

THE CHRISTOLOGY OF IRENAEUS

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I THE CHRISTOLOGICAL PROBLEM STATED

Christology is that sector of the theological discipline which deals with the Person of Jesus Christ, and more specifically, with the relation of the divine and the human as they coalesce in His Person. Ignatius, representative of the primitive church tradition had asserted one Christ, both human and divine, flesh and spirit.¹

There is one Physician who is possessed both of flesh and spirit; both made and not made; God existing in the flesh; both of Mary and of God....²

The Logos, who was from the supernatural order, had become human specifically in Jesus.

If Ignatius is content with the bald assertion of the New Testament and early church tradition, Justin Martyr starts "from the cosmological aspect of the problem."³

He is the Word of whom every race of men were partakers; and those who lived reasonably are Christians...they who lived before Christ and lived without reason, were wicked and hostile to Christ....⁴

The redemptive part of the problem is also real for him.⁵

For no one trusted in Socrates so as to die for this doctrine, but in Christ, who was partially known even by Socrates...not only philosophers and scholars believed, but also artisans and people entirely uneducated....⁶

Our problem, as we consider Irenaeus is whether he continued and developed the philosophical and cosmological Logos doctrine of Justin,

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1. J. N. D. Kelly. *Early Christian Doctrines*, (New York: Harper and Bros., 1960), p. 142.
2. "Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians," VII, 2. *The Anti-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. I, I. Roberts, and J. Donaldson, editors, (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, n.d.), p. 52.
3. J. F. Bethune-Baker. *An Introduction to the Early History of Christian Doctrine to the Time of The Council of Chalcedon*, (London: Methuen and Co., LTD, 1958), p. 125.
4. "The First Apology of Justin XLVI." *The Anti-Nicene Fathers*, I, p. 178.
5. Bethune-Baker, *op. cit.*, p. 125.
6. "The Second Apology of Justin X." *The Anti-Nicene Fathers*, I, p. 191.

or went behind him to Ignatius and the New Testament with statements consonant with the proclamation of the Gospel.

II CHRISTOLOGY AND SPECULATION

It is important to remember that Irenaeus' greatest work, *Against Heresies* was written to combat the speculative theories of the Gnostics. "The feud with Gnostic faith helps Irenaeus formulate his Christology."⁷ The rabid and intensive speculations of the Gnostics are quite famous. The question before us here is whether Irenaeus is speculative or philosophical, and if he is, what this means for his Christology. Roman Catholic theology with its Aristotelian and metaphysical base tries, of course, to locate in Irenaeus a speculation which shapes his Christology.

We find in Irenaeus the first attempt to grasp the relationship between the Father and the Son in a speculative manner: 'God has been declared through the Son, who is in the Father and the Father in himself.' (3, 6, 2)⁸

Yet Irenaeus' own words refute a purely philosophical attempt to expound the relation of the Son to the Father.

If anyone, therefore, says to us, 'How then was the Son produced by the Father?' we reply to him, that no man understands that production, or generation, or calling, or revelation, or by whatever name one may describe His generation, which is in fact altogether indescribable.⁹

When Irenaeus does become philosophical in describing the generation of the Word from the Father it is in reaction to the Gnostic speculations and not as an assertion of the Christo-centric character of his religious faith.¹⁰ Grant¹¹ and Lawson¹² attempt to emphasize the quantity of Irenaeus' echoes of Greek philosophizing. Grant's examples can only be applied to secondary matters in Irenaeus, however, such as art, metal-working, kingship, etc. Lawson fails to take into account that the greater part of his examples are from Irenaeus' anti-Gnostic sections. Irenaeus opposes Plato's pre-existence and trans-migration of souls.¹³ His emphasis upon the knowledge of God and Christ is not by means of speculative reason, but God's redeeming love in the cross of Jesus Christ.

It is better, as I have said, that one should have no knowledge what-

7. Samuel Laeuchli. *The Language of Faith*, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 175.
8. J. Quasten. *Patrology*, Vol. I, *The Beginnings of Patristic Literature*, p. 295, (Westminster, Md.: The Newman Press, 1950).
9. Irenaeus. "Against Heresies," II, 28, 6. *The Anti-Nicene Fathers*, I, p. 401. This work will from now on be referred to as AH, Book, Chapter, paragraph numbers, page.
10. AH, II, 13, 8, p. 375.
11. R. M. Grant. "Irenaeus and Hellenistic Cultures," *The Harvard Theological Review*, XLII, No. 1, Jan. 1949, pp. 41-51.
12. J. Lawson. *The Biblical Theology of Saint Irenaeus*, (London: The Epworth Press, 1948), pp. 132-133.
13. AH, II, 33, 2, p. 410.

ever of anyone reason why a single thing in creation has been made, but should believe in God and continue in His love, than that puffed up through knowledge of this kind, he should fall away from that love which is the life of man, and that he should search after no knowledge except [the knowledge of] Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was crucified for us, than that by subtle questions and hair-splitting expressions he should fall into impiety.¹⁴

Baillie is right then when he asserts that Irenaeus' attempt to find the divine in Jesus is not linked to a metaphysical basis but is an attempt to correlate the redemptive love of Jesus and the nature of God.¹⁵ Irenaeus' failure to refer to Justin Martyr more than once¹⁶ and then in a God-Jesus framework points to a non-philosophical bent in his writings. "His God is theocratic, merciful, a God who speaks, and not the nature-god of Gnostic experience or the rational principle of Justin."¹⁷ We must look elsewhere than in the speculations of Justin, the Gnostics, or Greek philosophy for the Christology of Irenaeus.

III CHRISTOLOGY AND SALVATION

The basic rule of truth to which Irenaeus held all believers was "that there is one God Almighty who made all things by His Word. . . ."¹⁸ The Two essential elements here are God, the Father, as Creator and His Word as God Himself as the instrument of creation. God, the Father, is the Supreme God; here Irenaeus and the Gnostics agree. They disagree over the fact of His Creatorship.

But there is only one God, the Creator—He who is above every Principality, and Power, and Dominion, and Virtue: He is the Father, He is God, He the Founder, He the Maker, He the Creator, who made those things by Himself, that is, through His Word and wisdom.¹⁹

The Father is joined here to the Word who is Creator with Him. The Word is Artificer of all²⁰ and is our Lord Jesus Christ.²¹ "The Word of God [is] the Founder, and Framer, and Maker of all things. . . ."²² There is no second God for Irenaeus as there is for Justin.²³ Rather the Word is God Himself.

And in what respect will the Word of God—yea, rather God Himself, since He is the Word—differ from the word of men, if He follows the same order and process of generation?²⁴

14. *Ibid.*, II, 26, 1, p. 397.

15. D. M. Baillie. *God Was in Christ*, (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1955), p. 70.

16. *AH*, IV, 6, 2, p. 468.

17. Laeuchli, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

18. *AH*, I, 22, 1, p. 347.

19. *Ibid.*, II, 30, 9, p. 406.

20. *Ibid.*, III, 11, 8, p. 428.

21. *Ibid.*, III, 8, 2, p. 421.

22. *Ibid.*, I, 15, 5, p. 340.

23. *Ibid.*, II, 30, 9, p. 406.

24. *Ibid.*, II, 13, 8, p. 375.

Irenaeus, as we have seen above, spends little time in abstract theologizing about the relationship between the Word and the Father. In fact, he has a preference for the term "Son" rather than "Word"²⁵ more so than just using them interchangeably.²⁶ This is not to say that he does not believe in the co-existence of the Word (Son) with the Father.²⁷ Rather, "the Logos is not the principle of reason within the Godhead, but the Word which became flesh."²⁸ This same Word pre-existed with the Father.

For thou, O man, art not an uncreated being, nor didst thou always co-exist with God, as did His own Word.²⁹

Justin emphasizes the distinction between the Logos and the Father, calling the former a second God. Irenaeus, following Ignatius, declares that the Word is the form in which God manifests Himself.³⁰

He therefore, the Son of God, our Lord, being the Word of the Father, and the Son of Man, since He had a generation as to His human nature from Mary—who was descended from mankind, and was himself a human being—was made the Son of Man.³¹

Irenaeus then teaches that the one, living God, who is supreme over all, has created all through His Word, that is, Himself. This Word is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, our Saviour. Hence Creation is not considered apart from Christology, or even apart from salvation.

But the second article is the Word of God, the Son of God, Christ Jesus our Lord, who was shown forth by the prophets according to the design of their prophecy and according to the manner in which the Father disposed; and through Him were made all things whatsoever. He also, *in the end of times*, for the recapitulation of all things, is become a man among men, visible and tangible, in order to abolish death and bring to light life, and bring about the communion of God and man.³²

The pre-existent Word who conversed with the prophets and Moses is the same who afterwards was made man for us³³ and even before the Incarnation saved men. It was

customary from the beginning with the Word of God to ascend and descend for the purpose of saving those who were in affliction.³⁴

The key to all that Irenaeus says about God as Father is the Word, Jesus Christ the Son and vice-versa. The two are mutually interacting.

25. G. Aulen. *Christus Victor*, (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1960), p. 21.

26. Bethune-Baker, *op. cit.*, p. 130

27. *AH*, II, 30, 9, p. 406.

28. Laeuchli, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

29. *AH*, II, 25, 3, p. 397.

30. Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

31. *AH*, III, 19, 2, p. 449.

32. Irenaeus. *Proof of The Apostolic Preaching*, 6, p. 51. Hereafter referred to as *Proof*.

33. *AH*, III, 11, 8, pp. 428-29.

34. *Ibid.*, IV, 12, 4, p. 476. Cp. III, 16, 4; III, 17, 6.

To these men, therefore, did the Lord bear witness, that in Himself they had both known and seen the Father (and the Father is truth) . . . the Son leading them to the Father, but the Father revealing them to the Son.³⁵

IV CHRISTOLOGY AND THE INCARNATION

For Irenaeus then the pivot of the knowledge of God is not a theoretical doctrine of the Holy Trinity, but a revelation of God the Father through His Word in Creation and salvation.

For in no other way could we have learned the things of God, unless, our Master, existing as the Word, had become man. For no other being had the power of revealing to us the things of the Father, except his own proper Word.³⁶

The one God, who is Creator of all through Jesus Christ, has such a great love for what He has made that He humbles Himself to be born of the virgin.³⁷ The very essence of God is for Him to descend to man.

While God is in Himself incomprehensible, unknowable, yet it is also his very nature to reveal Himself to His creatures, even to the point of Incarnation, because that is the natural activity of the Logos, and the Logos is of the essence of God.³⁸

The Incarnation is for Irenaeus the basis for the meeting place of God and man. It is the beginning of God's salvation for man. The key question is "For why [in that case] did He descend?"³⁹ The answer is clear and ringing.

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 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 be present with His own creation, saving it. . . .⁴⁰

Again here Irenaeus does not stop to speculate or theorize about the nature of his union of the divine and human. "He speaks of a *commixtio et communio dei et homines*, and he does not distinguish between the working of the two sides as they are distinguished in the doctrine of the two natures."⁴¹ He is concerned with the assertion of the tremendous fact of God's redemptive activity.

35. *Ibid.*, III, 13, 2, p. 437.

36. *Ibid.*, V, 1, 1, p. 526.

37. *Ibid.*, III, 4, 2, p. 417.

38. Baillie, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

39. *AH*, II, 14, 7, p. 378.

40. *Ibid.*, IV, 20, 4, p. 488.

41. W. Sanday, *Christologies Ancient and Modern*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1910), p. 24.

Irenaeus does however assert the unity and fleshliness of the Word of God in Jesus. They are one. At the baptism "Christ did not at that time descend upon Jesus, neither was Christ one and Jesus another. . . ." ⁴² Hence, he is no adoptionist, for Jesus Christ became an infant, a child, a youth, an old man, a dead man "that He might be Master of all. . . ." ⁴³

Nor is Irenaeus a Marcionite, for he emphatically asserts that the God of the Old Testament who created is the God of the New Testament who becomes incarnate.

Thus God and the Father are true, one and the same; He who was announced by the prophets, and handed down by the true Gospel whom we Christians worship and love with the whole heart, as the Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things therein. ⁴⁴

In opposition to the docetism of the Gnostics, he declares the reality of the incarnation of the Word of God, which is God Himself. "His motive here was frankly soteriological; only if the divine Word entered fully into human life could the redemption have been accomplished." ⁴⁵ Once more, Irenaeus is no philosopher when he asserts that God.

shall also judge those who describe Christ [as having become man] only in [human] opinion. . . . And how can these men really be part-takers of salvation if He whom they profess to believe, manifested Himself as a merely imaginary being? ⁴⁶

Irenaeus has been accused of modalism because of the following words: ". . . for the Father is the invisible of the Son, but the Son the visible of the Father" ⁴⁷ and of Nestorianism because of these words: "acknowledging the advent in the flesh of the Son of God, and [His] divinity (*deum*), and looking forward with constancy to His human nature (*hominum*). . . ." ⁴⁸ The kenotic theory is not without foregleams in Irenaeus. The Father excelled the incarnate Lord in respect to knowledge. ⁴⁹ God, the Word remained "quiescent, that He might be capable of being tempted, dishonoured, crucified, and of suffering death. . . ." ⁵⁰ Again we read

Well spake he who said that the immeasurable Father was Himself subjected to measure in the Son, for the Son is the measure of the Father, since He also comprehends Him. ⁵¹

Yet it is hardly fair to attribute to Irenaeus doctrines that were not issues in his day.

42. *AH*, III, 9, 2, p. 423.

43. *Ibid.*, II, 22, 4, p. 391.

44. *Ibid.*, III, 10, 5, p. 426. Cp. also III, 9, 2, p. 422.

45. Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

46. *AH*, IV, 33, 5. Cp. also I, 9, 2; III, 16, 2; III, 16, 8; III, 11, 3; III, 17, 4.

47. *Ibid.*, III, 16, 6, p. 443.

48. *Ibid.*, V, 14, 4, p. 542. Cp. also V, 14, 1 and V, 21, 3.

49. *Ibid.*, II, 28, 8, p. 402.

50. *Ibid.*, III, 19, 3, p. 449.

51. *Ibid.*, IV, 4, 2, p. 466. Cp. also IV, 20, 5.

The essence of Irenaeus' proclamation is that Jesus Christ is divine, God Himself.

But that He is Himself in His own right, beyond all men who ever lived, God and Lord, and King Eternal, and the Incarnate Word... may be seen by all who have attained to even a small portion of the truth.⁵²

But He is also human, God in the flesh. Irenaeus has influenced the church "with reference to the Person of Christ in itself, as the meeting-point of humanity and divinity."⁵³ If the first Adam was of dust, the second Adam had to be formed in the womb that the first Adam might be redeemed by the same kind of substance.⁵⁴ Man possesses flesh and blood and a rational soul, which must be quickened by the Spirit.⁵⁵ Irenaeus nowhere categorically states the presence of a rational human soul in Jesus Christ, but his emphasis upon the divine and human in Him argues that he implicitly did.

While it is not absolutely clear, whether he attributed a rational human soul to the Incarnate Lord (the question had not been raised in his day), the probability is that he did in so far as he thought about the matter at all.⁵⁶

Christ did "become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself."⁵⁷ "The incarnation is taken to imply a human soul as well as a body; Christ was no mere human-frame inhabited by a higher Divine presence."⁵⁸ Irenaeus' continued emphasis on the fact that the Son became what we are argues for the full humanity of the Incarnate Lord. "Or how shall man pass into God, unless God has [first] passed into man?"⁵⁹ Metaphysical philosophizing and theorizing are dispensed with and the thesis of God becoming man replaces it.⁶⁰

V CHRISTOLOGY AND THE WORK OF CHRIST

If Christ is for Irenaeus the Creator of the world who has come as God-in-the-flesh, for what purpose has he come? The self-communication of God in Jesus Christ is for the recapitulation of man.

There is therefore, as I have pointed out, one God the Father, and One Christ Jesus, who came by means of the whole dispensational arrangements [connected with Him], and gathered together all things in Himself... He took up man into Himself... being made man, thus summing up all things in Himself...⁶¹

52. *Ibid.*, III, 19, 2, p. 449. Cp. also I, 9, 2; III, 9, 1; III, 9, 3; III, 19, 2; IV, 6, 7.

53. Sanday, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

54. *AH*, III, 21, 10, p. 454.

55. *Ibid.*, V, 9, 1, pp. 534-35.

56. Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

57. *AH*, Preface, p. 576.

58. H. R. Mackintosh. *The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ*, (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1916), p. 147.

59. *AH*, III, 16, 6, pp. 442-443.

60. Laeuchli, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

61. *AH*, III, 16, 6, pp. 442-443. Cp. Eph. 1:10 and 3:6-19.

The previous Church fathers, Ignatius and Justin, had emphasized the Divine-Human of Jesus Christ with little emphasis upon His work in saving humanity. With Irenaeus there is a recognition of the universal work done by Christ for mankind. All men had fallen in the first Adam; in Christ as the Second Adam all men are gathered up into Divinity.

It is He who has summed up in Himself all nations dispersed from Adam downwards and all languages and generations of men, together with Adam himself.⁶²

The Person who does this is none other than God Himself. "God recapitulated in Himself the ancient formation of man, that He might kill sin."⁶³ Hence in Jesus Christ, the Word of God gives Himself to man and sums up man in Himself, bringing Him back to God.

