

THE FATHERS ON THE FUTURE

A 2nd-Century Eschatology for the
21st-Century Church

Michael J. Svigel

Go Deeper Excursus 1

Who Was Irenaeus of Lyons and Why Does He Matter?

Irenaeus's Life

Irenaeus of Lyons was born about AD 130 and likely raised in Smyrna, western Asia Minor.¹ At the time, Polycarp, a disciple of the apostle John, was bishop of Smyrna. About the year 156, Irenaeus was in Rome, possibly sitting at the feet of the famous teacher in Rome, Justin Martyr.² After a great persecution in Lyons and Viennes, Gaul (modern day France), Irenaeus became bishop of Lyons in the year 177. Some have even argued that Irenaeus himself penned the famous *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyons to the Churches of Asia and Phrygia* recounting the persecution in Gaul and the testimonies of the martyrs.³

Shortly after that time he wrote his five books *Against Heresies*, then a shorter work that recounts the entire trinitarian creation-fall-redemption narrative, *Epideixis* or *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*. Later in his ministry, in the 190s, Irenaeus also intervened in a dispute between the bishop of Rome, Victor, and Christians from Asia over the proper time of the observance of Pascha (*Hist. eccl.* 5.23–24). Not surprisingly, in that letter Irenaeus noted that the Asian Christians felt bound to follow the ancient customs, indicating that even from earlier times a diversity of opinion and practice had been held in peace among the disciples of the apostles.

¹ Paul Parvis, “Who Was Irenaeus? An Introduction to the Man and His Work,” in *Irenaeus: Life, Scripture, Legacy*, ed. Sara Parvis and Paul Parvis (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 14–15. Cf. Mary Ann Donovan, *One Right Reading?: A Guide to Irenaeus* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1997), 8–9; Eric Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 2.

² James R. Payton, Jr., *Irenaeus on the Christian Faith: A Condensation of Against Heresies* (Cambridge, U.K.: James Clarke, 2012), 2. Steenberg writes, “While he never mentions having met him, it seems entirely unlikely that Irenaeus would not have known Justin personally during his time in Rome.... Justin’s influence is certainly apparent in Irenaeus’ writing” (Irenaeus M. C. Steenberg, “Tracing the Irenaeian Legacy,” in *Irenaeus: Life, Scripture, Legacy*, ed. Sara Parvis and Paul Parvis [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012], 202).

³ Cf. See Pierre Nautin, *Lettres et écrivains chrétiens des iie et iiiie siècles* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1961), 54–61.

Though Jerome referred to Irenaeus as a “martyr,” he most likely died of old age around the year 200.⁴

Irenaeus’s Reliance on “the Elders”

As mentioned above, as a child or adolescent, Irenaeus had been a “hearer” of the esteemed Polycarp of Smyrna (Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 5.20.5). Irenaeus was certainly in a unique historical position to have known and conversed with students of the original disciples of Jesus. Payton writes that Irenaeus “received what he acknowledged to be his primary instruction in the Christian faith from someone who was himself trained by an apostle” and he “insisted on the importance of remaining faithful to the Christian message as received from Jesus Christ and the apostles and passed on by succeeding generations of the Church through its leaders. With him, that message is at only one removed [sic] from the apostolic source.”⁵

Throughout his writings, Irenaeus leans on the insights of those teachers for his own theological reflection. Thus, for example, when discussing textual variants regarding the number of the Beast in Revelation 13, Irenaeus noted that not only did the most ancient manuscripts read “666,” but “those who saw John face to face confirm it” (*Haer.* 5.30.1), indicating that he had personal discourse with such second-generation followers of John. This would have occurred while Irenaeus was growing up in Smyrna.

The fourth-century church historian, Eusebius of Caesarea, evidently had access to letters and shorter works Irenaeus had written on various occasions, usually confronting those whose teachings had deviated from the apostolic doctrines. Only summaries of the content or brief excerpts of these letters are extant. The full letters are lost to us. However, Eusebius relays that in Irenaeus’s work, *On the Ogdoad*, Irenaeus “shows that he himself had been acquainted with the first successors of the apostles” (*Hist. eccl.* 5.20.1).⁶ This would have certainly included Polycarp, disciple of John, but also other second-generation leaders in the churches of Asia Minor and Rome, such as Papias of Hierapolis.

