

**IRENAENUS' INTERPRETIVE METHOD:
SOLA SCRIPTURA, BIBLICAL THEOLOGY, AND TYPOLOGY**

In *Against Heresies*,¹ Irenaeus of Lyons presents a biblically rigorous defense of historic Christianity in the face of second-century Gnosticism. The purpose of this paper is to examine Irenaeus' interpretive method in *Against Heresies*, and to assert that contemporary Bible scholars, theologians, and pastors would do well to consider Irenaeus' theological hermeneutics and to imitate those interpretive methods that prove faithful to Scripture (cf. Heb. 13:7). This paper will posit three unreserved affirmations for Irenaeus' method of interpretation: 1) *against Gnosticism*, Irenaeus rejects theological accommodation that superimposes philosophical systems onto the biblical text; 2) *against Valentinus*, the Bishop of Lyons affirms *Sola Scriptura* with its doctrinal entailments—inspiration, inerrancy, sufficiency, and authority; and 3) *against Marcion*, Irenaeus defends the Bible's unity by proposing a robust biblical theology. Expanding this last point, the final analysis of the paper will assert that within Irenaeus' overall framework of biblical interpretation, his typological method should be adopted with some significant modifications and caveats.

¹ Irenaeus *Adversus haereses*, trans. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson under the title *Irenaeus Against Heresies*, in *The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*, Ante-Nicene Fathers [ANF], American ed., vol. 1 (United States: Christian Literature, 1885; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 309-567.

Against Gnosticism, Irenaeus’ Interpretive Method Rejects Theological Accomodation

In *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus spends the first two books understanding the Gnostics and refuting them at every turn.² His arguments are logical, but more importantly they are biblical. In contradistinction from Justin Martyr and Origen, who baptize philosophy with Christian truth and nomenclature, Irenaeus is a biblical apologist in the purest sense. The Gnostic Christians have misinterpreted the Bible, misconstrued the doctrines of the faith, and misled the Church by conjoining the pure Word of God with the perverted philosophies of Greek mythology. In *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus responds by highlighting the disparity between their false arguments and the plain reading of Scripture. He does this in three ways.

First, Irenaeus contends with the Gnostics because they derive their principles of doctrine from the irreligious philosophers of the day. Instead of appealing to the Bible they imitate Thales, Anaximander, Plato, and the Pythagoreans.³ The only difference is the nomenclature. Irenaeus writes, “These men (the heretics), adopting this fable as their own, have ranged their opinions round it, and if by a sort of natural process, changing only the names of the things referred to, and setting forth the very same beginning of the generation of all things, and their production.”⁴

² Cleveland Coxe summarizes these books, “The first of these contains a minute description of the tenets of the various heretical sects, with occasional brief remarks in illustration of their absurdity, and in confirmation of the truth to which they were opposed. In his second book, Irenaeus proceeds to a more complete demolition of those heresies which he has already explained, and argues at great length against them, on grounds principally of reason” in *The Anti-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 311. Irenaeus employs logic, but his polemics are biblically-informed and rich with illustrations and explanations from the Bible.

³ Irenaeus *Adversus haereses* 2.16.1-6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.16.1. In this statement, Irenaeus is referring to the account of an unrecognized “cosmic poet” by the name of Antiphanes, whose cosmogony started with Night and Silence which begot Chaos, then Love from Chaos and Night, and then finally Light.

Second, Irenaeus lists numerous ways in which the Gnostics strain the gnat and swallow the camel. They import meaning into letters, syllables, and numbers,⁵ while disregarding the composite testimony of the biblical writers. Likewise, they parse out meaning in parables that do not relate to the singular meaning of the Lord's instruction.

Third, Irenaeus charges the Gnostics with an atomistic reading of Scripture that fails to recognize authorial intent, biblical context, or the unified formation of Scripture. In this, Irenaeus distinguishes the use of biblical language and biblical truth. Concerning this vain imitation, he says, "by these words [the Gnostics] entrap the more simple, and entice them, imitating our phraseology."⁶ The Gnostics deceitfully appropriate the former to deny the latter. He says,

They gather their views from other sources than the Scriptures; and, to use a common proverb, they strive to weave ropes of sand, while they endeavor to adapt with an air of prophets, and the words of the apostles, in order that their scheme may not seem altogether without support.⁷

Continuing his rejection of the Gnostic system of interpretation, Irenaeus says, "the method which these men employ to deceive themselves, while they abuse the Scriptures by endeavoring to support their own system out of it."⁸ Rather than reading the Bible in context and searching for an inductive meaning in the text, these false teachers were conscripting words, ideas, and atomistic elements of the text to support their preconceived systems of thought.

