consistent refrain that there is one God who made all things, the hinge upon which the rest of his arguments hang. It is from this foundation that Irenaeus writes against the Valentinians.

Books one and two are primarily focused on the Valentinian cosmological system and Irenaeus's refutation of their errors. Another critique Irenaeus receives is that his articulation of the Valentinian system is not fully an identical account to what is found in the surviving documents discovered at Nag Hammadi. In her article on Irenaeus's rhetoric in the first book of *AH* PHEME PERKINS notes that Irenaeus is not explicitly seeking to give what we today would deem an accurate and unbiased account of the facts of the Valentinian system.<sup>37</sup> What Irenaeus is doing is attempting to refute their argument and, as he states himself at the opening of book one, that his goal is to “not only to make clear to you their doctrines—which you have long sought to learn—but also to supply you with aids for proving it false.”<sup>38</sup> PERKINS argues that the rhetorical models of refutation “dictate both the form and content of many of his assertions, which must, therefore, be understood as meeting rhetorical expectations and not as factual reports.”<sup>39</sup> Irenaeus provides an account of the Valentinian system not only as he understands it, but also in a way that makes evident the way he thinks it contradicts the Christian faith. If Irenaeus overemphasizes the tragedy and ignorance of the created world in their system, it is done to craft a greater contrast with the Christian emphasis on the intentionality and goodness of the Creator and the created world.

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<sup>37</sup> PHEME PERKINS, “Irenaeus and the Gnostics: Rhetoric and Composition in *Adversus Heresies* Book One,” *Vigiliae Christianae*, no. 30 (1976): 199–200.

<sup>38</sup> *AH* 1.pr.3 (trans. ACW 55:22).

<sup>39</sup> PERKINS, “Irenaeus and the Gnostics: Rhetoric and Composition in *Adversus Heresies* Book One,” 197.

After providing an initial list and description of the Valentinian system of Aeons, Irenaeus describes their purposes for the specific divisions and number before saying, “and if anywhere anything of the many things mentioned in the Scriptures can [be drawn to these things, they wish to] accommodate and adapt them to their fabrication.”<sup>40</sup> The foundation of the Valentinian cosmological structure is, to Irenaeus, a distortion of what is found in Scripture. In further evaluation of their argument later he says that others, besides just the Valentinians, “do violence to the good words [of Scripture] in adapting them to their wicked fabrications” and in doing so they “lead away from the Truth into captivity those who do not guard a firm faith in the one Father Almighty and in one Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”<sup>41</sup>

Irenaeus outlines the pattern and purpose of his argument at the outset of the work. His initial concern is not to refute the Valentinians for the sake of the argument. Rather he writes to oppose them because:

By specious argumentation, craftily patched together, they mislead the minds of the more ignorance and ensare them by falsifying the Lord’s words. Thus they become wicked interpreters of genuine words. They bring many to ruin by leading them, under the pretense of knowledge, away from Him who established and adorned this universe, as if they had something more sublime and excellent to manifest than the God who made heaven and all things in them.<sup>42</sup>

Irenaeus writes out of concern for those who are drawn to these Valentinian teachings. What is being taught by the Valentinians is not compatible with the Christian faith and the faithful are being pulled in. Despite its complexity and sometimes meandering nature, the purpose of *AH* is clear: to make known the teachings which distort the Scriptures and to refute their falsehoods

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<sup>40</sup> *AH* 1.1.3 (trans. ACW 55:24).

<sup>41</sup> *AH* 1.3.6 (trans. ACW 55:29-30).

<sup>42</sup> *AH* 1.pr.1 (trans. ACW 55:21).



with the truth. A necessary part of this refutation is an exposure of the inadequacy and fundamental falsehood of their cosmological system.

### **Creation and the Conflicting *Hypotheses***

Irenaeus describes the Valentinian cosmological system with its Ogdoad consisting of hypostatization of different names for the Father and Christ in chapter nine of book one. That is, they take terms such as Christ, Word, Savior, and Only-begotten and assert that they are distinct beings that populate their Pleroma rather than different names for the same being. After giving a brief description of it, he writes, “and when this [the Ogdoad] has been destroyed, their whole hypothesis has crumbled—the hypothesis which they were falsely dreaming up—and they overrun the Scriptures with their own hypothesis they invented for themselves.”<sup>43</sup> Irenaeus elsewhere describes their method as one “which neither the prophets preached, nor the Lord taught, nor the apostles handed down” but rather one which they have crafted and adapted to their system.<sup>44</sup> Irenaeus provides a clear example of their divergent readings in *AH* 1.8.5-1.9.2, including a quotation from a Ptolemaic reading of the passage and offering his Christian interpretation as a foil. This passage will receive further examination below.

The concept of *hypothesis* has a distinctive rhetorical and literary background. Robert Grant identifies the *hypothesis* as “the presentation (sometimes in a summary) of a plot or structure intended by an author such as Homer.”<sup>45</sup> In book one Irenaeus uses the illustration of a

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<sup>43</sup> *AH* 1.9.3-4: Ταύτης δε λελυμένης, διαπέπτωκεν αὐτῶν πᾶσα ἡ ὑπόθεσις, ἣν ψευδῶς ὀνειρώττοντες κατατρέχουσι τῶν γραφῶν. Ἴδιαν <γὰρ> ὑπόθεσιν ἀναπλασάμενοι (SC 264: 146), translation my own.

<sup>44</sup> *AH* 1.8.1 (trans. ACW 55:41).

<sup>45</sup> Robert M. Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons, The Early Church Fathers* (London: Routledge, 1997), 47.

Homeric cento to describe the way in which the Valentinians treat Scripture as they find support for their own *hypothesis*. The Valentinians, and the other opponents named throughout *AH*, “abstract verses, names, and expressions from Scripture and rearrange them such that they support a plot, narrative, or subject-matter other than that articulated by Scripture.”<sup>46</sup> The Valentinians are not the only ones with a *hypothesis*, for Irenaeus also presents a Christian *hypothesis* through which they interpret the same Scriptures.<sup>47</sup> In *AH* 1.10.1 Irenaeus gives a lengthy statement of the belief of the Church which has previously been identified as an example of his rule/canon which is often identified with his *hypothesis*. Although there are differences between the way that they are presented in *AH* one thing that is consistent between them is the insistence on a singular God who created the material world.<sup>48</sup> The Valentinian *hypothesis* leads them to read portions of Scripture as naming their many Aeons, supporting their cosmological structure, or even indicating the ignorance of Demiurge who created the material world. For example, what one would assume to be a direct proclamation of the proclamation of monotheism from Deutero-Isaiah “I am God, and beside me there is no other” is attributed to the Demiurge by the Valentinians.<sup>49</sup> They argue that it is an example of the ignorance of the Demiurge is so great that he thinks he is the only God, even though he is but one accidental being in a system of over thirty Aeons.

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<sup>46</sup> Anthony Briggman, *God and Christ in Irenaeus*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 13.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> For a discussion regarding the differences between the rule/canon and the *hypothesis* as presented in *AH* 1.22.1, 3.11.1 and 1.10.1 respectively see Briggman, *God and Christ in Irenaeus*, 15-18.

<sup>49</sup> *AH* 1.5.4.

The Christian rule/canon/*hypothesis* is derived from the witness of the Scriptures themselves as well as the inherited Christian tradition.<sup>50</sup> Irenaeus argues that the Valentinians read their *hypothesis* onto the text rather than out of it. In doing so, the Valentinians are crafting a *hypothesis* that is incongruous with the narrative presented in Scripture that bears witness to who God is and what it is that God is doing in the world. Robert Grant writes, “Irenaeus’s rule of faith or truth is the same as the *hypothesis* of the scriptures. It starts with belief in one God, maker of heaven and earth and everything in them. ... With the apologists Irenaeus insists upon God’s absolute supremacy in creation.”<sup>51</sup> Irenaeus presents a *hypothesis* which is in harmony with both the narrative of Scripture and the Christian tradition which he received from his predecessors. Regarding the specific content of Irenaeus’s *hypothesis* Briggman writes that it reveals “he regarded not only the activity central to the plot but also the subject of that activity as essential to the hypothesis of Scripture. That is to say, he is not only interested in the activity of God but the God who acts, not just the economy but the one who enacts the economy.”<sup>52</sup> Regarding creation, Irenaeus is not solely concerned with what has been created but with who the Creator is. In book one Irenaeus presents his *hypothesis* which begins by asserting that the church “received from the apostles and their disciples the faith in one God the Father Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth and the seas and all things that are in them; and in the one Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was enfleshed for our salvation.”<sup>53</sup> The Christian *hypothesis* begins

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<sup>50</sup> Paul M. Blowers, “The Regula Fidei and the Narrative Character of Early Christian Faith,” *Pro Ecclesia* 6, no. 2 (1997): 210.