The nature of the Incarnate God-in-Christ is pictured clearly by Irenaeus in the concept of the two hands of God. He pictures God as creating through His hands.

Now man is a mixed organization of soul and flesh, who was formed after the likeness of God, and moulded by His hands, that is by the Son and Spirit. . . .⁶⁴

Here God is pictured as dynamically creating through Christ the Word of God as His Hands along with the Spirit.

The Son, or Hand, of God is also active in redemption in addition to creation.

Knowing that this hand of God which formed us at the beginning, and which does form us in the womb, has in the last times sought us out who were lost, winning back His own, and taking up the lost sheep upon His shoulders, and with joy restoring it to the fold of life.⁶⁵

What is significant about the Son as the Hand of God is that the 'arm,' 'hand,' or 'finger' of God was a regular Old Testament metaphor. It was descriptive of some special and wonderful divine act or intervention, particularly in creation, in protection of God's People or the vindication of the right, in revelation, or in prophetic inspiration.⁶⁶

Irenaeus is not philosophical at this point. This is illustrated in how he handles Exodus 3:14, "The I am that I am passage." He converts this into the incarnation of God in Christ. The living God of the Old Testa-

62. *Ibid.*, III, 22, 3, p. 455. Cp. also V, 16, 3; III, 18, 1; V, 9, 2; III, 18, 7.

63. *Ibid.*, III, 18, 7, p. 448. Cp. also III, 10, 2.

64. *Ibid.*, IV, Preface, p. 463. Cp. also IV, 19, 2; IV, 20, 1.

65. *AH*, V, 15, 2, p. 543. Cp. also IV, 20, 1-12; V, 28, 4. *Proof*, 26, 66.

66. Lawson, *op. cit.*, p. 123. Old Testament references for God's activity as His Hand are: Isa. 48:1, Ps. 98:1, Isa. 51:9, Ezek. 3:14, 16, Ex. 32:11, Num. 11:23, Deut. 5:15, 6:21, 7:8, 19, 9:26, 11:2, 26:8, 34:12, 1 Kings 18:46, 2 Kings 3:15, Ps. 44:3, 71:18, 77:15, Isa. 40:10, 51:5, 52:10, 53:1, Ezek. 3:22, 8:1, 37:1.

ment is the God Who redeems His people in the New Testament.⁶⁷ Loofs tried to show that Irenaeus took his concept of God's hands from the philosophy of Theophilus of Antioch, but Loofs' claims were somewhat exaggerated⁶⁸ No direct evidence is available that Theophilus ever used the Hand of God for the Word of God, thus Irenaeus is no doubt referring to the biblical concept of God-in-Action.⁶⁹

Not only is this metaphor Hebraic in its core, but it also shows God as one who acts. The hand is a metaphor for the incarnate act. . . .⁷⁰

No natural, philosophical deity is implied.

In preaching "The Two Hands of God" he asserted that the Supreme God Himself both intimately indwells, and has incarnated Himself in, the world He had Himself created.⁷¹

VI CONCLUSION

Irenaeus goes in back of Justin, who is the originator of a long line of philosophical theologians with His Logos doctrine as eternal reason in God, to Ignatius with his crude and naked verbal thrusts about the God, Jesus Christ, who suffered for men. More than that, he reasserts the biblical preaching about Christ, the Word made flesh, Who was with God, and Who was God. Any speculating he does about the Person of Christ is secondary to his main thrust—the God of the Bible Who has acted in Jesus Christ. It is God Himself who has created through His Word, Jesus Christ. This same God gives Himself in the Incarnate Word to gather mankind back to Himself. The God of abstraction is secondary in Irenaeus; the living God of biblical revelation is primary.

67. *AH*, III, 6, 2, p. 419.

68. R. M. Grant. "Irenaeus" *Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1956) L. A. Loetscher, editor, p. 572. Cp. also his "Theophilus of Antioch to Antolycus," *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. XL, No. 3, July, 1947, pp. 227-256 and F. R. M. Hitchcock's "Loofs' Theory of Theophilus of Antioch as a Source of Irenaeus," *The Journal of Theological Studies*, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 149, Jan. 1937, pp. 130-139 and No. 151, July 1937, pp. 255-266.

69. Lawson, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

70. Laeuchli, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

71. Lawson, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

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