⁵ Ibid., 1.14.1-6; 2.24.1-6.

⁶ Ibid., 3.15.1. He reiterates this point, "Such men are to outward appearance sheep; for they appear to be like us, by what they say in public, repeating the same words as we do; but inwardly they are wolves" (Irenaeus *Adversus haereses* 3.16.8).

⁷ Ibid., 1.8.1.

⁸ Ibid., 2.9.1.

Irenaeus continues, “collecting a set of expressions and names scattered here and there [in Scripture], they twist, them, as we have already said, from a natural to a non-natural sense.”⁹

The problem with this is that it superimposes on the Bible the ideas and theological constructs of the reader. The intention of the author and message of the Spirit is distorted and lost. Though centuries before postmodern, reader-oriented hermeneutics, this is essentially what Irenaeus is refuting. He is contending against any kind of allegory which says “this means that,” what you see in *this* passage actually means *that* person, *that* Aeon, *that* god, or *that* idea drawn from the system of the reader. Irenaeus’ conclusion articulates well how contextual readings undo this allegorical nonsense.

If he takes [the verses lifted out of context] and restores each of them to its proper position, he at once destroys the narrative in question. In like manner he also who retains unchangeable in his heart the rule of the truth which he received by means of baptism, will doubtless recognize the names, the expressions, and the parables taken from the Scriptures, but will by no means acknowledge the blasphemous use which these men make of them. For, though he will acknowledge the gems, he will certainly not receive the fox instead of the likeness of the king. But when he has restored every one of the expressions quoted to its proper position, and has fitted it to the body of the truth, he will lay bare, and prove to be without any foundation, the figment of these heretics.¹⁰

Against Valentinus, Irenaeus Upholds *Sola Scriptura*

Long before Paul Tillich, men like Valentinus were engaging in theological accommodation and “methods of correlation.”¹¹ David Dockery says of Valentinus, “His

⁹ Ibid., 2.9.4.

¹⁰ Ibid., 2.9.4.

¹¹ The “method of correlation” was coined by Paul Tillich and encourages a dialectic approach to the Scripture where philosophy asks the question and the Bible supplies the answer. It is a twentieth century version of what the heretics have always done, comingle biblical truth with worldly philosophies (cf. Colossians 2:8). See Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson, *Twentieth-Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 114-29.

hermeneutical approach was more sophisticated than Marcion, beginning with a simple literal interpretation of the biblical passages and moving to a more esoteric instruction on ethical and spiritual truth.”¹² In response, Irenaeus excoriates Valentinus, saying, “They gather their views from other sources than the Scriptures,” and then use their wicked schema to tie biblical phrases together to come up with another system of doctrine.¹³

Irenaeus, on the other hand, from first to last is explicitly biblical. He outlines his method as one completely derived from the Bible, and he rejects Gnosticism on the basis that they corrupt the perfect word of God. Concerning the veracity of God’s word, he declares:

Our Lord Jesus Christ is the truth, and no lie is in Him. As also David says, prophesying His birth from a virgin, and the resurrection from the dead, “Truth has sprung out of the earth.” The apostles likewise, being disciples of the truth, are above all falsehood; for a lie has no fellowship with the truth, just as darkness has none with light.¹⁴

Earlier Irenaeus affirms divine inspiration, biblical inerrancy, and the apostolic authority of the Scriptures, writing, “the Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God and His Spirit.”¹⁵ Congruently, Irenaeus holds to the unity and clarity of the Scriptures when he says, “the entire Scriptures, the prophets, and the Gospels, can be clearly, unambiguously, and harmoniously understood by all.”¹⁶ In short, though centuries before the

¹² Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now: Contemporary Hermeneutics in the Light of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1992), 60.