<sup>51</sup> Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 49.

<sup>52</sup> Briggman, *God and Christ in Irenaeus*, 18.

<sup>53</sup> *AH* 1.10.1 (trans. ACW 55:49-50).

with the belief in a singular God who created all things. All else follows from that point. The Creator God is the same one who instituted the salvation of the world and is the same one who is bringing all things back to God.

Regarding the Valentinian origins of the world Balthasar writes, “At every point, to get their drama going, they have to project an ignorance which is not divine into the divine world.”<sup>54</sup>

Thus for them “the world always comes into existence as the result of a tragic accident, a disaster, a fall.”<sup>55</sup> Irenaeus deems their assertion that the creator is ignorant as ridiculous notion.

The Valentinians say that the creator is even ignorant of other Aeons while they:

maintain that they themselves who are on the earth know God who is above all, whom they have never seen, but will not grant that he who formed them and their whole world knows those things that they themselves know, although he is on high, even above the heavens, whereas they are here below...they arrive at so great a madness as to pronounce the Maker of the world devoid of understanding.<sup>56</sup>

They claim that the Demiurge, who made the world is so ignorant that he does not even know the mysteries of the greater Pleroma but they are able to comprehend these mysteries despite being trapped in this material reality. Their Demiurge is an ignoramus who does not know from whom he came into being, let alone of the existence of any other Aeons. In contrast, Irenaeus points to a God who is the Creator of the world and who made things with intention and goodness. It is a Creator who is involved with the creation. As Paul Blowers writes, “the Father-Creator, together with his co-Creator, the Logos-Christ, establish the fundamental integrity of the created world

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<sup>54</sup> von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, 2:41.

<sup>55</sup> von Balthasar, *The Scandal of the Incarnation: Irenaeus Against the Heresies*, 2.

<sup>56</sup> *AH* 2.6.3 (trans. ACW 65:28).

from the outset.”<sup>57</sup> There is no such intentionality or integrity preserved in the Valentinian system. The Demiurge was an accidental being, and his ignorance and accidental nature is transferred to the creation of this world.

### **Prologue of John: Divergent Readings**

The Valentinian *hypothesis* insists that the created world resulted from one accident after another. The material creation came about through accident and ignorance, lacking intention at all levels. This fundamental error leads the Valentinians to misread Scripture and craft their own system to which they proceed to adapt them. *AH* 1.8.5-1.9.2 offers a direct example of the Valentinian reading of the opening of the gospel of John and how this is in contradiction with the Christian interpretation of this same passage.

Before this, it is necessary that I give a brief sketch of the structure of the Valentinian Pleroma. Irenaeus describes the basic structure of the Valentinian system at the beginning of book one. The system begins with the first Aeon who is given a number of names such as First-Beginning, First-Father, and Profundity. There was another Aeon present with Profundity whom they name Thought, Grace, or Silence. This is the feminine principle paired with the masculine Profundity. A seed was emitted from Profundity to Silence and from them Mind and Truth, another masculine-feminine pair, came into being. These four—Profundity, Silence, Mind, and Truth—are what the Valentinians call the Tetrads. From Mind came the Aeon pairs Word and Life and Man and Church. These four who were emitted from Mind, in addition to the Tetrads, make up the Valentinian Ogdoad. From the union of Word and Life, ten more Aeons were brought into being (the Decad) and from Man and Church twelve more were emitted (the

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<sup>57</sup> Paul M. Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 86.

Dodecad). Together the Ogdoad, Decad, and Dodecad make up the hierarchical structure of the Valentinian Pleroma or Fullness.<sup>58</sup>

Valentinians, following the view of a teacher of theirs named Ptolemy read the prologue of John as an indication of their Ogdoad, those Aeons which were generated from the Tetrad and make up the “root and substance of all things.”<sup>59</sup> Since the Ogdoad is the beginning of everything, they call it the principal Ogdoad (ἀρχέγονον Ὀγδοάδα). Since the beginning of the gospel of John gives an account of the beginning of the world they interpret this passage as an account of the beginning of their Ogdoad. Irenaeus quotes their argument thus:

John, the disciple of the Lord, wishing to narrate the origins of all things, according to which Father emitted all things, proposes a kind of beginning, the first things begotten by Father, whom he called Son and Only-Begotten God, by whom Father emitted all things as through a “seed.” They say that Word was emitted by this Only-begotten and in him was emitted the whole substance of the Aeons, whom Word himself formed later.<sup>60</sup>

As Irenaeus continues his quotation of the teachings of Ptolemy it is clear that the method of reading brought to this passage of the gospel of John is one that is pointing toward a hidden meaning. For the Valentinians, the different names and many other nouns are hypostasized into Aeons and their relationships in the Ogdoad are loosely connected by their proximity in the text. The quotation ends with a summary of the Aeons to whom this passage bears witness:

So he carefully points out also the first Tetrad when he speaks of Father and Grace, of Only-begotten and Truth. Thus John speaks of the first Ogdoad, which is the Mother of all the Aeons; he speaks namely of Father and Grace, of Only-begotten and Truth, of Word and Life, of Man and Church.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> *AH* 1.1.1-3.

<sup>59</sup> *AH* 1.1.1 (trans. ACW 55:23).

<sup>60</sup> *AH* 1.8.5 (trans. ACW 55:44).

<sup>61</sup> *AH* 1.8.5 (trans. ACW 55:45).

Irenaeus's following response is of import in an initial exploration of the conflict between the Christian *hypothesis* and that of the Valentinians. His response begins with the assertion "they try to set up their fabrication by misusing the Scriptures."<sup>62</sup> He then offers two initial arguments against them based on the inconsistency and lack of inner logic of their own reading.

The first refutation is to point out that this passage in John does not name the Aeons of the Ogdoad in the same order in which the Valentinians assert that they have been produced. The Tetrad is given chronological primacy in the initial Valentinian exposition of the Aeons.<sup>63</sup> In the passage of John to which this section refers, the Tetrad is not all named at once with some named at the beginning and others at the end, all scattered through the passage. His second objection is based on the simple fact that they seek to find the Aeon Church within the passage, but Church is not once named. Irenaeus previously noted that the Valentinians name Aeons in masculine-feminine pairs, and this passage names all except for Ecclesia. Were the revelation of the names of the Ogdoad the intention of John in this passage, this does not make sense. Irenaeus says, "if he had enumerated the companions of the other Aeons, he would have indicated the consort also of Man, and would not have left it up to us to divine her name."<sup>64</sup> The basic outline of their argument cannot even be supported by their own interpretation of the text.

After this, Irenaeus turns from this interpretation of John to the Christian reading of the same text. He agrees that this passage is focused on beginnings, but the two different readings immediately diverge. Irenaeus writes:

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<sup>62</sup> *AH* 1.9.1 (trans. ACW 55:45).

<sup>63</sup> *AH* 1.1.1.

<sup>64</sup> *AH* 1.9.1 (trans. ACW 55:46).

To be sure, John preached on God Almighty, and one Only-begotten Christ Jesus, through whom he says all things were made. This is the Word of God, this is the Only-begotten, this the Maker of all things, this true Light who enlightens every man, this the Maker of the world, this the one who came into his own, this the one who became flesh and dwelt among us.<sup>65</sup>

The Valentinians are misreading the prologue of John when they manipulate it to make many Aeons out of the different names for the one and only God. The one called Word, Only-begotten, and Light is the Maker (ποιητήν) of everything in this world. Not only do the Valentinians vainly seek their Ogdoad in this passage, they also leave out the created world. When the text refers to creation, they claim it is about the way in which the Aeons emanate from one another. The one through whom all things are made in the Valentinian system—their ignorant Demiurge and his mother—are absent from their reading. Their *hypothesis* identifies this text as naming an incomplete Ogdoad and craft a new meaning foreign to the text. They have fabricated their own system and seek to support it by imposing their *hypothesis* upon the Scriptures. Thus, the Valentinians have alienated themselves from the church and have fallen into grievous falsehood.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have demonstrated the centrality of the Irenaeus's commitment to a single Creator God to his refutation of the Valentinians. I did this first by examining the general structure of *AH* as a whole, noting that the first two books are explicitly dedicated to the exhibition and the refutation of heretical systems, of which the Valentinians take primary importance, also arguing for a coherent argument and structure of the entire work. This was followed by the comparison of the Valentinian *hypothesis* with the Christian *hypothesis* as espoused by Irenaeus. It is only by imposing their *hypothesis* upon the text that the Valentinians are able to discover the names and attributes of the Aeons within their Pleroma. Irenaeus's

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<sup>65</sup> *AH* 1.9.2 (trans. ACW 55:46).



