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The Christian Other: Analyzing Valentinian Christianity Alongside Mainstream Orthodoxy

by

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Introduction

Since the time of Christ, people have been trying to make sense of the doctrines and teachings he left behind. Because of the variety of interpretations manifested in the few centuries since his death, new groups of Christians developed their own way of practicing these teachings. Eventually, the strand of Christianity known as proto-orthodoxy quashed the others for dominance over Christian doctrine. It has been said that history is written by the winners, but what about the ones who did not win? How did these alternative forms of Christianity influence proto-orthodox Christianity?

One of the major groups of Christians active in the second and third centuries was the Gnostics. Their influence even extended into the fourth and fifth centuries. Historically, this group has been very difficult to define because of the lack of records for their social activities and daily life. Even though the Gnostics did not pose a serious threat to mainstream proto-orthodoxy in terms of numbers, they maintained a sizable following among early Christians. A monumental discovery in Nag Hammadi in the 1940s granted scholars the ability to learn more about the Gnostics, who were overshadowed by the triumph of orthodox Christianity. Some of the works found at Nag Hammadi include *The Secret Book According to John*, *The Gospel of Judas*, *The Gospel of Thomas*, among others. The suppression of these works was due to its distortion by “traditional” forms of Christianity. Modern adherents to Christian doctrines find the teachings of these texts to be contrary to what is considered “orthodox” today, and, consequently, these texts have been all but dismissed.

Scholars have taken many different approaches to the study of the Nag Hammadi codices, and they have developed different ways of understanding the Gnostics based on their writings.

The popular theory for understanding early Christianity can be found in the “racehorse” model for varieties of Christianity¹. Arguments ensued over which group can claim exclusivity over Christian doctrine. The Christianity advocated by Irenaeus and other similar teachers won the day, and their teachings morphed into what is considered to be “orthodox” Christianity. The problem with this model, as David Brakke points out, is that it creates a tightly bound entity out of every group competing in the race. By placing “name brands” on groups of early Christians, characteristics and categories are formed that “determine [their] success or failure”².

In light of the discoveries at Nag Hammadi, scholars depict the scene of Christianity as an ever-changing milieu of diverse ideas, each group being informed by interactions with others. No one form of Christianity was dominant until much later, and even though proto-orthodox doctrine became dominant, it was not immune to change, as is evident from the many church councils throughout history. It is this diversity and interaction that will inform this paper. By looking at the works of both Gnostic leaders and proto-orthodox teachers, the common threads of philosophy and Christian doctrine can be observed. The separation of these two groups obscures the overlap of theology and practices they share. I seek to illuminate those connections so that we can gain a greater understanding about the dynamic interactions between competing Christian groups. In a particular way, I will focus on the writings of Valentinus and Irenaeus, both active in the second century A.D. Valentinus operated in the city of Rome, while Irenaeus led his Christian community as bishop of Lyons. Their two different forms of Christianity are but a few of many varieties of early Christian groups, and to study early Christianity is to view the totality of diversity in the ancient world.

¹ Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 7. See also Phillip Rousseau, *Pachomius: The Making of a Community in Fourth-Century Egypt, The Transformation of the Classical Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 19

² Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 9

The Influence of Middle Platonism

In order to understand the ways in which Valentinus and Irenaeus built their Christian teachings, it is important to recognize the pool of Platonic philosophy from which all early Christians obtained perceptions of reality. Platonic philosophy played a major role in the development of Christian ideas and acted as an important influence on both Valentinus and Irenaeus, as well as other Christian teachers. Underlying the theological doctrines and belief systems of early Christians was the fundamental principles laid out by Plato's *Timaeus*. In this text, Plato argued that the world was created by a divine architect, the demiurge, as an imperfect copy of the divine realm to which it belonged. Much like that divine realm, the demiurge adhered to the pattern of reality set forth in the original plan of the universe. The *Timaeus* established other principles in addition to the demiurge. The Ideas constitute the divine order, and it gave "beauty to the cosmos"³. Matter was the substance from which the world emerged. This presents a sort of duality in the universe, a divine realm and a material world. Plato argued for a connection between the two, and he looked to the creator of the world as the bridge. The demiurge, by observing the "eternal Ideas in the realm of Being"⁴, made the world as close to perfection as possible. In this way, Plato shows the ultimate goodness that the demiurge represented.