¹³ Irenaeus employs one of his most colorful quotations to illustrate what these false teachers are doing. He writes, “Their manner of acting is just as if one, when a beautiful image of a king has been constructed by some skilful artist out of precious jewels, should then take this likeness of a man all to pieces, should re-arrange the gems, and so fit them together as to make them into the form of a dog or of a fox, and even that but poorly executed” (Irenaeus *Adversus haereses* 1.8.1).

¹⁴ Irenaeus *Adversus haereses* 3.5.1.

¹⁵ Uniting inerrancy, inspiration, and authority together in one sentence, Irenaeus avows, “; but we, inasmuch as we are inferior to, and later in existence than the Word of God and His Spirit, are on that very account destitute of the knowledge of His mysteries” (Irenaeus *Adversus haereses* 2.28.2).

Reformation and the publication of systematic treatments of doctrine, this second century divine is firmly evangelical. He argues for Scripture's inspiration, inerrancy, authority, sufficiency, necessity, and clarity.

Though some have argued that Irenaeus' *regula fidei*, which appealed to apostolic tradition to defend Scripture, led to "a precedent for setting up church traditions as being of equal authority with Scripture,"¹⁷ it can be equally discerned from his writings that the ultimate authority is the Bible itself. Contending against the Gnostics, whose fallacious doctrines had no historical warrant, he appealed to the church because the church is the "pillar and buttress of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). In reading *Against Heresies*, it does not appear that Irenaeus himself is elevating tradition to the level of authoritative Scripture, but rather that he exhorts people to flee to the church because it is the church that possesses the life-giving Word of God.¹⁸

Against Marcion, Irenaeus Defends Canonical Unity and Embraces Biblical Theology

Canonical Unity

Irenaeus' evangelical doctrine of Scripture led him to read the Bible as a canonical unity and to construct a biblical theology that entailed strong intratextuality and extensive typology. Irenaeus' biblical theology sought to prove that the God of the Bible was one, that

¹⁶ Irenaeus *Adversus haereses* 2.27.2. He continues in 2.28.3, "all Scripture, which has been given to us God, shall be found by us perfectly consistent; and the parables shall harmonize with those passages which are perfectly plain; and those statements the meaning of which is clear, shall serve to explain the parables; and through the many diversified utterances [of Scripture] there shall be heard one harmonious melody in us, praising in hymns that God who created all things."

¹⁷ Michael Haykind, *Defence of the Truth* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press, 2004), 39; see also David Dockery's appraisal in *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now*, 71-73.

¹⁸ See Irenaeus *Adversus haereses* 3.1-5 for a detailed section of his appeal to the "rule of faith" and the historical importance of the church to arbitrate right doctrine. Irenaeus *Adversus haereses* 5.20.1-2 gives an interpretive key for Irenaeus' reasoning for appeals to the Church.

Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and there was no change in God.¹⁹ All of these biblical arguments were employed in his debate against the Marcion heresy.

Marcion “made an absolute distinction between the God of the Old Testament, who was perceived as harsh and rigorous, and the good God of the New Testament, who was completely love.”²⁰ In so doing, he bifurcated the OT from the NT, discarding the former and accepting only ten of Paul’s letters and portions of Luke’s gospel.²¹ *Against Heresies* confronted Marcion head on and sought to prove the unity of the OT and NT over against his “mutilation of the Scriptures.”²² “Book 4 is especially aimed at Marcion,”²³ where Irenaeus’ biblical theology takes aim at his heretical opponent.

The emphatic message of Irenaeus is that there is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” (Eph. 4:5).²⁴ He writes, “it is plain that the Father also is Himself the same who was proclaimed by the prophets, and that the Son, on His coming, did not spread the knowledge of another Father, but of the same who was preached from the beginning.”²⁵ All Scripture testifies to this reality, and all those who stand against this Spiritual revelation stand condemned. Thus Irenaeus proves to be a champion for the Scriptures and for reading the Bible according to its canonical unity.

¹⁹ Deuteronomy 6:4; Mark 12:29-30; Hebrews 13:8; James 1:17.

²⁰ David Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now*, 59.

²¹ Michael Haykin, *Defence of the Truth*, 37.

