

BEFORE CHRISTENDOM



Irenaeus of Lyons

EARLY TWO HUNDREDS

IRENAEUS OF LYONS

Irenaeus was one of the disciples of Polycarp in what is currently the nation of Turkey, and is one of the first of the important Christian writers and thinkers who was brought up as a Christian rather than converting as an adult. From Turkey, Irenaeus was made a priest and sent to the churches of Lyon in present-day southern France. While Irenaeus was in Lyon, the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius began persecuting Christians. Irenaeus, however, escaped persecution because of his ability to think and argue for the faith. Even while the priests and Christians in Lyon were being persecuted for their faith, they felt it necessary to send Irenaeus to Rome in order to argue against the Montanist heresy (a personality cult largely whose founders claimed to have special revelations from the Holy Spirit).

However soon, Irenaeus' talents were turned against the Gnostic cults, in particular the gnostic cults of Valentinus (a Gnostic who had a lighter "dualistic" sense, but a higher sense of a pantheon of gods, and a higher sense of a "special secret" passed along in gnostic communities). His work "Against Heresies" was his most important work, and up until the discovery of the Nag Hamadi gnostic library in 1945, Irenaeus' work against Gnosticism provided the clearest description of this early heresy. In addition to arguing against Gnosticism, Irenaeus argued for what is basically the New Testament canon today and for apostolic succession.

"Inasmuch as certain men have set the truth aside, and bring in lying words and vain genealogies, which, as the apostle says, "minister questions rather than godly edifying which is in faith," and by means of their craftily-constructed plausibilities draw away the minds of the inexperienced and take them captive, [I have felt constrained, my dear friend, to compose the following treatise in order to expose and counteract their machinations.] These men falsify the oracles of God, and prove themselves evil interpreters of the good word of revelation. They also overthrow the faith of many, by drawing them away, under a pretense of [superior] knowledge, from Him who rounded and adorned the universe; as if, forsooth, they had something more excellent and sublime to reveal, than that God who created the heaven and the earth, and all things that are therein. By means of specious and plausible words, they cunningly allure the simple-minded to inquire into their system; but they nevertheless clumsily

destroy them, while they initiate them into their blasphemous and impious opinions respecting the Demiurge; and these simple ones are unable, even in such a matter, to distinguish falsehood from truth.

THE GOSPEL OF PHILIP (HERETICAL)

The Gospel of Philip was one of the many gnostic texts discovered in 1945 at Nag Hamadi. The Gospel of Philip gives us a particular look into the brand of Gnosticism that was championed/created by a man named Valentinus. Valentinus believed in a large pantheon of gods called "Aeons" who were fifteen pairs of "couplings" i.e. "mind/truth, word/life, autonomy/bliss". Of these pairings, one part of the "wisdom/will" pairings, Sophia, sinned and caused the creation of the earth by YHWH who is called "the Demiurge" and is more of a demon than a god. Additionally, Valentinus believed in a strange collection of "Sacraments": 1. The Bridal Chamber (a place where secrets were disclosed), 2. Baptism, 3. Death. The Gospel of Philip gives a clear testimony to Valentinian Gnosticism at work.

"A horse sires a horse, a man begets man, a god brings forth a god. Compare the bridegroom and the bride. They have come from the [...]. No Jew [...] has existed. And [...] from the Jews. [...] Christians [...] these [...] are referred to as "The chosen people of [...]," and "The true man" and "Son of Man" and "the seed of the Son of Man". This true race is renowned in the world [...] that the sons of the bridal chamber dwell.

Whereas in this world the union is one of husband with wife - a case of strength complemented by weakness(?) - in the Aeon (eternal realm), the form of the union is different, although we refer to them by the same names. There are other names, however; they are superior to every other name that is named and are stronger than the strong. For where there is a show of strength, there those who excel in strength appear. These are not separate things, but both of them are this one single thing. This is the one which will not be able to rise above the heart of flesh."

TERTULLIAN

Tertullian's claim to fame is the word "Trinity". Before Tertullian, the concept of their being a Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at work in the Scriptures was certainly present, but Tertullian gave it a name and in so doing made it an important part of what it meant to believe the message of Christianity. Born in North Africa, possibly the son of a Roman centurion, Tertullian was trained first as a lawyer, and then as a priest later in life after he converted in his late 30's or early 40's. While Tertullian's concept of the Trinity is helpful (i.e. he was the first to say that the Trinity is three persons with one substance), Tertullian had some problematic beliefs that he was working out. Tertullian had a hard line against what he saw as traitorous actions such as widows remarrying and Christians fleeing persecution. He said these as well as murders and fornicators should not be allowed back into the Church (he was willing to say that some may be saved, however, just not within the Church). Lastly, the end of Tertullian's life is marked with a question as to whether he defected Orthodox Christianity for the Montanist heresy.

"We define that there are two, the Father and the Son, and three with the Holy Spirit, and this number is made by the pattern of salvation . . . [which] brings about unity in trinity, interrelating the three, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. They are three, not in dignity, but in degree, not in substance but in form, not in power but in kind. They are of one substance and power, because there is one God from whom these degrees, forms and kinds devolve in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit."