

## “AND BEHOLD IT WAS VERY GOOD”: ST. IRENAEUS’ DOCTRINE OF CREATION

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“And God saw all that he had made, and behold, it was  
very good.”

Genesis 1:31

The doctrine of creation was one of the earliest contested doctrines of the church. Central to the debate was a question regarding the goodness of the material world, and even more significantly, the goodness of the God (or gods) who had made it. Was the world made from the dregs of creation by an evil demiurge, who himself was an outcast from the high heavens (as the Gnostics declared)? Or was the world made directly and lovingly by the Father of Jesus Christ? Much was at stake in this debate: the interpretation of Scripture, the nature of Jesus Christ, the nature of humanity, the destiny of the world, and the identity of the God of Genesis—all hung in the balance. And St. Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyon (c. 130-200AD) was right at the center of it. Irenaeus, more so than any other church father, was responsible for crafting a pro-material doctrine of creation that identified the Creator-God of Genesis as the Father of Jesus Christ.

Irenaeus’ star has risen and fallen throughout the centuries. His works were widely read and copied in the early centuries of the church. But the retreat of organized Gnosticism and the “Platonic turn” of later Christian theology tended to sideline him in the fourth century and beyond (for reasons we will soon discover). And for much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Irenaeus fared even worse; at the most uncharitable moments, he was often characterized as a muddled, primitive theologian whose only lasting (and lamentable) contribution was propping up the Roman papacy and suppressing minority dissent. But a renewed interest in the doctrine of creation has brought with it a renewed appreciation for Irenaeus.

Orthodox scholar and Bishop Matthew Steenberg, in the opening sentence of his favorable monograph on Irenaeus, observes, “Irenaeus

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of Lyon has earned the reputation of a theologian of creation.<sup>2</sup> British theologian Colin Gunton goes further, stating that Irenaeus' "defense of the goodness of the material creation is without equal in the history of theology."<sup>3</sup> Swedish theologian Gustaf Wingren is no less generous. When it comes to affirming a positive material anthropology, Wingren asserts that "it would be difficult to find anyone who surpasses Irenaeus either then or in the later period."<sup>4</sup> Such statements are, in my estimation, justly earned. Irenaeus' polemic against his Gnostic opponents pushed his theological system in a strongly pro-material direction. His cosmology is well developed and thoroughly integrated into his overall theological system. Arguably, his doctrine of creation serves as the theological foundation of his entire thought. Irenaeus is especially noteworthy in the early Christian tradition precisely because he, unlike many of the Christian fathers who followed after him, managed to avoid the deep suspicion of the material world so in vogue in the philosophical currents of the day. Contemporary theologians wishing to construct a world-affirming theology are hard pressed to do better than Irenaeus.

In this article my aim is to provide an executive summary of Irenaeus' larger pro-material doctrine of creation. His affirmation of the goodness of the material world can be seen in at least six ways:<sup>5</sup> 1) the demiurge (i.e., creator) is identified as the true Father, 2) God creates the world directly with His own two hands (i.e., the Son and the Spirit), 3) creation is accomplished *ex nihilo*, 4) the material world is given as a gift to humanity, 5) God will renew the present earth to its pristine condition in a literal millennial kingdom, and 6) God will create a perpetual new heavens and new earth in the eternal age.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Steenberg, *Irenaeus on Creation: The Cosmic Christ and the Saga of Redemption* (Leiden, 2008), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Colin Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historic and Systematic Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 62.

<sup>4</sup> Gustaf Wingren, *Man and Incarnation: A Study in the Biblical Theology of Irenaeus* (trans. Ross Mackenzie; 1947; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), xii.

<sup>5</sup> A seventh reason could be added, namely that Irenaeus views the Devil's fall as taking place in Genesis 3, due to envy of Adam and Eve's lordship over the earth. For Irenaeus, the material world is sufficiently good that the Devil desires to possess it for himself. For more on Irenaeus' view of the Devil, and its pro-material implications, see Gerald Hiestand, "The Bishop, Beelzebub, and the Blessings of Materiality: How Irenaeus' Doctrine of Creation Reshapes the Christian Narrative in a Pro-Material Direction," *The Bulletin of Ecclesial Theology*, 4.1 (June, 2017): 83-99, and Hiestand, "Passing Beyond the Angels: How Irenaeus' Account of the Devil Informs His Doctrine of Creation," (PhD diss., The University of Reading, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> For the Latin text of *Adversus haereses* (hereafter, *Haer.*), I have followed the relevant volumes in Rousseau, ed., *Sources Chrétiennes* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf). For the Greek text I have followed W. Wigan Harvey, Saint Irenaeus, *Bishop of Lyons: Five Books Against Heresies*, 2 vols. (Rochester, NY: St. Irenaeus Press, 2013). The English translations of *Adversus haereses* I have revised and updated as necessary from A. Roberts and W. H. Rambaut in *Ante Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, Repr. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1985). The English translation for *Epideixis* (hereafter, *Epid.*) used throughout is Armitage Robinson's 1920 translation from the Armenian.