*hypothesis*, however, is rooted in the belief that there is one God, and this one God is the one who created everything in the world. These conflicting *hypotheses* clash in their interpretations of the prologue of John. The Valentinians fabricate Aeons from names from the words of Scripture and neglect to speak of the created world. Irenaeus insists that, in accordance with the Christian *hypothesis* which he received, John speaks not of Aeons and their emission from one another, but of only one God and that this God is the Creator of all things.

## Chapter Two

It is clear from a cursory reading of *AH* that part of Irenaeus's conflict with the Valentinian doctrine of creation is based upon their misinterpretation of Scriptures which they hold in common with Irenaeus. Despite using the same texts, both Irenaeus's and the Valentinians' *hypotheses* lead them to radically different interpretations, as has been noted above with respect to the identity of the creator God. Multiple times throughout *AH* Irenaeus employs the language "enclosing, not enclosed" or references this philosophical concept in refutation of the Valentinian perspective on God and God's relationship with the created world or other divine beings. It is an interesting point of argument for a few reasons. Its initial interest is due to the fact that this is a philosophical formula used prior to Irenaeus in Christian sources with which he was familiar. Irenaeus takes this formula with its brief Christian precedent and substantially builds upon it. An additional reason why this is an interesting turn in Irenaeus's argument is because it is a point where he and the Valentinians supposedly *agree*.<sup>66</sup> Yet, he takes that supposition of agreement and proceeds to use it against the Valentinians to not only show the internal inconsistencies of their own system but he also uses it as an affirmation of the power of the single Creator God who not only made this world but sustains it.

The formula "enclosing, not enclosed" is part of Irenaeus's argument for the transcendence of God that also permits him to affirm the connection between God and the created world. Using this argument, Irenaeus explores the incoherent logic of the Valentinian

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<sup>66</sup> Three times in book one Irenaeus notes their use of ἀχώρητος, or "uncontained" as a descriptor of one of their Aeons. The first, in *AH* 1.1.1 it is used to describe Profundity and the other two times it is in reference to Mind whom they deem Father (*AH* 1.2.1, 1.2.5). William Schoedel also notes Epiphanius attributes the specific formulation "enclosing, not enclosed" to the Valentinian Gnostics. (William R. Schoedel, "Enclosing, Not Enclosed: The Early Christian Doctrine of God," in *Early Christian Literature and the Classical Intellectual Tradition: In Honorem Robert M. Grant*, *Théologie Historique* 54 [Paris: Éditions Beauchesne, 1979], 77).

system of a plurality of Gods and what amounts to an infinite regress. To overthrow their system Irenaeus turns to the “first and greatest principle, with the Creator God,” asserting that this God is the *only* God, Lord, Creator, and Father, “alone contains all things, and he himself gives existence to all things.”<sup>67</sup> Irenaeus’s insistence upon a single God is certainly because of his Christian convictions, but his appeal against the Valentinians to support his claim against theirs is also mixed up in the debates and logic of their shared antecedent philosophical atmosphere.

In this chapter I trace the philosophical background upon which Irenaeus and the Valentinians develop their views on the identity of the Creator God. In doing so I recognize that there were multiple trajectories in philosophical speculation regarding the origins of the world. I show that Irenaeus’s affirmation of a single Creator God is in line not only with the Jewish and burgeoning Christian traditions but also with the Presocratic Eleatic philosophers. I also show that the Valentinians were not innovators in their negative view of the material world. Their work is more in line with the trajectory set forth by the dualist tendencies of philosophers such as Numenius. Finally, I examine portions of book two where Irenaeus employs the philosophic argument that God is “enclosing, not enclosed” as a key part of his refutation of the Valentinians and his insistence that there is only one Creator God.

### **Oneness and Dualism in Philosophy**

Philosophy in the second century was made up of both a transitional consensus as well as a smattering of eclecticism in the way the philosophers received and interpreted the work of the predecessors. This period prior to Plotinus involved much working out of a variety of aspects with respect to the interpretation of the works of Plato. Harold Tarrant notes some writers “were more faithful to the original spirit of Plato’s doctrines than Plato’s immediate successors, and

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<sup>67</sup> *AH* 2.1.1 (trans. ACW 65:17).

others had ideas that took sufficient liberties with interpretation and doctrine to embarrass Plotinus and his circle.”<sup>68</sup> Consensus and diversity mark this period, particularly as philosophers continued to work out the nature and being of god in relationship to the material world. John Dillon observes that during this period “the question of the nature and activity of the supreme principle, or God, is dominant” with these conversations often using the concept of duality, the Monad and Dyad, to describe the relationship.<sup>69</sup>

In Deirdre Carabine’s book *The Unknown God* she notes that the discussion in this period about god focused on the question of whether the father and creator were the same god or two distinct beings. She looks to a passage from *Timaeus* in which Plato is discussing the search for the knowledge of god and says, “Now to discover the Maker and Father of this Universe were a task indeed.”<sup>70</sup> In Plutarch’s interpretation of this passage he suggests that Plato “was referring to one supreme God having two different functions.”<sup>71</sup> Contrarily, the later Numenius interprets this same passage as referring to two different gods.<sup>72</sup> Her analysis of Plutarch continues, “God may be called ‘Maker’ because he has created the universe, and in this capacity he is transcendent. He

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<sup>68</sup> Harold Tarrant, “Platonism before Plotinus,” in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 66.

<sup>69</sup> John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, Revised. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 45.

<sup>70</sup> *Timaeus* 28C (trans. Loeb 234:50-51): τὸν μὲν οὖν ποιητὴν καὶ πατέρα τοῦδε τοῦ παντὸς εὐρεῖν τε ἔργον καὶ εὐρόντα εἰς πάντα ἀδύνατον λέγειν.

<sup>71</sup> Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena*, Louvain Theological & Pastoral Monographs 19 (Louvain: Peters Press, 1995), 55.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

is given the name ‘Father’, because he has endowed the soul with rational life.”<sup>73</sup> In this period it is a question of if this is the same God and, in later developments, how can God retain transcendence when creating the world?

In the Presocratic thought of Xenophanes there was a push away from the traditional Greek pantheon of gods to a singular deity. Ps-Aristotle attributes to Xenophanes the statement, “For the essence of God and of His power is to rule and not to be ruled, and to be the most powerful of all. In so far then as He is not most powerful He is not God.”<sup>74</sup> The essence of being God is to be one and the most powerful. Schoedel notes that both Xenophanes and Melissus “argue that if the One is thus supreme (or infinite, in the case of Melissus) another existent would set limits to it...and thus negate its supremacy.”<sup>75</sup> Irenaeus did not *need* the argument from the Eleatic philosophers to convince him of the oneness of God—that was a nonnegotiable passed on from the Jewish and Christian tradition of monotheism.<sup>76</sup> Where Irenaeus found use for the Eleatic argument was “to construct the logic sustaining his own argument for and conception of the one, infinite God.”<sup>77</sup> Although Irenaeus relies upon these Eleatic arguments, the philosophical environment of the second century did not follow in the trajectory they had set forth.

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<sup>73</sup> Carabine, *The Unknown God*, 55.

<sup>74</sup> *On Xenophanes* 1, 977a (trans. Loeb 307:483).

<sup>75</sup> Schoedel, “Enclosing, Not Enclosed,” 79.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Briggman, *God and Christ in Irenaeus*, 77.

Alcinous' *Didaskalos* appears to be a synthesis of much of the thought of his predecessors is an example of a textbook or manual for students of Platonism in the second century.<sup>78</sup> He sets forth three principles of the world—Matter, the Forms, and the primal God. This God is “the cause of the eternal activity of the intellect of the whole heaven” and is the source of all derivative principles such as the Forms.<sup>79</sup> Although there is supremacy attached to the primal God, this is still only one of three first principles of the universe. The primal God is named Father “through being the cause of all things and bestowing order on the heavenly Intellect,” is described as “rousing up the soul of the world,” and is the one who “imposes order on all of nature in this world.”<sup>80</sup> This primal God is not alone at the beginning of the world, though he does retain supremacy over those things where are there alongside him.

This role of God as the maker of the world comes up a few chapters later when Alcinous discusses the generation of the world. He follows what could be called a standard Middle Platonic paradigm regarding the creation of the world.<sup>81</sup> The world is “fashioned by God looking to a form of World, that being the model of our world, which is only copied from it, and it is by assimilation to it that it is fashioned by the creator, who proceeds through a most admirable

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<sup>78</sup> John Dillon, “Introduction,” in *Alcinous: The Handbook of Platonism*, Clarendon Later Ancient Philosophers (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), xiii–xiv.

<sup>79</sup> *Didaskalos*, 10.2 (trans. 17). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are from John Dillon, *Alcinous: The Handbook of Platonism*, Clarendon Later Ancient Philosophers (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

<sup>80</sup> *Didaskalos* 10.3 (trans. 18).

<sup>81</sup> In fact, Dillon proposes that he copied this from Arius Didymus. He writes, “at least the beginning of ch. 12 is lifted, with minimal changes, from Arius Didymus, and a reasonable presumption is thereby created that Arius' handbook is the basis for this whole section, if not for the whole work” (Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 285-86).

providence and administrative care to create the world, because he was good.”<sup>82</sup> There is present in this chapter a sense that the world was created intentionally by God, who is said to have taken the random matter without order and shaped it into the best that it could be. It is an understanding of this world as created good and according to a pattern rather than as a tragic accident without any plan or intention behind it.

Differing in many ways from Alcinous is the work of Numenius. His work is distinctive in that it provides an insight into the interaction between Pythagorean and Platonic thought in the second century. At times he is called a Neopythagorean and at other times, controversially, as one of the founders of Neoplatonism, though he is most often characterized as an eclectic philosopher in the Middle Platonic tradition.<sup>83</sup> His mingling of the different schools of philosophy, along with his interaction with Jewish and Christian writers and texts makes him an excellent example of the intermingling of thought in the second century. Not only does Numenius cite or make reference to multiple interpreters within the Platonic and Pythagorean tradition, at times he also cites the Jewish Scriptures.<sup>84</sup>

Although Alcinous speaks of three first principles, Matter, Forms, and God, Numenius postulates three divinities which are in some way derivative of the First God. In Fragment 11 Numenius describes the First God as simple and says “the Second God and Third are one; but

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<sup>82</sup> *Didaskalos* 12.21 (trans. 20-21).

<sup>83</sup> Mark Edwards notes “Pythagorean is the most common epithet for Numenius” and that it is perhaps a term he would have preferred for himself (Mark Edwards, “Numenius of Apamea,” in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000], 115–116). Carabine refutes the suggestion that Numenius can be deemed a founder of Neoplatonism, still recognizing that he made a unique contribution during the transitional period before Plotinus and Neoplatonism in *The Unknown God*, pp. 101-102.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 116–17.

when this God associated with Matter which is dyad so that it might become one, this God was divided by Matter since it has a character of desiring (ἐπιθυμητικὸν) and is flowing.”<sup>85</sup> The First God is not the one who creates but, as Numenius says in Fragment 12, is the father of the Demiurge. Additionally, the Second and Third God are split through their interaction with Matter. As this God attempted to unify Matter, Matter in turn divided this God. This First God who is elsewhere described by Numenius as “the Good-in-itself (αὐτοαγαθόν)” and the Second and Third God is described in terms of imitation of this primary Good.<sup>86</sup> What Numenius makes clear is that there is a distinction between the Supreme God and the Demiurge. He “makes a distinction between the first God, who is simple and concentrated entirely on himself, and the God who is both second and third.”<sup>87</sup> This distinction creates a hierarchy within this triad of Gods and thus a division of roles.

The division of the Second and Third Gods through their interaction with matter is the origin of the world. Numenius writes “The Second and Third God, however, are in fact one; but in the process of coming into contact with Matter, which is the Dyad, He gives unity to it, but is Himself divided by it.”<sup>88</sup> The origin of the world, that is, the Third God, is as a result of an

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<sup>85</sup> ὁ θεὸς μέντοι ὁ δεύτερος καὶ τρίτος ἐστὶν εἷς. συμφερόμενος δὲ τῇ ὕλῃ δυάδι οὔση ἐνοῖ μὲν αὐτήν, σχίζεται δὲ ὑπ’ αὐτῆς, ἐπιθυμητικὸν ἦθος ἐχούσης καὶ ρεούσης. Translation my own. All Greek text taken from *Numenius Fragments*, (Paris: Société D’Édition Les Belles Lettres, 1973).

<sup>86</sup> “his imitator, the Good Creator; but there is one Being of the First, and another of the Second; whose imitation is the Beautiful World, which is beautified by the participation (in the Being) of the First.” 5.25.3 (Kenneth Guthrie, trans. *The Neoplatonic Writings of Numenius*, [Lawrence, Kansas: Selene Books, 1987], 26).

<sup>87</sup> Carabine, *The Unknown God*, 95.

<sup>88</sup> Trans. in Dillon 367.



unintentional interaction between the Second God and Matter. It is “the result of error and schism in the second noetic principle.”<sup>89</sup> We see here a difference between Numenius and Alcinous on the origin of the world. Namely, that for Alcinous the world originates in an act of ordering of disordered and chaotic matter and for Numenius it is due to a schism. Despite this schism, there is nothing that could be considered ‘tragic’ about the division. Although Valentinian cosmology agrees that there is some sort of division and derivation among the divine, they see this as an unintentional accident caused by Sophia’s fall.

Regarding the philosophical atmosphere and background, neither Irenaeus nor the Valentinians were radically original in their cosmological convictions. Certainly, neither can be wholesale categorized in one or the other school of thought. They each adapted the philosophical arguments of the day, and of the past, to further support their argument. It is this shared impulse to adapt philosophical arguments to their systems and logic that makes their conflict intriguing. Certain nonnegotiable convictions guided the things which they borrowed and adapted to support their own arguments. A central guiding principle in what they took and what they left was their doctrine of the Creator God. Without the same monotheistic impulse guiding their interaction with pagan philosophy the Valentinians were not inclined to reject cosmologies that separated the identity of the God who is over all from the Creator God. For Irenaeus, such a notion was unthinkable.

### **Antecedent Christian Use of “enclosing, not enclosed”**

The “enclosing, not enclosed” formula and affirmation of God as all powerful and uncontained undergirds both Irenaeus’s refutation of the Valentinians and his belief in a single Creator God who has not only made this world but sustains and saves it. The philosophical logic

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<sup>89</sup> Edwards, “Numenius of Apamea,” 123.

provided a foundation upon which Irenaeus could build his argument against the Valentinian system. For Irenaeus it was not only that the Valentinians rejected a singular, infinite God, it was also that they presumed that the creator was inferior to the Pleroma and Father, in essence enclosed by them. Once again, Irenaeus is critiquing the Valentinians for presuming that the creator was an inferior being and “the fruit of a defect”<sup>90</sup>

The early Christians inherited from Judaism a belief in a singular Creator God and brought this conviction with them to the philosophical conversations of their days. Irenaeus is by no means the first Christian writer to use the formulation “enclosing, not enclosed.” However, before turning to the Christian use of the formula it would be remiss to not consider Philo, whose specific formulation of “enclosing, not enclosed” is most akin to Irenaeus’s use. Philo’s use of this formula, as Schoedel describes, reveals his “impulse to go beyond the Greek tradition in emphasizing the divine transcendence.”<sup>91</sup> Philo’s use of περιέχω, the same term as most likely used by Irenaeus,<sup>92</sup> is the first appearance of this specific formulation and “has the basic function of establishing the supreme God over against lesser entities that are mistakenly confused with the supreme God.”<sup>93</sup> God is not enclosed, or contained, because God is not confined to a specific place. It is this sense of the supremacy of God over and above everything which is echoed in Irenaeus’s argument regarding the supremacy of a Creator God.

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<sup>90</sup> *AH* 2.1.1.

<sup>91</sup> Schoedel, “Enclosing, Not Enclosed,” 76.

<sup>92</sup> For the reasoning behind reading the Latin in *AH* 2.1.2 as a translation of the Greek περιέχω see Schoedel, “Enclosing, Not Enclosed: The Early Christian Doctrine of God,” 78n18.