Later philosophers built upon the legacy of Plato and developed new ideas on ethics, physics, and logic. They constitute the period known as Middle Platonism. It was the ideas formed by these philosophers that influenced Christian understandings of the divine. One of the main concerns for the Middle Platonists was the idea of the *telos*, or the "end of goods"⁵. This

³ Karen King, *The Secret Revelation of John*, 191.

⁴ King, *The Secret Revelation of John*, 192.

⁵ John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists: A Study of Platonism 80 B.C. to A.D. 220*, 43.

idea can be defined as ultimate happiness, and philosophers did make attempts to incorporate that stance into their writings⁶. The issue of virtue leading to happiness created separation between the Stoics and Peripatetics. The latter group tended to lean toward the teachings of Plato's Academy and early Platonic thought. On this point of contention, Stoics believed that in order to achieve the *telos*, one must have three kinds of good: the goods of the body, external goods, and virtues. Although each kind of good presented itself in varying degrees, this position implied the necessity of all three. On the other hand, Peripatetics thought that the body and external good were inferior to the virtues, and therefore could not be necessary for the achievement of ultimate happiness.

A common term found in their writings is the entity called the Logos. It is a Greek word that means "word" or "reason", and it referred to the Divine Word that came into the world to bring salvation to believers. Philosophers tackled the conception of the Logos in different ways. Antiochus of Ascalon, writing in the early years of the Middle Platonic period, connected the Logos to the natural law of nature. He wrote that the universe functioned through the providence of God. The Logos was that providence manifested in the material world. Because humanity was created by God with Reason, a bond was formed between God and human beings. With the Logos at work in nature, "there is the necessary implication that the Logos is a moral force...in the minds of men"⁷.

The Platonist philosophers in Alexandria provided a classification of the universe in terms of principles, hearkening back to the ideas found in the *Timaeus*. Eudorus built upon the

⁶ Speusippus, Xenocrates, and Polemon are just a few of the philosophers who attempted to wrestle with the concept of happiness. See John Dillon's discussion of Alexandrian Platonism for how their ideas influenced philosophers like Eudorus.

⁷ Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 80.

ideas of Philo and thought about the Ideas as the “thoughts of God”, thereby making God “the Monad⁸, representing the form of the universe as it should be. Matter was the “Dyad”, the substance that was created and multiplied into the world. By working together, the Monad and Dyad “produces the world of Forms, or Ideas, which, as reason-principles or *logoi* (or, collectively, as the *Logos*), create the material universe”. Philo saw the Logos as the culmination of their “combined activity”⁹.

Who were the Gnostics?

Gnostic Christians also drew from the well of Platonist philosophy like Irenaeus and Valentinus, constructing a myth of origin that explained the journey of the Gnostic to connect to the Fullness of reality. Before going into a discussion of Valentinus and the myth he created, it would be beneficial to analyze their myth, which can be found in *The Secret Book According to John*, one of the many sources that Valentinus incorporated into his version of Christianity.

Gnostic Christianity became active during the second century A.D. It is very difficult to pinpoint the exact dates that the sect came to prominence. Scholars think that these Christians may have been around before the second century A.D.¹⁰ The teachings and writings of the Gnostics were heavily influenced by the philosophical currents of the time, with Plato’s *Timaeus* being the primary text from which the Gnostics gathered their ideas.

The Gnostics derive their name from the Greek word “gnostikos”, a word that, according to Bentley Layton, “must have sounded new and slightly odd to Greek speakers of the second

⁸ Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 128.

⁹ Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 128.

¹⁰ For more description on the approximate dates for the Gnostics, see Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), esp. 5 and 8.

century A.D.¹¹” Although the word “gnostikos” had many different meanings, the word “gnosis”, the Greek word for knowledge, was an easier concept to understand and one that was generally known throughout Greek-speaking Christian communities. For the Gnostics, the way to achieve salvation was through the acquisition of “gnosis”, the knowledge of God and the heavenly realms. Knowing God means that each individual person must recognize himself or herself as a part of the fullness that encompasses the material world and the realm beyond human understanding. This knowledge would be achieved through an initiation in the form of baptism¹².

The Gnostics distinguished themselves from other Christian groups through their use of obscure terms and reliance on mythical origins. The fact that they developed a myth of origin suggests that the Gnostics thought of themselves as separate from other Christian groups and that only Gnostics could be members. Consequently, social records or descriptions of the group’s activities are scarce. The Gnostic myth, therefore, established a divide between those who possessed the knowledge of God and those who were outside that distinction.