²² See Irenaeus vehement accusation against Marcion in Irenaeus *Adversus haereses* 1.27.4.

²³ Michael Haykin, *Defence of the Truth*, 37.

²⁴ See Irenaeus prolix argument for the unified message of the Bible in *Adversus haereses* 4.5-15.

²⁵ Irenaeus *Adversus haereses* 4.11.4.

Biblical Theology

Working against an atomistic reading of Scripture, Irenaeus appeals to the variegated testimony of the Old Testament that finds unity in Christ (cf. Eph. 1:10).²⁶ Drawing on these OT witnesses, Irenaeus vindicates the virgin conception of Jesus in a variety of ways. He points to Isaiah for giving the church a “sign” of its coming Lord,²⁷ Daniel for “foreseeing [Jesus] advent” in the stone cut without hands,²⁸ Moses for “giving a type” when he “cast his rod upon the earth, in order that it, by becoming flesh, might expose and swallow up all the opposition of the Egyptians,”²⁹ and Jeremiah for explaining in history how the Messiah could not be the biological son of Joseph, because Jesus earthly father was, in fact, the descendent of the disinherited Jechoniah.³⁰ In this logical exposition of the Old Testament text, Irenaeus calls attention to divinely-ordained symbolism, predictive prophecy, typology, and historical deduction based on the revealed will of God. In all of these modes of interpretation, Irenaeus presupposes the Old Testament as a divinely-intended foreshadow of things to come.

Naturally this leads to a very strong sense of recapitulation in his biblical theology. His typology commonly posits Jesus as the divine antitype who recapitulates OT people, events,

²⁶ Irenaeus *Adversus haereses* 4.33.10.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.21.6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.21.7.

²⁹ This type Moses explains was a part of “the pre-arranged plan of God; that the Egyptians themselves might testify that it is the finger of God which works salvation for the people, and not the son of Joseph [in the flesh]. For if He were the son of Joseph, how could he be greater than Solomon...Jonah...or David” (Irenaeus *Adversus haereses* 3.21.8).

³⁰ Irenaeus intratextual argument posits that while Joseph was cut off from the Davidic covenant because of his patriarchal lineage and connection with the accursed Jechoniah (Jer. 22:24-25, 28; 36:30-31), Jesus is not disqualified because he is not his biological heir. He was virgin born. In the flesh, he was the son of Mary, who did not descend from Jechoniah (cf. Matt. 1:1-17, the genealogy of Joseph; Luke 3:23-38, the genealogy of Mary). This intratextual argument exemplifies Irenaeus’s commitment to the biblical text (Irenaeus *Adversus haereses* 3.21.9).

and institutions. Quoting from Romans 5, Irenaeus comments, “[just as] had his substance from untilled and as yet virgin soil...so did He who is the Word, *recapitulating* Adam in Himself, rightly receive a birth...from Mary, who was as yet a virgin.”³¹ Likewise, Irenaeus sees Jesus blood as recapitulating the “innocent” blood of Abel shed at the hands of his brother Cain,³² and Jesus entire lifework “sum[s] up all things, both waging war against our enemy, and crushing him who had at the beginning led us away captives in Adam.”³³ Summarizing the kind of revelation found in the OT, he writes:

For the prophets prefigured in themselves all these things, because of their love to God, and on account of His word. For since they themselves were members of Christ, each one of them in his place as a member did, in accordance with this, set forth the prophecy [assigned him]; all of them, although many, prefiguring only one, and proclaiming the things which pertain to one.³⁴

In a litany of OT citations, Irenaeus quotes nine OT authors,³⁵ grouping these oracles according to four intertextual themes—the glories of the Messiah, His sufferings, His resurrection, and the establishment of a new covenant (cf. Luke 24:26, 46-47). In arranging these predictive prophecies in this way, Irenaeus shows a tremendous grasp of the Hebrew Scriptures, but more than that he expounds a Christ-centered, Gospel-contoured (life, death, resurrection), textually-derived biblical theology. Graeme Goldsworthy summarizes Irenaeus’ interpretation:

³¹ Irenaeus *Adversus haereses* 3.21.10.

³² *Ibid.*, 5.14.1.