<sup>93</sup> Briggman, *God and Christ in Irenaeus*, 77.

Turning to Irenaeus’s Christian predecessors, we can find a variation of the formula in the *Shepherd of Hermas* in a passage that Irenaeus quotes in book four. In *Mandate* 1.1 it is used in a statement of belief, that there is a singular creator God who created out of nothing and who “contains everything but alone is not contained.”<sup>94</sup> Carolyn Osiek notes that this is an early instance of “an idea drawn from Hellenistic philosophy that was soon to appear frequently among Christians, both Valentinian Gnostics and orthodox alike.”<sup>95</sup> As I discuss below, the Valentinian claim to understanding the pre-existent Aeon Profundity as uncontained (ἀχώρητον), though their system failed to support this claim, is a prime opportunity for Irenaeus to continue his refutation of their doctrine of creation and the identity of the creator God.<sup>96</sup>

Another brief mention of the concept of God as uncontained appears in Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho*. Toward the end of the work Justin focuses a chapter on explaining that the use of anthropomorphic language does not mean that God is seeing or knowing in the manner of humans. God is not located in a place and thus cannot walk, sleep, or get up in the manner of humans, and God’s hearing and seeing is in a manner unlike humans as well. Justin continues by saying “Nor is He moved who cannot be contained (ἀχώρητος) in any place, not even in the whole universe, for He existed even before the universe was created.”<sup>97</sup> This is an example of the

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<sup>94</sup> Shepherd Mandate 1.1 πάντα χωρῶν, μόνος δὲ ἀχώρητος ὢν.

<sup>95</sup> Carlyn Osiek, *Shepherd of Hermas*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 103–104.

<sup>96</sup> AH 1.1.1; Beyond just the Valentinians and Christians, William Schoedel notes that within the *Corpus Hermeticum* there is also a sense that “the cosmos or God encloses all things” (Schoedel, “Early Christian Literature and the Classical Intellectual Tradition,” 78).

<sup>97</sup> οὔτε κινούμενος, ὁ τόπῳ τε ἀχώρητος καὶ τῷ κόσμῳ ὅλῳ, ὅς γε ἦν καὶ πρὶν τὸν κόσμον γενέσθαι. Dialogue with Trypho 127 (trans. 346). Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Thomas B. Falls, *Saint Justin Martyr*, Fathers of the Church (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1965).

use of the concept of God as ἀχώρητος in an apologetic context. Justin uses it not as a simple statement of belief, as seen in the *Shepherd*, but as an argument against any suggestion that God can be understood otherwise.

Theophilus' *Ad Autol.* offers another example of an apologetic use of this formula. In his explanation about why God cannot be seen Theophilus says that “the pilot of the universe is God, even if he is not visible to merely human eyes because he is unconfined (ἀχώρητον).”<sup>98</sup> The created world, including humanity, is “enclosed by the hand of God.”<sup>99</sup> Later, in comparing God with the Greek pantheon and the failures of Zeus, Theophilus utilizes this concept as a presentation of what the characteristics of a genuinely Almighty God are:

But it is characteristic of the Most High and Almighty God, who is actually God, not only to be everywhere but to look upon everything and hear everything, and not to be confined in a place; otherwise, the place confining him would be greater than he is, for what contains is greater than what is contained. God is not contained (οὐ χωρεῖται) but is himself the locus of the universe.<sup>100</sup>

Theophilus appeals to the “enclosing, not enclosed” argument to refute the Greek gods and their multifarious generations. Zeus cannot be the Most High God because he is confined to a place. It is this same line of argumentation to which Irenaeus appeals when refuting the Valentinians. They claim to adhere to the principle that God is uncontained, but their system of derivative Aeons contained within a Pleroma that is also contained proves their own inconsistencies.

### **Irenaeus against the Valentinians**

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<sup>98</sup> *Ad. Autol.* 1.5 (trans. 7-8). Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Robert Grant, *Theophilus of Antioch*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970).

<sup>99</sup> *Ad. Autol.* 1.5, (trans. 7-8): οὕτως οὐδὲ ἄνθρωπος ἐμπεριεχόμενος μετὰ πάσης τῆς κτίσεως ὑπὸ χειρὸς θεοῦ.

<sup>100</sup> *Ad. Autol.* 2.3 (trans. 25).

In book two Irenaeus, after having exposed the system of the Valentinians and other false teachers in book one, opens his overthrowal of the Valentinians saying:

It is necessary, then, that we begin with the first and greatest principle, with the Creator God, who made heaven and earth and all things in them, whom these individuals blasphemously call the fruit of degeneracy. [It is necessary] further that we show that there is nothing either above him or after him, and that he was influenced by no one but, rather, made all things by his own counsel and free will, since he alone is God, and he alone is Lord, and he alone is Creator, and he alone is Father, and he alone contains all things, and he himself gives existence to all things. Really, how would it be possible for another Fullness or Beginning or Power or another God to be above him, since God, the Fullness of all things, necessarily contains them all without limit and is not contained by anyone?<sup>101</sup>

As discussed above the belief in a single Creator God is foundational to Irenaeus's refutation of the Valentinian system. In this paragraph he argues against an infinite regress of gods who are greater than the previous. Two options are put forth: either the God who creates everything is above all and deemed the Pleroma/Fullness or, as Irenaeus will continue in the following paragraphs, whatever is higher and above the Pleroma is the most supreme God instead.

Irenaeus continues to expound the inconsistencies within the heretical cosmological systems by pointing to their belief in some being greater than the one termed Pleroma or Father of all. Irenaeus's argument against them is a *reductio ad absurdum*. He writes that this being "will be contained, enclosed by something else, and surrounded from the outside by some other Authority that must, of necessity, be greater, since what contains something must be greater than that which is contained."<sup>102</sup> What they deem to be the fullness and the one over all is itself contained by something greater. To this Irenaeus asks, how can this one be called the Fullness?

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<sup>101</sup> AH 2.1.1-2.1.2 (trans. ACW 65:17).

<sup>102</sup> AH 2.1.2 (trans. ACW 65:17).

Osborn summarizes the logic of Irenaeus’s argument saying, “either one being contains and creates all according to his own will, or there is a limitless plurality of creators and gods who begin and end from each other on every side, are contained and therefore not God.”<sup>103</sup> It has previously been observed that this argument similar to the argument from Xenophanes quoted above that says God rules and is not ruled, that God must be the most powerful in order to be called God.<sup>104</sup> The idea that God is the most powerful of all and is uncontainable is a central aspect of Irenaeus’s understanding of God, rooted in the Scriptural witness of God’s omnipotent power.<sup>105</sup>

Irenaeus employs this argument for the superior power of God against the Valentinians to show that there is not a plurality of gods whose powers are vastly different. A Demiurge is not an inferior being. Rather, if the creator is the one who “made all things freely, and by His own power, and arranged and finished them, and His will is the substance of all things, then He is discovered to be the one only God who created all things, who alone is Omnipotent, and who is the only Father founding and forming all things.”<sup>106</sup> Since this God has made all that there is God thus “contains all things, but He Himself can be contained by no one.”<sup>107</sup> This appeal to the power of God as proof of God being the creator *and* the only God bears much similarity to

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<sup>103</sup> Eric Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 55–56.

<sup>104</sup> Τοῦτο γὰρ θεὸν καὶ θεοῦ δύναμιν εἶναι, κρατεῖν, ἀλλὰ μὴ κρατεῖσθαι, καὶ πάντων κράτιστον εἶναι. ὥστε κατὰ μὴ κρείττων, κατὰ τοσοῦτον οὐκ εἶναι θεόν. *On Xenophanes* 3.977a, Loeb pp. 482-83

<sup>105</sup> Briggman, *God and Christ in Irenaeus*, 74–75.

<sup>106</sup> *AH* 2.30.9 (ANF).

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

Xenophanes' argument quoted above. In addition, there are echoes of the same sentiment found in Alcinous who argues that the primal God "is Father through being the cause of all things" and it is this God's intellect that "imposes order on all of nature in this world."<sup>108</sup> For the Valentinians, or any other groups for that matter, to assert that there is a plurality of gods who have limited power or have come into existence by means of the defect, is to blaspheme and reject the one who is the maker and sustainer of the cosmos—that is, the Christian God.<sup>109</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Irenaeus returns to the theme of God as Creator throughout the entirety of *AH* as he addresses topics that would be more readily categorized as Christology, soteriology, or eschatology. He begins here not because it is a chronological starting point in his refutation of the Valentinians but because God's creation of the world is not an isolated event. Creation—God's creative act of making, forming, and ordering the world—is only the beginning of the divine economy. This same God who made all things through the Word sent the Word incarnate in the flesh. The incarnate Christ—a Christ intimately involved in the material reality—is the center point of creation and its salvation. In failing to attribute the creation of the world to the one God who is Creator, Maker, and Nourisher of the whole of creation the Valentinians have crafted an incompatible system from which the select few will be able to escape. Irenaeus, after exploring the distorted cosmological system of the Valentinians, says that he wrote it all "to bring forward their doctrines, with the hope that perchance some of them, exercising repentance

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<sup>108</sup> *Didaskalos* 10.3 (trans.18).