The Gnostic myth¹³ begins with the parent of the entirety, a divine source that is “immeasurable, because nothing else has measured it; invisible, because nothing else has seen it.¹⁴” This first principle, through the act of thinking about itself, produced a second principle called the Barbelo. It is also referred to as Forethought. At some point, the Barbelo “made a request of the invisible virgin spirit, that it be given prior acquaintance.¹⁵” Prior acquaintance

¹¹ Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 8.

¹² For a discussion on Gnostic baptism, see Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 19-20.

¹³ I used the translation of *The Secret Book According to John* written by Bentley Layton. References to specific lines from the text will use his abbreviations and language.

¹⁴ BJn 3:10-13.

¹⁵ BJn 5:10-13.

then becomes its own separate entity that belongs to the Barbelo and the invisible spirit (the parent of the entirety). Three more aeons (a Greek word meaning “realms” or “ages”, but here denotes the offspring of the divine intellect) develop through the interaction between the Barbelo and the parent of the entirety. They are called incorruptibility, eternal life, and truth. The parent of the entirety “gazed at” the Barbelo, and from that gaze the divine self-originate came into being. It was anointed by the invisible spirit and gained the perfection of the entirety. After making a request to the spirit for more partners in creation, the Word, intellect, and will were created. Then the parent and the Barbelo bestowed upon the Anointed self-originate power over the entirety and all the aeons that exist in it.

From the Anointed came four more aeons called Harmozel, Oroiael, Daueithai, and Eleleth. Each of these aeons, also called luminaries, consist of three additional aeons.¹⁶ The four luminaries also act as a dwelling place for four heavenly archetypes, each corresponding to figures from the Genesis story and their offspring. The first, Geradamas, was the heavenly version of Adam, the first man. Seth inhabited the second luminary Oroiael. The third luminary contained all the souls that belong to the offspring of Seth, the forefather of the Gnostics. The last luminary Eleleth held the souls of people who did not know the fullness of the entirety and did not choose to accept knowledge. However, there would come a time when they would accept the “gnosis”, the acquaintance, of the heavenly realms. This last luminary represents the people living in the present time, those who are seeking the acquaintance with God. The third luminary depicts those who already accepted that knowledge.

¹⁶ The names of these additional aeons can be found in BJn 8.

One of the twelve established aeons, Sophia, decided to think on her own, without the consent of the parent or her consort. Because of her individual thought, a new and imperfect being came forth. This new entity was called Ialdabaoth. It seized power from Sophia, and with that power it created a new realm, far away from the heavenly realm of the parent. This is the material world. Ialdabaoth proceeded to create entities called rulers to govern its new realm, and they totaled 365.¹⁷ At this point, the story of creation found in the Book of Genesis began. Therefore, Ialdabaoth corresponds to the God who created the world in Genesis. Although the ruler of the material world was an imperfect being, it modeled the material world after the heavenly realm, with the 365 rulers standing in the place of the aeons. Meanwhile, Sophia moved back into the entirety after her fall through an act of repentance.

Ialdabaoth and the rulers, through the action of the parent and the Barbelo, saw a representation of the first human being. They proceeded to create a human being that mirrored their own images and the image of the parent. This first human being was named Adam, “so that [they] might have his name as a luminous power.¹⁸” This account of creation reimagines the familiar story in the Book of Genesis.¹⁹ Ialdabaoth put the spirit which was stolen from its mother Sophia into the first human being, and through the acquisition of this power, human beings had knowledge of the divine. This was achieved through the deception of Sophia, for when Ialdabaoth put the spirit into Adam, it separated itself from the power of the divine realm. Adam was placed in the material world because Ialdabaoth and the other rulers became envious of the human being’s intelligence and light. Then, Eve was created from the power that resided

¹⁷ A rather long description of how the other rulers came into existence can be found in BJn 10:27-12:33.

¹⁸ BJn 15:12

¹⁹ Part IV of Layton’s translation denotes a transition into a dialogue between the author and the Savior. It is meant to signify the beginning of the creation story found in Genesis 1 and 2. See pages 38-47 of *Gnostic Scriptures*.

in Adam, and they lived in the garden. During that time, Ialdabaoth and the other rulers plotted to take back the power that was taken from them through Sophia's deception. One of the rulers took the form of a serpent, the same one that tempted Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit in Genesis. Ultimately, the rulers threw them out of the garden because they displayed their lack of acquaintance with God through disobedience.