³³ Irenaeus’ recapitulation, though primarily accomplished by Jesus Christ, does extend to other aspects of redemptive history (*Irenaeus Adversus haereses* 5.21.1). In *Irenaeus Adversus haereses* 5.19.1, he compares Eve to Mary, and asserts how the latter obediently reenacts—he does not use “recapitulate”—the life of the first woman, whose “virginal disobedience” led to death, but now “has been balanced by virginal obedience.”

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.33.10.

³⁵ The full list includes Amos, Daniel, David, Ezekiel, Habakkuk, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Joel, and Zechariah; and includes some of the prominent typological and prophetic passages associated with these inspired writers (*Irenaeus Adversus haereses* 3.23.9-15).

In the early church we see attempts to understand the essential unity of the Bible from the epicentre of the person and work of Jesus Christ. These early Christological interpretations of the Old Testament were driven partly by the apologetic needs to counter Judaism...[and in the case of Irenaeus], to oppose Gnosticism by showing the unity of the Testaments.³⁶

Irenaeus' hermeneutic unashamedly unites all things in Jesus Christ. For him, "the Old Testament and the New Testament represented a unity. The prophets were fulfilled in Christ. The apostles, meaning the entire New Testament (the apostolic preaching), in turn preached the same God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and the same economy of salvation."³⁷ Over against the Gnostics whose selective Bible reading led them to posit a false God and a damning form of religion, Irenaeus' biblical theology led him to see in every person, event, and institution a divinely intended type or shadow of Jesus Christ.³⁸

Irenaeus understood typology to be a primary means by which YHWH instructed the people of Israel (OT) and the church (NT). Quoting 1 Corinthians 10:11, he comments, "For by means of types they learned to fear God, and to continue to devoted to His service."³⁹ Speaking of the saints in the Old Testament, he argues that all that they received in the law—circumcision and the Sabbath,⁴⁰ covenantal stipulations,⁴¹ and the sacrificial system⁴²—were given to represent later and greater Spiritual realities. He writes:

³⁶ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles for Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 236.

³⁷ David Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now*, 69.

³⁸ In his exhaustive work on the word *typos* in the New Testament, Richard Davidson says of the early church fathers, "Throughout the patristic literature the Scriptural 'types' are generally understood to consist of divinely-designed prefigurations of Christ or of the realities of the Gospel brought about by Christ" in *Typology in Scripture: A study of hermeneutical TYPOS structures* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1981), 19.

³⁹ Irenaeus *Adversus haereses* 3.14.2.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.16.1-2. Concerning circumcision and the Sabbath, Irenaeus posits, "These things, then, were given for a sign; but the signs were not unsymbolical, that is, neither unmeaning nor to no purpose, inasmuch as they were given by a wise Artist; but the circumcision after the flesh typified that after the Spirit" (Irenaeus *Adversus haereses* 3:16.1).

Moreover, [God] instructed the people...by repeated appeals to persevere and serve God, calling them to the things of primary importance by means of those which were secondary; that is, to thing that are real, by means of those that are *typical* [typological]; and by things temporal, to eternal; and by the carnal to the spiritual; and by the earthly to the heavenly; as was also said to Moses, “Thou shalt make all things after the pattern of those things which thou sawest in the mount.”⁴³

An Evaluation of Irenaeus’ Typology

In reading *Against Heresies*, it becomes apparent that typology is a primary means by which he explains the OT and NT. Appealing to recapitulation, citing specific types, and demonstrating from the text recurring biblical patterns, Irenaeus intentionally and consciously employs typology. Some examples of his typology have already been cited, now in what remains, Irenaeus’ method will be examined in light of recent scholarship on the subject.⁴⁴

In his 1981 dissertation on typology and the hermeneutical use of *typos* in the New Testament, Richard Davidson provides four objective criteria for a biblically-warranted typology. He says that for typology to be legitimate, it must be: 1) grounded in history; 2) an interpretation of Scriptural passages; 3) specifically parallel and not simply a general correspondence; and 4) prospective.⁴⁵ Admittedly, it is anachronistic to judge Irenaeus by Davidson’s modern rubric; nonetheless, employing his diagnostics will help determine the abiding faithfulness, and therefore usefulness, of Irenaeus’ typological method.