<sup>109</sup> *AH* 2.31.1.

and returning to the only Creator, and God the Former of the universe, may obtain salvation.”<sup>110</sup>

It is to the soteriological aspect of God as Creator that I shall turn in the next chapter.

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<sup>110</sup> *AH* 1.31.3.



### Chapter Three

Thus far I have demonstrated the centrality of Irenaeus's argument for a single Creator God in *AH* as well as the way in which his argument interacts with his Christian antecedents and philosophical milieu. The question then remains, what is the purpose of Irenaeus's emphatic insistence that there is only one God, and that this God is the Creator, Maker, and Nourisher of the entire world? Whatever Irenaeus's concern is, it goes beyond merely identifying and refuting an opponent. When speaking of the Christian *hypothesis* and the rule of truth, Irenaeus always begins with the affirmation that there is one God who created all things. This insistence is not simply because of the chronological primacy of protology. The beginning of the world is interpreted by Irenaeus from an economic perspective. God's act of creation is not only the beginning of the world, it is also the beginning of the divine economy of which Christ is a central agent.

In this chapter I begin by looking at how Irenaeus's thought develops through portions of *AH* with respect to the way he articulates the role of Christ in the creation of the world. In the earlier portions of *AH* Irenaeus typically speaks of God creating "through" the Word, but in book three he picks up on the motif of the Hands of God and develops it further through the rest of the work. After this I examine the relationship between God's creative activity and the divine economy. A natural part of this discussion is the recapitulative work of Christ, the center point of God's economy of salvation for the entire world. Finally, I look at how Irenaeus articulates the relationship between a single Creator God and the salvific incarnation of Christ.

#### Hands of Creation

The Valentinians, as part of the broader category of Gnostics, constructed cosmological narratives which were not based on the traditioned witness of the Christian faith or the

developing Christian canon of Scriptures. As Blowers notes, part of the Christian opposition to Gnostic systems in this period was founded upon a concern “that Gnostics had cheated the patient process of discerning the economy of creation and redemption from the diverse scriptural witnesses.”<sup>111</sup> Through their complex hypostatization of divine names and activities, as well as a relegation of the material world to a degenerate Demiurge, they refused to engage with the difficulties in the biblical texts and with the non-negotiables of the burgeoning Christian tradition, such as a fierce commitment to monotheism. What we find in Irenaeus is a sustained engagement with the difficulties presented to a theologian in the era before Nicaea of how to speak of the work of Christ, and the Spirit, without falling into the error of polytheism. One of the ways Irenaeus does this is through the motif of God’s Hands.

As Irenaeus’s thought develops across the time spent writing *AH*, he begins to appropriate this image of God’s two Hands in his discussion of the creative activity of God and the salvation of humanity. He most likely came across the specific use of the “Hands of God” in the Christian tradition in Theophilus’ *Ad Autol.*, in particular in 2.18-19 where Theophilus describes the creation of humanity by means of God’s hands.<sup>112</sup> For Irenaeus, the imagery of the two Hands of God is connected to their creative role. In using this imagery Irenaeus is pushing back against the Valentinian, and other Gnostic, hypostatization of names of God. His Valentinian opponents, as I noted above in their exegesis of the prologue of John, identify the Word as another one of the thirty Aeons. For them, creation is the task of a deficient and

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<sup>111</sup> Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy*, 84.

<sup>112</sup> The explicit use of language of the Hands of God to refer to the Word and/or Spirit does not appear until book three at the earliest. Briggman argues that this is because it was while writing book three that Irenaeus was introduced to the work of Theophilus and that it was through his reading of *Ad. Autol.* that Irenaeus was introduced to the motif. For more on this see Briggman, *Irenaeus of Lyons and the Theology of the Holy Spirit*, 107–19.

degenerate Demiurge. For Irenaeus, arguing that the Word and Wisdom are agents of creation is a direct assertion of their intimate connection with the Creator God. As Michel Barnes writes, “the key metaphor for conceptualizing the unity of Word and the Holy Spirit with the Father is ‘the hands of God’: this language describes the cosmological work of the Son and Spirit.”<sup>113</sup> The two Hands are not additional creators but instead, as agents of creation, are conceived of in unity with the one Creator God.

The creative activity of the Word is referenced early in *AH*, before he introduces the Hands motif. After listing out various false teachings he is refuting, in addition to the Valentinians, Irenaeus writes:

The Rule of the Truth that we hold is this: There is one God Almighty, who created all things through His Word ... He made all things by His Word and Spirit, disposing and governing them and giving all of them existence. This is the one who made the world, which indeed is made up of all things. This is the one who fashioned man. This is the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, above whom there is no other God, nor a Beginning, nor a Power, nor a Fulness. This is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, as we shall demonstrate.<sup>114</sup>

At this early point in Irenaeus’s thought, the Word (and Spirit) is the means by which the one God creates the entire world. In this early articulation of the role of the Word and Spirit in the creation of the world, Irenaeus is also sure to insist that there is still only *one* God and that this God is not subordinate to another power. William Lowe writes, “Arguing that the same Word who became incarnate in Christ was present as the Father’s instrument at creation and throughout the history of Israel, he assembles a panoply of events and citations which, he would have it,

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<sup>113</sup> Michel René Barnes, “Irenaeus’s Trinitarian Theology,” *Nova et Vetera* 7, no. 1 (2003): 73–74.

<sup>114</sup> *AH* 1.22.1 (trans. ACW 55:80-81).

foreshadow and predict in detail various aspects of the future career of the Word incarnate.”<sup>115</sup>

The instrumentality of the Word in creation a fundamental connection between salvation and God as Creator. The Valentinians name the Word as just another Aeon, unconnected to the forming of the material world, whereas Irenaeus insists for Christians that this is the same Creator.

Irenaeus is cautious in the language he uses to articulate the relationship between the Word and Wisdom, always on guard against slipping into polytheism. Denis Minns summarizes Irenaeus’s argument thus: “first, that God’s acts cannot be divided up in any way, secondly, that God does not stand in need of any kind of assistance from angels or lesser ‘gods’ in order to create the world and finally that whatever God wills to do he does himself, and all at once—that to say that God creates by his Word and his Wisdom is the same as to say that he creates by himself.”<sup>116</sup> There is only one God, and this one God is the Creator. Any reference Irenaeus makes to the creative act of God, whether it be through language of by the Word or through Wisdom, is a reference to the creative activity of the one God.

In book two, as part of his refutation of the infinite regress of Aeons in the Valentinian system, Irenaeus argues that there was no need for a mediator in God’s creation of the world. Irenaeus writes, “It is proper to God’s preeminence not to be in need of other instruments for creating things to be made. His own Word is sufficient for the formation of all things. Thus John, the Lord’s disciple, says of him: All things were made by him and without him was made

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<sup>115</sup> William P. Loewe, “Irenaeus’ Soteriology: Transposing the Question,” in *Religion and Culture: Essays in Honor of Bernard Lonergan, S.J.*, ed. Timothy Fallon and Philip Riley (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1987), 169.

<sup>116</sup> Denis Minns, *Irenaeus: An Introduction* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 63.

nothing.”<sup>117</sup> He basis his argument here on the prologue of John which, as I discussed above, was a location where Irenaeus and the Valentinians came to irreconcilable odds in their interpretations. Using the Christian *hypothesis*, this passage supports the role of the Word in creation as something more than a mediatorial agent.

Later in the same book Irenaeus again references the work of creation by means of Word and Wisdom. It is used here in a similar way to how it is brought up in the passage from book one quoted above—that is, in support of the creative work of one God. At the end of *AH* 2.30 Irenaeus is summarizing his argument against the Valentinians with a particular emphasis on the identity of the Creator and those things which he made. In this summary Irenaeus write, “he alone will be acknowledged as the God who made all things; he alone is omnipotent and alone the Father who, by the Word of his power, created and made all things, both the visible and the invisible, the intellectual and the sentient, the heavenly and the earthly. He ordered all things by his Wisdom.”<sup>118</sup> There is certainly only one Creator, but the Word and Wisdom are still included in the creative activity, even before Irenaeus begins to articulate their role in creation through the Hands motif.