Eusebius then quotes generously from a letter from Irenaeus to an erstwhile friend, Florinus, who had wandered into false teaching. In that letter Irenaeus scolds Florinus, saying, “These doctrines, the presbyters who were before us, and who were companions of the apostles, did not deliver to thee” (*Hist. eccl.* 5.20.4). Then Irenaeus reflects on his own personal experience with Polycarp of Smyrna:

⁴ See John Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity*, Christian Theology in Context (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 14.

⁵ Payton, *Irenaeus*, 1.

⁶ Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* are from Eusebius of Caesarea, *The History of the Church: A New Translation*, trans. Jeremy M. Schott (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019).

I can describe the place where the blessed Polycarp sat as he dialogued, and his exits and entries, and the character of his life and the form of his body, and the dialogues he gave to the crowd, and the fact that he proclaimed that he lived with John, and the rest who had seen the Lord, and that he recalled their words, and what it was he had heard from them about the Lord, and about his powers, and about his teaching, and that Polycarp received [it] from eyewitnesses of the life of the Logos and proclaimed everything in accordance with the writings” (*Hist. eccl.* 5.20.6).

We have no reason to doubt the authenticity or accuracy of Eusebius’s transcription of this report of Irenaeus. Nor are we justified in challenging Irenaeus’s claim that he was an eyewitness of the famous Polycarp, who himself was an eyewitness not only of the apostle John but of others who had seen the Lord (καὶ τὴν μετὰ τῶν λοιπῶν τῶν ἑορακότων τὸν κύριον).

Steenberg characterizes the conservative spirit of Irenaeus in the following way:

Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp. This is a well-known, well-worn fact, yet one of essential significance in understanding Irenaeus’s whole theological and ecclesiastical framework.... He encounters the faith at the feet of his elder, who had encountered it at the feet of his, who had encountered it at the feet of Christ. This experience grounds Irenaeus’s lifelong insistence on theological creativity as a dangerous game, played primarily by heretics. Continuity is what demarcates true Christian expression.⁷

In light of this, it seems unlikely that he would have knowingly, consciously, and willfully promoted an eschatology in discord with that of his own teachers. His was an intentionally conservative approach to theology: receiving, articulating and defending, then passing forward the faith of the apostles and prophets. Novelty in theology was far from Irenaeus’s agenda. Minns writes, “Irenaeus himself would have greeted the expectation that he should produce something original with considerable indignation. Original thinking in theology was precisely the source of the problem he sought to address, not by being original himself, but by demonstrating what was the original, universal, unchanging and uncontaminated teaching handed down from the Apostles.”⁸

Did Irenaeus Botch Tradition?

At this point, it is necessary to respond to an objection often used to demonstrate the worthlessness of Irenaeus’s use of apostolic tradition. It is often pointed out that in *Haer.* 2.22.6, Irenaeus argues

⁷ Irenaeus, “Tracing the Irenaeian Legacy,” 201.

⁸ Denis Minns, *Irenaeus: An Introduction* (New York: T & T Clark, 2010), xi.

that Jesus was almost fifty when he was crucified, and thus ministered for almost twenty years after his baptism at the age of thirty. He does say, “Being thirty years old when He came to be baptized, and then possessing the full age of a Master, He came to Jerusalem” (2.22.4). Irenaeus taught that Jesus’s public ministry after baptism began at thirty. For him, this pivotal year transitions a person from young man to mature man. At the end of 2.22.4, Irenaeus says Jesus “passed through every age”: infancy, childhood, youth, and old man; that is, he had to have gone beyond thirty to represent every age of humanity. He appeals to this fact against heretics who say Jesus only ministered one year and died at age thirty, not having reached full maturity. Then, in 2.22.5 Irenaeus says, “How could He have taught, unless He had reached the age of a Master? For when He came to be baptized, He had not yet completed His thirtieth year, but was beginning to be about thirty years of age.”

However, according to the false teachers, Irenaeus says, Jesus had “preached only one year reckoning from His baptism. On completing His thirtieth year He suffered, being in fact still a young man, and who had by no means attained to advanced age.” In Irenaeus’s reckoning, thirty was still the last year of being a “young man,” but earlier he said he passed all ages, from young man to old man, which means Jesus had to have lived longer than thirty. If Jesus lived until thirty-three or so, this would fulfill Irenaeus’s scheme and also refute the heretics who said he suffered in the same year as he was baptized.