⁴¹ Ibid., 3.16.3-5. Speaking of the instructive and eschatological nature of the Law, Irenaeus writes, “These things [i.e. the Law], therefore, which were given for bondage, and for a *sign* to them, He cancelled by the new covenant” (Irenaeus *Adversus haereses* 3.16.2).

⁴² Ibid., 3.17-18.

⁴³ Ibid., 3.14. 2.

⁴⁴ In recent decades, the topic of typology has only increased in intensity and scrutiny. The scope of this paper disallows citing or referring to this ever-expanding body of literature. Instead, it will utilize one the conclusions of one major work to analyze Irenaeus typology.

⁴⁵ Davidson, *Typology in Scripture*, 421-22.

Typology and History

First, Irenaeus roots his typology in history. From start to finish, Irenaeus is crafting his arguments along a redemptive-historical grid.⁴⁶ More specifically, in Book 3, he contends that the same God who revealed himself in the OT, fulfilled his promises in the NT.⁴⁷ The outworking of this promise-fulfillment is a biblical hermeneutic that is very sensitive to progressive revelation and the historicity of the text.

For instance, Irenaeus understands all history to be divinely foreshadowed in the first six days of creation.⁴⁸ Though this is a spurious interpretation of Genesis 1, it does illumine how he understood history. For Irenaeus, all history is God's history, and resultantly, history is a stage on which God is accomplishing his plan of salvation. As Frances Foulkes quips, "Typological interpretation...is the interpretation of history."⁴⁹ In *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus is clearly expounding a historical typology, where "God is sovereign over history," where "historical patterns...theologically *foreshadow* later recurrences of similar things," and where "the final historical fulfillments *eclipse* their prior counterparts."⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Though describing Irenaeus' other work, *The Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, Dockery writes affirming Irenaeus perception of Christian history, "It presented Christ and Christianity as the fulfillment of the Old Testament by means of a Christological-typological reading of the text. Salvation history was structured according to the various covenants of God with man" (Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now*, 68). This kind of redemptive-historical framework is seen at work in *Against Heresies*.

⁴⁷ Irenaeus *Adversus haereses* 3.6-10.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.28.3.

⁴⁹ Frances Foulkes, "The Acts of God: A Study of the Basis of Typology in the Old Testament" in *The Right Doctrine for the Wrong Texts?: Essays on the Use of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 342.

⁵⁰ Jonathan Lunde in the "Introduction" to *Three Views on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 19.

Typology and Textual Warrant

Second, Irenaeus derives his typological interpretations from Scripture; the majority of which have legitimate textual warrant, even if the interpretation is askance. Over against the Gnostics, who mangle the Bible for their own devious interpretations,⁵¹ Irenaeus labors to exegete the text in its canonical context. For instance, he makes repeated reference to his “proofs drawn from the Scriptures,”⁵² while at the same time, he argues that biblical interpretation must emerge for the harmonious testimony of Scripture.⁵³

Consequently, Irenaeus’ consistently *attempts* to make legitimate type-antitype correspondences emerge from the text. This is evident in his Adam-Christ typology;⁵⁴ in his assertion that Jonah is a sign of the Christ;⁵⁵ in his comparison between Eve and Mary, where the latter virgin obediently recapitulates the failure of the mother of all living;⁵⁶ in his typological interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar and the Antichrist;⁵⁷ and in his assertion that the scarlet cord in Rahab’s window is prefiguring the admittance of prostitutes into the kingdom of God.⁵⁸

From this list, it is evident that Irenaeus has varying levels of biblical support: Adam-Christ and Jonah-Christ are clearly recognized as legitimate typological structures (cf. Rom. 5:12ff; Matt. 12:41); Eve-Mary and Nebuchadnezzar-Antichrist are more speculative, but still

⁵¹ Irenaeus *Adversus haereses* 1.8.1; 2.9.4.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 5.14.4; cf. 3:19.2; 4.33.15.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 2.28.3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.23.1-2.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.20.1.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.19.1-2.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.29.1-2.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.20.12.

may find textual support in both testaments with differing degrees of correspondence.⁵⁹ This is considerably true for the latter, where Revelation 17-18 depicts the fall of the Antichrist in Babylonian terminology. Finally, though maligned as fanciful allegory, Irenaeus' scarlet cord typology is based on the antecedent theology of the Passover and a NT correspondent: "The publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of heaven before you" (Matt. 21:31).