During their time in exile, the Barbelo sent the rulers to take away the divine life from Eve so that only the carnal body remained. Cain and Abel were conceived through the union of Ialdabaoth with the carnal body of Eve.²⁰ From the union of Adam and Eve came Seth, the one who was modeled after acquaintance with the divine realm. Ialdabaoth placed a "deep sleep" on Adam and Eve so that they would lose the knowledge that had been given to them by the parent of the entirety. The Gnostic people claim direct descentance from Seth and therefore possess the "gnosis" of the divine realm in themselves.

The final act of the myth, in the eyes of the Gnostics, was still going on in their present time. In order to escape from the material world and the rulers who seek to lead people astray, a true Gnostic must accept the knowledge and acquaintance of God and return to the divine realm. There was a possibility for those who did not obtain the "gnosis" of God to find it; however, the soul which did not accept the knowledge became "reincarnate in another body²¹" and continued to live in the material world until full acceptance occurred. In the case of those who gained knowledge of the divine and deliberately turned away from it, *The Secret Book According to John* describes how these souls are taken to "the place where no act of repentance is performed" and that "they will be kept until the day when...the spirit will be tortured and punished with

²⁰ See BJn 24:8-32.

²¹ See BJn 26:7-28.

eternal punishment.²²” Jesus acted as the harbinger of the divine message of salvation through acquisition of the “gnosis” of God. This presents a cycle of reception and acceptance of the divine light for the Gnostic soul.

A final word on how Jesus is presented in *The Secret Book According to John*. Some versions of the final part of the myth show that there would be a future annihilation of all the rulers, and this gives meaning to the coming of the savior. Others portray the events of Genesis (the flood, the prophets, genealogies, etc.) as important moments in the creation of the material world and its ultimate inferiority to the divine realm. Regardless of how much variation is constructed, the basic pattern of salvation is similar. For the Gnostics, the goal of existence was to unite their souls with the parent of the entirety, the divine realm which they considered to be their true home. The way to achieve this goal is by gaining the secret “gnosis” of the entirety and accepting that knowledge in one’s own soul.

The Myth of Valentinus

The writings of Valentinus represent a version of Christianity that was overshadowed by the prevailing teachings of proto-orthodox theologians like Irenaeus. By observing the ways in which Valentinus adapted Christian doctrine and philosophy into his teachings, we can come to a better understanding of the nature of early Christianity. The original teachings of Valentinus and information about his life have been a topic of debate among early Christian scholars. What is known about him can be deduced from the writings of his followers and other Christian intellectuals²³ living in the same time period, including Irenaeus. Valentinus received his

²² BJn 27:27.

²³ A notable follower of Valentinus was Ptolemy, and not much is known about him in terms of when he lived. Irenaeus writes a version of the Gnostic myth that is attributed to Ptolemy, and a letter written to a Christian named Flora is attributed to him as well. See Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 277.

education in Alexandria and began his teaching career around A.D. 117. During his time in Alexandria, Valentinus probably came into contact with other forms of Christianity and philosophical schools of thought. Bentley Layton suggests that Valentinus developed his Christian ideas and teachings while he was working in Alexandria²⁴. After his time in Alexandria, Valentinus found his way to Rome, an important city in which religious diversity flourished. In Rome, he played a role in ecclesiastical activities. He became very popular among Roman Christians, and one group of Christians almost elected him as bishop of their community²⁵. Even though Valentinus received criticism from Christian groups who did not follow his version of Christian doctrines, he was not condemned by any authorities at the time. This was because there was no singular body of authority that exercised control over the affairs of all forms of Christianity. After A.D. 160, there are hardly any sources for Valentinus's later life and death.

The main aspects of Valentinus's version of the Gnostic myth can be found in the works of Irenaeus. In the first book of *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus outlines the myth as a way of showing how this form of Christian teaching did not adhere to what he considered to be the true teachings of Christ. The brevity of his remarks on Valentinus's myth has to do with his intentions to use his writings as a means to disenfranchise the multitude of teachers who claim to be disciples of Valentinus²⁶. Irenaeus describes the duality of the "ineffable" and "silence", from which the other aeons emanate. One of the aeons²⁷ rebelled against the rest of the Entirety, and from that disobedience, the material world came into being. The offspring of Wisdom, called the

²⁴See Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 217.

²⁵ See David Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 100.

²⁶ Brakke argues that Irenaeus's version of the Valentinian myth is brief because of his concerns about other Valentinians. See Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 100.