By book three Irenaeus has been introduced to the image of the Hands of God, referring specifically to the Word as the Hand of God<sup>119</sup> and beings to integrate it into his argument regarding divine creative activity. Irenaeus brings the image of the Hands of God into conversations about creation as well as the recapitulative and salvific work of Christ. In 3.21.10 Irenaeus writes that Adam’s substance was taken from virgin soil “and was formed by God’s

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<sup>117</sup> *AH* 2.2.5 (trans. ACW 21).

<sup>118</sup> *AH* 2.30.9 (trans. ACW 65:100).

<sup>119</sup> *AH* 3.21.10

hand, that is, the Word of God.”<sup>120</sup> Although he does not explicitly name Word and Wisdom as hands, Irenaeus writes in book four “There is therefore one God, who by the Word and Wisdom created and arranged all things” as he turns his focus to the incarnation of the Word and the salvation of the created world.<sup>121</sup> I examine this passage and what it means for the connection between the doctrine of creation and recapitulation below.

At the beginning of book five Irenaeus returns to the creation of humanity by the hands of God. In the first chapter he insists that God’s creation of humanity by means of the Word and Wisdom went beyond the initial act. This one God is not only the Creator but is also the one who nourishes and sustains humanity. In this chapter Irenaeus refutes the Valentinian rejection of the incarnation and the salvation of the flesh. After lumping in the Ebionites with this same refutation Irenaeus writes, “For never at any time did Adam escape the hands of God ... And for this reason in the last times, not by the will of the flesh, nor by the will of man, but by the good pleasure of the Father, His hands formed a living man, in order that Adam might be created [again] after the image and likeness of God.”<sup>122</sup> The incarnation of the Word was a continuation of the creative activity of God. No matter what transpired in the garden, humanity could not escape the hands of God.

Later, in 5.15.3, Irenaeus draws a poignant connection between the creative work of the Hand of the Word and the literal hand of the Word incarnate. He references the healing of the man born blind from John 9 and writes:

As, therefore, we are by the Word formed in the womb, this very same Word formed the visual power in him who had been blind from his birth; showing openly who it is that

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<sup>120</sup> *AH* 3.21.10 (trans. ANF).

<sup>121</sup> *AH* 4.20.4 (trans. ANF).

<sup>122</sup> *AH* 5.1.3 (trans. ANF).

fashions us in secret, since the Word Himself had been made manifest to men: and declaring the original formation of Adam, and the manner in which he was created, and by what hand he was fashioned, indicating the whole from a part. For the Lord who formed the visual powers is He who made the whole man, carrying out the will of the Father.<sup>123</sup>

This is more than simply creative exegesis on the part of Irenaeus. This passage from John is crucial in the argument he has been making against the Valentinians regarding the degeneracy of the material world. Irenaeus looks to this passage and points out not only Jesus' healing of the blind man by means of the dirt but also looks back to the initial formation of humanity. Irenaeus continues:

And inasmuch as man, with respect to that formation which, was after Adam, having fallen into transgression, needed the laver of regeneration, [the Lord] said to him [upon whom He had conferred sight], after He had smeared his eyes with the clay, "Go to Siloam, and wash;" thus restoring to him both [his perfect] confirmation, and that regeneration which takes place by means of the laver. And for this reason when he was washed he came seeing, that he might both know Him who had fashioned him, and that man might learn [to know] Him who has conferred upon him life.<sup>124</sup>

The creative and re-creative work of the Word is more than a proof text for the identification of Christ with the Creator God. The motif of the Hand is used here "to support the salvation of the flesh which is guaranteed by the creative activity of the One God."<sup>125</sup> In the following paragraph Irenaeus turns to the Valentinians and says that this creative work of the Word to heal and bring salvation to the flesh causes them to "lose their case."<sup>126</sup> Christ's healing act is the activity of the same one who created humanity in the beginning. The same one who created humanity by the

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<sup>123</sup> AH 5.15.3 (trans. ANF).

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Briggman, *Irenaeus of Lyons and the Theology of the Holy Spirit*, 123.

<sup>126</sup> AH 5.15.4 (trans. ANF).

work of his hands in the beginning was also the one who went out in the garden looking and calling out for Adam when he hid in his disobedience. Irenaeus writes, “That means that in the last times the very same Word of God came to call man, reminding him of his doings, living in which he had been hidden from the Lord. For just as at that time God spoke to Adam at eventide, searching him out; so in the last times, by means of the same voice, searching out his posterity, He has visited them.”<sup>127</sup> The incarnation and the work of the Word in the world is a continuation of God’s creative and sustaining activity.

### **The Divine Economy and Recapitulation**

Another point at which the Valentinian doctrine of creation is at odds with Irenaeus is with respect to the intentionality of the created world. I made a brief reference to this at the beginning of this thesis, but it is important to return to it again here. The Aeons emanated from each other in male-female pairs, but in Sophia’s passion she emitted material substance and the Demiurge without her male counterpart. This passion acted outside of the patterns of the Aeons and ought never have happened. The Demiurge and the substance from which he formed the material world occurred outside of the will and intention of the primary Aeon Profundity. The created world is, as Steenberg describes it, “cast apart from the inner life of the Pleroma.”<sup>128</sup> At the center of the Valentinian cosmological myth regarding the creation of the material world is “its primary origin in ignorance and grief, fear and bewilderment.”<sup>129</sup> Steenberg notes that this is “at the heart of Irenaeus’ cardinal objection to Valentinian cosmologies (as well as others):

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<sup>127</sup> *AH* 5.15.4 (trans. ANF).

<sup>128</sup> Steenberg, *Irenaeus on Creation*, 23.

<sup>129</sup> *AH* 1.2.3 (trans. ACW 55:26).



ignorance or defect are among the motivating principles in the creation of the material cosmos.”<sup>130</sup> Irenaeus rejects this because one of his core convictions is that there is only one Creator God who “made all things by his own counsel and free will.”<sup>131</sup> There was nothing outside of God’s will which compelled God to create, no deviation from within a mythological Pleroma that brought the world into existence against the divine will. God created the world freely and without external compulsion.

The intentional creation of the world is the starting point of the divine economy. However, it ought not be relegated to nothing more than a temporal starting point. As Osborn observes, “Creation begins God’s economy of salvation. It has a beginning in time but is not confined to the past. God fulfils his continuous plan of salvation with the help of creation, not in spite of it.”<sup>132</sup> If creation is the starting point of God’s economy of salvation, it then becomes necessary to ask, what is this economy? What does it entail? How is it enacted in the world?

One aspect of the background of economy (*οικονομία*) is related to ordered management of the individual household all the way up through the management of a city and beyond. It implies a sense of order both in administration as well as in rhetoric.<sup>133</sup> In the rhetorical sense it ought to support the *hypothesis* of the discourse at hand. “Since the intention of a whole literary or rhetorical work resides in its hypothesis, then an economic arrangement presupposes the hypothesis—it takes the hypothesis as its starting-place.”<sup>134</sup> Within the literary structure of

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<sup>130</sup> Steenberg, *Irenaeus on Creation*, 24.

<sup>131</sup> *AH* 2.1.1 (trans. ACW 17).

<sup>132</sup> Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 54.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>134</sup> Briggman, *God and Christ in Irenaeus*, 24.

Irenaeus's refutation of the Valentinians an emphasis on God's economy is bound up in his arguments against their falsely-crafted *hypothesis*. In the Christian tradition, going all the way back to Paul, the term economy was appropriated to speak not only of God's ordering of the created world, but also God's plan of salvation. This use of οἰκονομία features most prominently in Ephesians and in the Pastoral Epistles. It is continued by Irenaeus who not only centers the divine economy in *AH* but also places the work of Christ at its centermost point. Blowers writes, "At the heart of this cosmic vision is Irenaeus' celebrated theological principle of *recapitulation* (ἀνακεφαλαίωσις), in which the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ effectively constitute the end—and therefore also the beginning and middle—of the *oikonomia*, the divine 'strategy' of creation and redemption."<sup>135</sup> There is only one God who created the world and that same God is the one who has instituted a plan to save it. That economy of salvation is revealed in its fullness in the incarnation and the recapitulative work of Christ.<sup>136</sup>

For Irenaeus, recapitulation is a summing up of the entire plan of the divine economy. As Blowers writes, "recapitulation means that, instead of being an emergency effort to rescue a

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<sup>135</sup> Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy*, 87.