Earlier, in 5.22.3, Irenaeus asserted that the heretics “have not examined the Gospels to ascertain how often after His baptism the Lord went up, at the time of the passover, to Jerusalem, in accordance with what was the practice of the Jews from every land, and every year.” Irenaeus then describes three trips to Jerusalem for Passover: “First of all, after He had made the water wine at Cana of Galilee, He went up to the festival day of the Passover.” Then, “Afterwards He went up, the second time, to observe the festival day of the Passover in Jerusalem.” And finally, “And going up from Bethany to Jerusalem, He there ate the passover, and suffered on the day following. Now, that these three occasions of the passover are not included within one year, every person whatever must acknowledge.”

The problem should be obvious. Irenaeus says Jesus celebrated three consecutive Passovers after his baptism, making him about thirty-three at his crucifixion; and because thirty was the pivotal age from youth to “old man” (2.22.4), he thus had passed through every age and had, by turning thirty-one, attained the age of a Master. If Jesus had died at age thirty, as the false teachers alleged, he would still have been a “young man” and would not have passed into the age of “old man,” a view Irenaeus rejected because Jesus celebrated three Passovers after his baptism, making him thirty-three.

In light of this, the passage in 2.22.5, starting with “Now, that the first stage of life” poses some problems. The first problematic line says, “But from the fortieth and fiftieth year a man begins to decline towards old age, which our Lord possessed.” The Latin text reads “*A quadragésimo et quinquagesimo anno declinat jam in aetatem seniore, quam habens Dominus noster.*” I would rather translate this as “from the fortieth and fiftieth year one declines to an older age than our

Lord had.” That is, it does not say here that Jesus had the age of forty to fifty—the age of decline—but that he had “old age,” which, earlier, he said was anything over the age of thirty-one. Irenaeus also then appeals to oral tradition from the disciples of John for the veracity of this fact that Jesus possessed maturity as a Master, having reached the age beyond thirty.

It should be observed that the phrase “and he remained among them up to the time of Trajan,” refers to the Apostle John, not to Jesus. The text does not clearly allege that Jesus advanced past forty and began to decline (*declinat*)—if *quam* is rightly read as comparative.

So, it is really 2.22.6 that poses the greatest problem. Note, however, that the text does not say that particular material was received by tradition from John. The argument in section 6 is based on a milking of the interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees (John 8:56–57). That text says, “He did not them want much of being fifty years old,” suggesting Jesus was in his late forties. And he says, “He did not therefore preach only for one year, nor did He suffer in the twelfth month of the year. For the period included between the thirtieth and fiftieth year can never be regarded as one year.” This passage, then (2.22.6), contains an internal contradiction with 2.22.4, where Irenaeus clearly says Jesus observed three Passovers after his baptism, not ten or twenty.

Also, note that the author did not claim Johannine oral tradition for 2.22.6; that was only for the matter of Jesus reaching beyond 30 as a “senior” and Master. No, the argument for Jesus living almost to fifty in *Haer.* 2.22.6 depends on Irenaeus’s own reading of John 8:57 and Jesus’s interaction with the Pharisees, not upon oral tradition.⁹ Ironically, this would be an example not of the tragic results of relying on oral tradition, but the results of going beyond oral tradition. To be honest, I do not know what to make of this obvious contradiction. Both cannot be true—that Jesus observed only three annual Passovers between his baptism at thirty and his crucifixion and that he lived into his late forties. I wonder, then, whether all of section 6 (and maybe even portions of section 5) are an interpolation by the translator of the Latin text or a later scribe or student of Irenaeus. In any case, the author of *Haer.* 2.22.6—whether Irenaeus or another—does not claim that interpretation of John 8:56–57 comes from oral tradition.

Irenaeus’s Eschatology

What we know of Irenaeus’s eschatology comes firsthand from two works—*Against Heresies*, which survives almost entirely in a Latin translation with some Greek manuscripts, and *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, which has come down to us only in an Armenian manuscript.