For Irenaeus, the issue of textual warrant boils down to interpretive accuracy. His method is self-consciously biblical, contextual, and correspondent—that is seeking to find types and their antitypes from within the canon. The problem is that at times he fails to live up to his own standards, and at other points his biblical saturated mind may go to far in drawing speculative connections. This leads to a third point.

Typology and Specificity

Third, Irenaeus is sufficiently detailed in his typology, sometimes, in fact, too much so. Concerning such specificity, Davidson avers, "Typology is not merely a recognition of the 'recurring rhythm' or 'structural analogy' within God's revelation in history;" instead it "consists of divinely designed, predictive prefigurations of specific NT fulfillments."⁶⁰ From the preceding examples, it can be observed that Irenaeus NT antitypes carry various levels of specificity. In the case of the scarlet cord, there is a NT referent, but it is not certain that this is a legitimate correspondence. Explicit and repeated recognition by the New Testament authors of such a connection is lacking.

⁵⁹ Denying the woman who suffered from an issue of blood as a type of the Gnostic's "suffering aeon," Irenaeus did articulate a need for certifiable correspondence between type and antitype, when he said, "For a type and emblem is, no doubt, sometime diverse from the truth [signified] as to matter and substance; but it ought to the general form and features, to maintain a likeness [to what it typified], and in this way to shadow forth by means of things present those which are yet to come" (Irenaeus *Adversus haereses* 2.22.1).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 422.

As Richard Davidson highlights, this level of detail moves the biblical interpreter away from the larger macro-types of the Bible,⁶¹ to more speculative and uncertain forms of OT-NT correspondence. Davidson clarifies, “typology does not appear to consist of trivial and extraneous details...but is invariably directly related to Christological-soteriological realities.”⁶² When one reads of the red cord in the window, one cannot but help to think that *if* this is meant to be a type, it is of a kind that is far different than that of Adam to the Second Adam or the Passover Lamb to Christ crucified.

Still, in other passages, Irenaeus typology is not lacking detailed correspondence, it is supposing too much. In Book 5, Irenaeus does well to distinguish “spiritual” and “carnal” men,⁶³ but in supporting his case he appeals to the levitical system of clean and unclean animals. In his estimation these two kinds of beasts represent the extant duality among humanity. He writes, “For those animals which have the hoof all in one piece easily slip; but those which have it divided are more sure-footed.”⁶⁴ He then compares these “slipping” animals to the wayward and ignorant who are in danger of slipping. Surely, this kind of typology is too exacting and too speculative.

Likewise, in another instance he typifies the resurrection of Lazarus as adumbrating the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is appropriate as far as it goes. Jesus is “the Resurrection and the Life” (John 11:25). Yet, Irenaeus further posits that Lazarus grave clothes were

⁶¹ Graeme Goldsworthy lists 18 different macro-types in his book *Gospel Centered Hermeneutics*, 253-256. Some of these include creation-new creation; Adam-new humanity; covenant-new covenant; OT worship – eschatological worship; and David throne – kingdom of God.

⁶² Richard Davidson, *Typology in Scripture*, 422.

⁶³ See Matthew 13:24ff; 25:1-46; John 8:31ff; 1 Corinthians 2:10ff; 1 John 3:6-10.

⁶⁴ Irenaeus *Adversus haereses* 5.8.1-4.

“symbolical of that man who had been bound in sins.”⁶⁵ Such a fanciful interpretation borders on allegory. There is nothing in John 11 that warrants that reading, and in this case Irenaeus does not quote from another passage to support this claim.

In another instance, Irenaeus clearly moves into allegory when he compares the axe that fell into the Jordan to the word of God, the tree which caused the loss to the cross of Christ, and the two hands that held the axe handle to the two people of God—Israel and the Gentiles (cf. Eph. 2:11-22). Though he appeals to biblical texts to make his case he is unfortunately importing concepts and ideals that do not fit the historical narrative in 2 Kings. These aberrant interpretations lead to the conclusion, that while explicitly appealing to Scripture, Irenaeus theological method is not without interpretive error.