²⁷ Wisdom.

craftsman, ruled over the material world. Among the emanations of the Entirety was Jesus, but the aeons from which he emanated was debated.²⁸

Valentinus's myth shares some similarities with the Gnostic myth. Both begin with an ultimate being that is unknowable and transcends all understanding. A long line of aeons came forth from this being, and because of one aeon's decision to "revolt", the material world was created. While Valentinus seemed to draw from the original Gnostic myth found in *The Secret Book According to John*, there are some differences that are made apparent through Irenaeus's rendition. One of the striking differences is the movement of the holy spirit in the church. The original Gnostic myth did not highlight the role of the holy spirit in the fullness or how it worked within the material world. Another difference is how the first principle of the Gnostic myth is presented. Irenaeus describes Valentinus's version of the parent of the entirety as a "duality", as opposed to the "monad" found in *The Secret Book According to John*.²⁹ These differences show how Valentinus adapted the ideas put forth by the original Gnostic myth to create his own path to salvation.

As previously mentioned, there are debates among scholars on which texts can be attributed to Valentinus himself. The two texts that are considered to be more directly linked to him are *The Gospel of Truth* and *Summer Harvest*. Both of these texts deviate from the style of Gnostic literature, meaning that they do not have any overt references to an origin myth. *Summer Harvest* is a very short poem that survived along with the works of St. Hippolytus of

²⁸ Irenaeus describes the way Valentinus adapted the Gnostic myth in *Against Heresies*, 1.11.1.

²⁹ BIn 2:26.

Rome.³⁰ Through metaphysical images and philosophical undertones, *Summer Harvest* evokes the sense that everything that exists depends on the power of God:

“I see in spirit that all are hung
I know in spirit that all are borne
Flesh hanging from soul
Soul clinging to air
Air hanging from upper atmosphere
Crops rushing forth from the deep
A babe rushing forth from the womb.”³¹

The poem shares some images with the original Gnostic myth, including the “womb of the entirety” in the Secret Book According to John. The images in the poem are meant to recall the Valentinian myth in the mind of the reader. The poetic nature of the images suggests a reliance on the ultimate power of God and the benefits of obtaining knowledge of the divine, which is in stark contrast to the development of the Gnostic mythos found in other works.

The *Gospel of Truth* presents a different way of interpreting the Gnostic origin myth and the subsequent quest for knowledge. Written in the form of a sermon, it outlines the ignorance of the material and the revelation of the Word as the means of achieving salvation. Since there were very few texts from the Gnostic sect written in this style, perhaps the *Gospel of Truth* may provide a window into the daily life of a Gnostic congregation. The *Gospel of Truth* contains examples of parables and allegories that were meant to illustrate difficult concepts for uneducated members³². A text like the *Gospel of Truth* would have been read in a communal

³⁰ Layton describes the contents and background of St. Hippolytus’s text in an appendix to *Summer Harvest*. See Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 249.

³¹ Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 248.

³² See GTr 25:25-26:8, 31:28-32:35.

space by a well-respected teacher who was considered the leader of the congregation.³³ The first lines of the text state the themes of this sermon: that the “proclamation of the truth is a joy for those who have received grace from the father of truth” and that this truth is given through the saving work of “the savior”³⁴. The Savior descended from the entirety in order to bring the chosen out of ignorance.

In regards to the Gnostic myth of the *Secret Book According to John*, the *Gospel of Truth* displays minimal explicit references to the myth. Rather, Valentinus adapted parts of the myth into the sermon and gave an allegorical interpretation of the fall of Sophia (Wisdom). In this sense, the *Gospel of Truth* provides an example of how Valentinus “responded to Gnostic teachings by transforming them, rather than by rejecting them outright.”³⁵ The *Gospel of Truth* contains the creation of the material world and the ignorance that came from Sophia, here referred to as Error. This section is an allegorical reading of the creation of the rulers and Ialdabaoth’s role in the separation of the divine and the material. In order for the chosen people to gain the knowledge of God, they had to understand the circumstances that led to the formation of ignorance. In addition to the allegorical renditions of the Gnostic myth, the *Gospel of Truth* also employs adaptations of stories found in the canonical gospels. For example, the Savior engaged with “wise people” that tried to test him but were ultimately refuted by him.³⁶ The Savior also interacted with the “little ones” and taught them the truth about acquaintance with the divine.

³³ Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 250.