Regarding the content of Irenaeus’s eschatology, Brian Daley writes, “Irenaeus sketches out a clear, distinctive picture of the eschatological future humanity can hope for.”¹⁰ This picture

⁹ Cf. Davin L. White, “Jesus at Fifty: Irenaeus on John 8:57 and the Age of Jesus,” *JTS NS* 71.1 (2020): 160–1.

¹⁰ Brian E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1991), 29–30.

contains some standard elements quite familiar to Christians today; but it also includes some unique and unexpected colors that may surprise us. Daley summarizes some points of Irenaeus's eschatological expectations this way: "The Antichrist will appear in Jerusalem, endowed with all the powers of the devil, and usurp the place of God, persecuting all the saints.... Then Christ will come again in glory as judge... and will cast the Antichrist and his followers into 'the lake of fire'.... Destructive as they will be for the wicked, the tribulations of the end will only refine and purify the just."¹¹ After this judgment, there will be "a first resurrection of the just and an earthly Kingdom.... That earthly Kingdom will last a thousand years," after which the resurrection of the wicked will follow.¹² Daley notes, "Irenaeus supports this interpretation by referring to many biblical passages that promise salvation to Israel in typical terms of peace, prosperity and material restoration.... The purpose of such a millennial kingdom, he suggests, is to allow the just time, in the familiar setting of a renewed earth, to become gradually accustomed 'to partake of the divine nature.'"¹³

Denis Minns also provides a good introduction to Irenaeus's eschatology:

Irenaeus belonged to a body of Christians, surprisingly large even at the end of the second century, who continued to believe in the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God in a quite literal sense: they believed that at the coming of Christ the earth would be renewed and the just would rise from the dead to dwell with him in his Kingdom for a thousand years.... Half a century later, partly in consequence of the growing influence of Platonism within Christian theology, the 'spiritual' interpretation of the coming of the Kingdom had triumphed, and the views on the Kingdom of Irenaeus and other like-minded theologians were derided as naïve or outlandish.¹⁴

Minns even suggests some reasons why Irenaeus's vision of an earthly kingdom had fallen out of favor in subsequent generations:

The fact that Irenaeus' views on the Kingdom were so soon overtaken with in the Great Church by the Platonizing, spiritualizing interpretation may have a good deal to do with the general neglect of his writings in the later tradition of the Church. Most medieval manuscripts of *Adversus Haereses* do not contain the final chapters of Book V, where Irenaeus' eschatology is most fully presented. The desire to protect Irenaeus' reputation for orthodoxy has not been confined to medieval copyists. In 1938, V. Cremers attempted to show that these pages were not the work of Irenaeus at all, but a later interpolation. Some scholars, though not embarrassed by the realism of Irenaeus' expectations of the Kingdom have yet been at pains to urge that 'there is not a single mention of the words "thousand

¹¹ Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church*, 30.

¹² Parvis, "Who Was Irenaeus?," 22.

¹³ Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church*, 31.

¹⁴ Minns, *Irenaeus*, 140–41.

years' reign”’, so that it cannot be said that there are any ‘misplaced chiliastic tendencies in the *Adversus Haereses*’.¹⁵ However, the Armenian version of Books IV and V of *Adversus Haereses*, first published in 1910, shows these claims to be unsupported. For from it we learn that even the one Latin manuscript that had been thought to preserve the whole of the text did, in fact, lack a small but crucial paragraph in the very heart of Irenaeus’ discussion of this subject. And in that paragraph Irenaeus speaks unequivocally of the thousand-year reign of the just.¹⁶

Irenaeus’s eschatological vision includes many details, which we will explore and fill out in due course. However, we will see that his eschatological perspective may be described as premillennial and futurist, as he believes in a seven-year tribulation period at the end of the age, climaxing in the return of Christ as king, the resurrection of a righteous as well as the remnant of mortal survivors of the Antichrist’s reign left to repopulate the earth, followed by a thousand-year intermediate kingdom, and concluded with the resurrection of the wicked and ushering in of the eternal renewed creation.

¹⁵ Minns cites “G. Wingren, *Man and the Incarnation*, pp.189–90, and other authors cited there” (Minns, *Irenaeus*, 143n46).

¹⁶ Minns, *Irenaeus*, 142–43.