<sup>136</sup> Thomas Holsinger-Friesen disputes the centrality that recapitulation has in the work of Irenaeus. He believes that it has been overemphasized in scholarship to the point of restraining Irenaeus's "freedom as a theologian" (20). He suggests that "insufficient warrant has been given for the leaps from a scattered collection of the term *recapitulation* to totalizing assertions that recapitulation means 'everything' Christ does, or that it brings into alignment all of the diverse themes in Irenaeus' description of salvation. Must recapitulation necessarily be found to underlie and motivate every one of Irenaeus' theological claims? At the least, where the term is not found in particular contexts, greater reticence toward generalization is preferable" (Thomas Holsinger-Friesen, *Irenaeus and Genesis: A Study of Competition in Early Christian Hermeneutics*, Journal of Theological Interpretation Supplements 1 [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009], 20–21). As I make clear in my examination Irenaeus's own words regarding the incarnation and recapitulative work of the incarnate Christ, my answer to Holsinger-Friesen's question is yes, recapitulation *does* underlie and motivate Irenaeus's theological claims.

fallen creation, the work of Christ (with the Spirit) summarizes the seamless and purposive action of the Creator in and for the world.”<sup>137</sup> At the center of the created world and the divine plan to bring salvation to it is Christ. Behr provides a brief survey of the rhetorical background of the term recapitulation. He notes that in Quintilian it is described as a rhetorical device which “serves to provide a summary of the whole case or a restatement of the argument in an epitome or résumé.”<sup>138</sup> Paul uses recapitulation to speak of the summing up of the law in the double love commandment.<sup>139</sup> In Irenaeus recapitulation continues to be a summary, though now it is more than a summary of the commands of Scripture and is expanded to mean a summing up of the entire divine economy of salvation. Osborn identifies four distinct things that recapitulation does, and it is the third and fourth area that are important for my argument. First, the whole history of salvation is brought together and second Christ is made sovereign over all. He continues, “Thirdly, all things are recreated, restored, renewed and set free. Lastly, all things achieve the purpose for which they were made; they are not merely repaired but are brought to perfection in Christ.”<sup>140</sup> The recapitulative work of Christ is a continuation of divine creative activity. All things were made by one Creator and it is that same Creator who becomes flesh in order to save it.

As mentioned above, there are many places across *AH* where Irenaeus speaks of the Word as an instrument of creation, eventually adopting the motif of the Hands of God. In *AH*

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<sup>137</sup> Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy*, 87.

<sup>138</sup> Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity*, 137.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 116.

4.20, Irenaeus initially uses this as an argument against the belief that God created the world by the mediation of angels. Regarding the creation of humanity Irenaeus writes, “It was not angels, therefore, who made us, nor who formed us, neither had angels power to make any image of God, nor anyone else, except the Word of the Lord, nor any Power remotely distant from the Father of all things. ... For with Him were always present the Word and Wisdom, the Son and the Spirit, by whom and in whom, freely and spontaneously, He made all things.”<sup>141</sup> He then turns once again to his oft-repeated argument that there is only one God who made the world and is “He who contains all things, and is Himself contained by no one.”<sup>142</sup> Irenaeus then offers a list of scriptural proofs to support his statement that the Word was an agent of creation. Regarding this portion of the chapter Behr writes “He concludes this section by returning to the contrast of transcendence and immanence: there is one God who has created and arranged all things by his Word and Wisdom; this is the Creator who has granted the world to the human race.”<sup>143</sup> All of this serves as a foundation for the next step in Irenaeus’s argument.

Through the incarnation of the Word who creates that salvation is brought to the creation. The Creator does not exist estranged from the creation and is not ashamed of it. The Creator made this world intentionally and has set forth a plan to bring it back into wholeness. At the center of that plan is the incarnation of the Word. Irenaeus writes,

He [God] is always known through Him by whose means He ordained all things. Now this is His Word, our Lord Jesus Christ, who in the last times was made a man among men, that He might join the end to the beginning, that is, man to God. Wherefore the prophets, receiving the prophetic gift from the same Word, announced His advent according to the flesh, by which the blending and communion of God and man took place

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<sup>141</sup> *AH* 4.20.1 (trans. ANF).

<sup>142</sup> *AH* 4.20.2 (trans. ANF).

<sup>143</sup> Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity*, 96.

according to the good pleasure of the Father, the Word of God foretelling from the beginning that God should be seen by men, and hold converse with them upon earth, should confer with them, and should be present with His own creation, saving it ...<sup>144</sup>

Through the incarnation the Creator is in the company of the creation. The Creator does not abandon creation but instead throughout all of history has been enacting a plan to bring created humanity back into communion with God. The one who made the world and went searching in the garden for Adam and Eve is not estranged from creation but is instead intimately present with it, taking on created flesh in order to bring all things back to God.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter I focused on the way in which Irenaeus articulates the role of the Word in the creation of the world. I did this first by examining the way his language developed throughout *AH* with respect to the instrumentality of the Word. His use of the motif of Hands provided him with the ability to speak of the Word and Wisdom as ones through whom the world was created as he continued to refute the Valentinian assertion that the Creator God was a different being than the Supreme God over all. For Irenaeus, there is only one God who created the world through his two Hands, Word and Wisdom. After this, I examined the place of God's creative activity in the divine economy. In this discussion I also looked at the recapitulative work of Christ and how Irenaeus connected the creative activity of God with the work salvation through Christ's incarnation. Everything, from the divine act of creation at the beginning of history to the promises found in the words of the prophets, was looking ahead toward that incarnation so that Christ could bring all of them together, bringing humanity back to God.

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<sup>144</sup> *AH* 4.20.4 (trans. ANF).

## Conclusion

In Irenaeus's conflict with the Valentinians, insisting that there is only one God who is the Creator of all things was of primary importance. The Valentinians not only argued for an abundance of divine beings, but also that the world was created by a defective, ignorant Demiurge. For Irenaeus, the Valentinians were a prime example of liars and distorters of the truth. They were, for him, a new iteration of the deceptive serpent in the garden.<sup>145</sup> This was not an instance of a heavy-handed Christian leader looking for an opponent to castigate. Irenaeus was deeply concerned that the teachings of the Valentinians were leading the faithful astray from the Christian faith. Their teachings lure people away from the one God who made all things, championing falsehood and abandoning truth.

In this thesis I explored several different facets of Irenaeus's argument against the Valentinians. In chapter one I explored the structure of *AH* with a focus on Irenaeus's consistent return to his insistence that there is only one Creator God. After this, I looked specifically at how the *hypotheses* of Irenaeus and the Valentinians come into conflict precisely because they disagree over the identity of the Creator. In chapter two I explored the philosophical background in which Irenaeus and the Valentinians both stood. This shared background is part of what makes their conflict intriguing. There are multiple philosophical trajectories in the second century and Irenaeus and the Valentinians adapt and appropriate from them differently. Finally, in chapter three I looked at role of the Word in the creation of the world and the importance of a single Creator God to Irenaeus's articulation of the divine economy. This entailed discussion of Irenaeus's language regarding the creative activity of the Word as well as the recapitulative work of Christ incarnate.

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<sup>145</sup> *AH* 4.pr.4.

Irenaeus's insistence on a single Creator God is more than mere refutation of opponents. The creative activity of God is always present in some way as he addresses the theological categories of Christology, soteriology, and eschatology. It is foundational to the Christian faith. The Valentinian error at the foundation leads to misreading of Scripture and a failure to recognize the divine economy of salvation because they are "thinking up another God besides the Creator, Maker, and Nourisher of this universe."<sup>146</sup> They have cut themselves off from the Christian faith. Irenaeus writes his refutation of their teachings so that "Perhaps, some of them can be saved if they do penance and convert to the one and only Creator and God, the Maker of the universe."<sup>147</sup> The Creator is not an ignorant Demiurge who does not even know from where he originates. The Creator God is the one who never allowed Adam to escape the hands of God and is the one who has been searching for humanity until the last days, just as in the beginning.

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<sup>146</sup> *AH* 1.10.3 (trans. ACW 55:50).

<sup>147</sup> *AH* 1.31.3 (trans. ACW 55:103).

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