³⁴ GTr 16:31, 36.

³⁵ Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 100.

³⁶ For these examples and others, see GTr 19:17-33.

One of the striking images in the *Gospel of Truth* is the “book of the living.”³⁷ It shows Valentinus’s knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures and his ability to adapt it to his own devices. Einar Thomassen shows how this image was not a completely unfamiliar motif in ancient Christian literature.³⁸ The book is used as a symbol of the reunification of the ideal self, present in the entirety, and the material body of the human being. Each person’s “name” written in the book was there since the beginning, which implies that the book acts as a list of those who were chosen to attain the secret knowledge of God and that the chosen were preordained as recipients of this knowledge. The father “inscribed these things in advance, having prepared [the chosen] for assignment.”³⁹ Although it can be argued that the description of the book becomes ambiguous when thinking about the ideal self fusing with the material self⁴⁰, the *Gospel of Truth* points out a return to the divine through acquaintance with the father and the entirety.

The means of achieving this acquaintance came through the salvific actions of the Savior. Unlike in the Gnostic origin myth, the role of Jesus is much more pronounced in the *Gospel of Truth*. For Valentinus, Jesus represents the Savior, the aeon sent from the Entirety to liberate souls through acquaintance with the Entirety. Jesus “shed light upon those who were, because of forgetfulness, in darkness”⁴¹ through his death on the cross. The crucifixion of Christ becomes a central moment in the salvation of those chosen to gain knowledge. Jesus “became fruit of the father’s acquaintance”⁴², and those who recognized the importance of the crucifixion “discovered [Jesus] within them.”⁴³ The original Gnostic myth does not place emphasis on Jesus as the

³⁷ GTr 19:34-20:9.

³⁸ Einar Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the ‘Valentinians’*, 150.

³⁹ GTr 21:23-24.

⁴⁰ For a more detailed understanding of this view, see Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed*, 152.

⁴¹ GTr 18:17-18.

⁴² GTr 18:26.

⁴³ GTr 18:31.

Savior. In fact, *The Secret Book According to John* only mentions Jesus by name in the last line of the text, referring to Christ as the “Anointed⁴⁴”. *The Gospel of Truth* also refers to the advent of the Word, or the Logos. This Logos moves from the father into the rest of the entirety, bringing the “outward manifestation of [the father’s] will.”⁴⁵ Once the father’s will was realized in the individual’s soul, it gains the knowledge necessary for absorption into the entirety. This brings about a sense of “repose”, that is, the state of total connection with the divine, “the place of the blessed.”⁴⁶ The importance of the Logos emanating from the father deserves more detailed attention with regards to its place in the philosophical currents of the time.

Proto-orthodoxy

Irenaeus of Lyons was one of the most prominent theologians in early Christianity. He grew up in Asia Minor, and he came into contact with earlier teachers and apostles at a young age. He claimed to be taught by Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna. According to tradition, Polycarp himself was taught by St. John, one of Christ’s first apostles. Thus, Irenaeus constructed a line of succession that led directly to the original followers of Christ. Around 177 A.D., Irenaeus became the bishop of Lyons, which was located in Gaul. During these years in Gaul, he composed perhaps his most well-known treatise called *On the Detection and Refutation of Knowledge Falsely So Called*. It is more commonly referred to as “Against the Heresies”. This text, comprised of five books, laid out the theologian’s views of what he believed to be the true Christian doctrine handed down from the apostles of Christ and was written in response to the growing popularity of the Gnostic Christians. In a particular way, he targeted the teachings of Valentinus and his followers. Another text, discovered in 1904 in Armenia, that Irenaeus wrote

⁴⁴ BJn 32:6.

⁴⁵ GTr 24:1.

⁴⁶ GTr 42:37.

is called the *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*. Most likely written closer to the end of Irenaeus's life⁴⁷, it delivered the teachings found in "Against the Heresies" in a more concise manner. The brevity of the treatise shows that the text was meant to be read as a manual of theology as opposed to a tool to combat heretical teachings.

The first book of "Against the Heresies" outlines the teachings of Valentinus and his followers. Irenaeus attempted to establish his own version of Christianity through a rather detailed description of his opponents. In addition to laying out the framework for the Valentinian belief system, Irenaeus criticized the practices of these Christians and called out their moral corruption. For example, those that are deemed "perfect" in the Valentinian sense, according to Irenaeus, participated in immoral activities like pagan worship and eating meat used to worship idols⁴⁸. Because of the amount of detail found in his works, Irenaeus's exegesis became the source for what scholars understood to be Valentinian Christianity. Although he claimed that the Valentinians incorporated the scriptures into their teachings, "Against the Heresies" highlights the twisting of the parables found in the New Testament and how their interpretations of Christ's words fit into their own terms. Irenaeus went so far as to create a parody of an interpretation of Valentinus's system⁴⁹.