Typology and Predictive Prophecy

Fourth, Irenaeus interprets the Old Testament as a document filled with predictive prophesies. In Book 4, after a long series of OT citations, he summarizes, “it was not by means of vision alone which were seen, and words which were proclaimed, but also in actual works, that He was beheld by the prophets, in order that through them He might prefigure and show forth future events beforehand.”⁶⁶ Clearly, Irenaeus theological view of history and his belief in God’s perfect word assured him that all things written in the past were for the future. In another passage about the Tabernacle and the Exodus, he further demonstrates his eschatological reading of the Old Testament:

These things were done beforehand in a type, and from them was the tabernacle of God constructed; those persons justly receiving them, as I have shown while we were pointed out beforehand in them—[we] who should afterwards serve God by the things of others.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 5.13.1.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 4.20.12.

For the whole exodus of the people out of others. For the whole exodus of the people of Egypt, which took place under divine guidance, was a type and image of the exodus of the Church which should take place among the Gentiles.⁶⁷

A Man Worthy of Consideration and Imitation (Heb. 13:7)

After surveying Irenaeus *Against Heresies* it is evident that the Bishop of Lyons is committed to Scriptures and thus worthy of emulation in many ways. His vehement opposition to Gnostic heresies, his unwavering commitment to the Word of God as authoritative, inerrant, and sufficient, and his robust biblical theology are examples worthy of ponder and imitate. In his grasp of the Bible and in his bold proclamation thereof, Irenaeus incarnates Titus 1:9 admonition to elders, “holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it.”

Nevertheless, there are things that Irenaeus did in his exposition of Scripture that modern expositors should be cautious to repeat. First, Irenaeus’ habit of allegorizing details within narrative passages is not a legitimate hermeneutic procedure. Finding more than three allegorical meanings to the ax head in Elisha narrative, and comparing the three spies sent to Jericho to the Trinity⁶⁸ are spurious interpretations are best and potentially harmful.

Second, his pattern of making typology fit the most intricate detail of the event is problematic (i.e. Lazarus’ clothes, clean and unclean animals). Though Irenaeus was constrained from major error because of a strong apostolic doctrine, those who have weak doctrine and strong imaginations will be the next generation of Gnostics, or liberals, or postmoderns.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 4.30.4.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 4.20.12.

Patience, humility to admit we don't know everything,⁶⁹ and increasing textual evidence based on ongoing exegesis must be required for all typological interpretations.

Finally, there is wisdom in focusing on the main details of the Gospel and not on peripheral non-essentials. In a handful of instances, Irenaeus taught peculiar doctrines (i.e. Christ living to the age of 50; six days of creation correspondent to six millennia) by defining one passage of Scripture with another, that in all likelihood should not have been combined. The causes of this are manifold, but the principle lesson is that doctrinal formulation should be founded on the clearest and most abundant biblical evidence. Such Scriptural data must recognize the unfolding nature of progressive revelation and form its doctrines in accordance with the canonical shape of the Bible.

Today, the church stands on the shoulders of men like Irenaeus, and benefits from his stalwart commitment to the truth and the right interpretation of Scripture. Yet, there is one another aspect of his theological enterprise that should not go unnoticed. At the end of Books III and IV, Irenaeus prays for his opponents. He was not cold theologian, but a doctrinally-committed pastor whose theology shaped his prayer and his polemics. May we consider his life and imitate his biblical faith.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Something that Irenaeus demonstrated in his own position of ecclesial authority (see. *Adversus haereses* 2.28.3).

⁷⁰ For the Gnostics, Irenaeus prays, "We do indeed pray that these men may not remain in the pit which they themselves have dug, but separate themselves from a Mother of this nature, and depart from Bythus, and stand away from the void, and relinquish the shadow; and that they, being converted to the Church of God, may be lawfully begotten, and that Christ maybe formed in them, and that they may know the Framers and Maker of this universe, the only true God and Lord of all. We pray for these things on their behalf, loving them better than they seem to love themselves" (*Adversus haereses* 3.25.7).

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