Irenaeus placed emphasis on the authority of his teachings as directly linked to the original teachings of Jesus's Apostles. By claiming apostolic succession from the line of St. John through Polycarp, Irenaeus argued that his teachings were shaped by the tradition of the Apostles, which in turn would directly link him to Christ's teachings. To that end, "Against the Heresies" criticized the supposed lineage of the Gnostic Christians. The heretical teachings of

⁴⁷ See Joseph P. Smith's introduction to the translation of *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, 6.

⁴⁸ *Against Heresies*, 1.6.2-4.

⁴⁹ *Against Heresies*, 1.11.4.

all Gnostics began with the figure of Simon Magus, discussed in the Acts of the Apostles. From him, all manner of corruption emanated⁵⁰. Valentinus himself claimed to be a disciple of a teacher named Theudas⁵¹, who was taught by St. Paul. Through this lineage, Valentinus himself claimed to be a part of an apostolic tradition that gave legitimacy to his teachings.⁵² Even though the Valentinians' claim to the authority of the Apostles seemed legitimate here, Irenaeus's response is that they recognized mythical figures, apostles, or learned teachers as the authors of their texts, thereby giving them authority. Because of Simon Magus, the teachings of the Gnostics became corrupted and all subsequent deviations from it were tainted.⁵³ For Irenaeus, this established the mythical nature of the Gnostics and their origins, which contrasted to the concrete teachings that can be traced back to Christ himself. It was precisely this discontinuity of lineage that made Irenaeus discount the Valentinians and other Gnostics.

Irenaeus criticizes the ways in which the Valentinians taught their followers, highlighting the role of secrecy in their "church". He says that the Valentinians were "truly destitute of divine understanding"⁵⁴ because of their expression of belief in multiple aspects (aeons) of the divine and the separation of Wisdom from the invisible spirit. In response to them, Irenaeus provides an exhaustive list of how to gain knowledge, including the "complete investigation of everything said in parables and its adaptation to the argument of truth"⁵⁵.

One of the central themes of Irenaeus's theology is the three "articles of faith". For Irenaeus, the concept of God took a trinitarian form. God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁵⁶ He

⁵⁰ Simon the Magician is mentioned in *Against Heresies*, 1.23.

⁵¹ Brakke notes that Clement of Alexandria makes this claim. See *The Gnostics*, 103.

⁵² Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 103.

⁵³ *Against Heresies*, 1.23.2

⁵⁴ *Against Heresies*, 1.10.3.

⁵⁵ For the rest of Irenaeus's reasoning on this subject, see *Against Heresies*, 1.10.3.

⁵⁶ Smith, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, 51.

interpreted the world as the creation of God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* shows how God the Father cannot be comprehended and that he is “not to be circumscribed in space”⁵⁷. Humanity can come to know the Father through the Son and the Holy Spirit. God the Son is the manifestation of the Word, the Creator’s Word that brought the world into being. The person of Christ draws humanity closer to the Father, since he is the image of the invisible Father⁵⁸. The Holy Spirit is Wisdom of the Father, the one who spoke through the prophets of the Old Testament and gave the likeness of God to man. Although the nature of humanity was corrupted by the actions of Adam and Eve, restoration with God became possible in the incarnation of the Son. The Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is revealed to humanity in the “reproduction” of the Image of God, which is the Son. Redemption for human beings goes through two paths, one “from God to humanity” and one “from humanity to God”⁵⁹. In both of these paths, the end result is humanity living according to the original design for creation: incorruptibility.

For Irenaeus, human beings are composed of the body, soul, and spirit. It is important to mention that the language of Irenaeus was not completely unique, since it has its origins in Platonist discourse. Valentinus also drew from this philosophical current and adapted them to his conception of the material and spiritual person. The body and the soul are parts of humanity that are exposed to the evil in the world. The spirit, however, cannot experience evil because “the spirit knows no evil”⁶⁰. In contrast to the spirit, the soul oscillates between the natures of the body and spirit, maneuvering through the corruption of the material world and the ability to

⁵⁷ Smith, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, 24.

⁵⁸ Smith, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, 26.

⁵⁹ *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, 50.

⁶⁰ *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, 26.

attain perfection. The soul can choose to be corrupted by the world or to reach salvation through God. All three parts of the person are necessary in order to achieve salvation, and they are all equally important in God's creation. With this is the ideas of recapitulation, communion, and incorruptibility. A term taken from the writings of St. Paul, this occurred in the incarnation. The advent of the Son brings about a restoration of the original plan for creation. As a result, humanity is brought to a deeper connection with the Father, a communion of the human race to God. This communion "implies friendly intercourse, a readmission in some degree to the privileged position held by Adam as the companion of God"⁶¹. Through the unity of human beings and God, the Father grants incorruptibility to his "adopted" children.

Common Threads

Despite the obvious differences in depictions of Christian doctrines and belief systems, there are common threads that run through the teachings of Irenaeus and Valentinus, evidence of their ability to engage with the religious and philosophical culture of their time. Prominent among the teachings of both Irenaeus and Valentinus is the redemptive message of the Savior. Valentinian Christians placed the Savior within the plethora of other emanations that came forth from the Invisible Spirit, the ultimate and unknowable First Principle. The Savior's mission was to bring the chosen people back to the knowledge of the divine realm and to escape the evil of the material world. It is through the Savior that those with the divine spark gain the "gnosis" of things beyond material reality⁶².

Irenaeus's position on the role of the Savior is similar in that salvation comes from accepting the Savior's call to return to the unknowable divine reality. However, the Savior

⁶¹ *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, 30.

⁶² GTr 38:1-41:2.

preached baptism as the way to restore one's relationship with God the Father. Baptism, according to Irenaeus, "comes through the three articles", referring to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and it gives "rebirth unto God the Father, through His Son, by the Holy Spirit"⁶³. This baptism was afforded to anyone who desired to unite him or herself to God, while Gnostic baptism, in a sense, bestowed secret knowledge to a select few, only those who possessed the spiritual components of the divine realm.

An important point should be mentioned about the spiritual being. For Irenaeus and Valentinus, the spiritual vastly ranked superior to the material. Only the spirit was given by God and is from God. The soul that does not have the spirit cannot achieve salvation. Gnostics described three categories of people in creation⁶⁴. There are those who were able to fully accept the divine spark within themselves and return to the Entirety. True Gnostics were the only ones who could gain "gnosis". People designated as material beings were incapable of achieving "gnosis". Sensual beings were those who do not have the knowledge of the divine but could be restored through having faith in God's manifestation in creation, which is the Logos. Although sensual beings were able to return to the Entirety, their inherently flawed nature made them inferior to the spiritual beings. Irenaeus also acknowledged "the spiritual man" as a person who was saved. His understanding of material, sensual, and spiritual beings follows closely with Gnostic beliefs in that the sensual being "needs good works as well as faith" in order to be saved⁶⁵. Unlike Gnostic teachers before him, Valentinus viewed the level of connection with the divine in terms of being "awake" and "ignorant"⁶⁶. Although the term "ignorant" implies a sort

⁶³ *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, 51.

⁶⁴ See BJn 25:7-27:27.

⁶⁵ *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, 28.

⁶⁶ GTr 29:1-30:19.

of passivity on the part of the individual, the person is still capable of choosing to accept knowledge of God. The “ignorant” person may not necessarily realize that the soul is still asleep and without knowledge. In this instance, Valentinus and Irenaeus share an inclusive attitude towards the restoration of humanity to the divine realm. Jews and Gentiles alike were able to be saved through faith in God the Son. All those who were “ignorant” could rise above the material world and truly “know” God.

Conclusion

Valentinus and Irenaeus both played major roles in the development of early Christian doctrines and practices. Even though Irenaeus’s ideas won the day, it should not discount the importance of other Christian groups in shaping the ideas that would eventually dominate the Christian world. The history of early Christianity was one of constant dialogue, a dynamic process of engagement with competing groups. The idea of a centralized, uniform Christian church in the centuries after Christ’s death was nonexistent. By engaging with the philosophical currents of the time and interacting with various theologies, we can see how competing groups effectively expressed their version of Christ’s teachings. Christianity included more than what the history books tell us. New scholarship and growing interest in the “lost” texts of Christianity is proof of that, displaying a new picture of religion in the ancient world where the winners and the losers are acknowledged.

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