## I. THE DEMIURGE AS THE TRUE FATHER

Most basic to Irenaeus' doctrinal system is his insistence that God is the Creator of the material world. "Now this world is encompassed by seven heavens,<sup>7</sup> in which dwell powers and angels and archangels, doing service to God, the Almighty who created all things."<sup>8</sup> And again, "The church, though dispersed throughout the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith: a belief in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are in them."<sup>9</sup> Of special note is the way in which Irenaeus underscores the import of God's identity as Creator by linking this doctrine to his famous "rule of truth." For Irenaeus, the "rule of truth" (or alternately "rule of faith") is the summation of the apostolic deposit—a body of truths that mark the boundaries for what constitutes true Christianity.<sup>10</sup> Each time Irenaeus explicitly mentions this foundational body of doctrinal content, he includes a clear and extended statement about God as Creator. Arguably, this aspect of the rule is its chief content. He writes, "The rule of truth which we hold, is, that there is one God Almighty, who made all things by his Word, and fashioned and formed, out of that which had no existence, all things which exist."<sup>11</sup>

Irenaeus is keen to press this point precisely because it lies at the heart of his debate with the Gnostics, who generally worked hard to put distance between God and the material world. For the Gnostics, the world was not

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<sup>7</sup> Irenaeus' conception of a "seven-heaven" cosmology is not unique to him. See for example *T. Levi*, 3 and the *Ascen Isa.* 10. Uniquely, however, Irenaeus connects the names of the seven heavens with the gifts of the Spirit (see *Epid.* 9). Seven-heaven cosmology was likewise present in late Jewish thought; see H. St. John Thackeray, *St Paul and Contemporary Jewish Thought* (London, 1900), 172–79. Irenaeus' cosmology is significantly less speculative than the Gnostic cosmologies he combated. Gnostic teachers (e.g. Saturninus and Basilides) typically maintained a series of descending heavens (even up to 365) with each emanation containing its own host of powers and angels. Irenaeus has little patience for such cosmologies: "nor are there a series of heavens...madly dreamt," *Haer.* 2.30.9. For an extended discussion on Irenaeus' 'seven-heaven' cosmology, see Ian MacKenzie, *Demonstration*, 91–100; Joseph Smith, *St. Irenaeus: Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*. Ancient Christian Writers 16 (New York: Paulist Press, 1952), 146–47, no. 57; and Wingren, *Man and Incarnation*, 8–10.

<sup>8</sup> *Epid.* 9.

<sup>9</sup> *Haer.* 1.10.1.

<sup>10</sup> In content the "rule" overlaps somewhat with the Apostles' Creed; it does not, however, come to us through Irenaeus in a fixed creedal form. Irenaeus links the rule to baptism in *Haer.* 1.9.4, which suggests that it had a catechetical function. For an analysis of Irenaeus' rule, see Alistair Stewart, "The Rule of Truth...Which He Received Through Baptism (*Haer.* 1.9.4): Catechesis, Ritual, and Exegesis in Irenaeus' Gual," in Paul Foster and Sara Parvis, eds., *Irenaeus: Life, Scripture, Legacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 151–58; also Peter-Ben Smit, "The Reception of the Truth at Baptism and the Church as Epistemological Principle in the Work of Irenaeus of Lyons," *Ecclesiology* 7 (2011), 354–373.

<sup>11</sup> *Haer.* 1.2.1. For other explicit references to the rule in *Adversus haereses*, see 1.9.4, 3.1.1–2, 3.11.1. In *Epid.* 6, Irenaeus likewise details the substance of the rule, again beginning with God as Creator as the first principle. See also *Epid.* 3, where Irenaeus begins with baptism in the name of Father, Son, and Spirit, with God as Creator immediately following.

made by God, but by a lesser (and typically evil and ignorant) demiurge.<sup>12</sup> The term “demiurge” is taken from the Latinized rendering of the Greek *δημιουργός*, literally meaning “public worker.” It first gained philosophical currency in Plato’s *Timaeus*, where it was used to refer to the divine being who gave form to the material world. For Plato, the demiurge is not the creator of the material world, but rather its “craftsman” or “shaper.” The Platonic demiurge is well-intentioned but limited; he does his best to shape the chaotic material of creation into order, but is met with limited success. In Plato’s *Timaeus*, and throughout the Platonic tradition, the demiurge is cast in a generally positive light.<sup>13</sup>

However, the concept of a demiurge is utilized within the Gnostic texts in more pejorative ways. For the Gnostics, the demiurge is not a benevolent maker/shaper of the material world, but a lesser god who most often functions as the primary villain of the Gnostic narrative. The identity and nature of the Gnostic demiurge was variously explained, but in nearly all instances the accounts were negative. He was one of the weak creating angels;<sup>14</sup> he was less enlightened than Satan;<sup>15</sup> he was ignorant of the heavenly realm above him;<sup>16</sup> he wrongly presumed himself to be the true God;<sup>17</sup> he was ontologically inferior to enlightened humans;<sup>18</sup> he was envious of humans;<sup>19</sup> his work was destined to come to ruin;<sup>20</sup> he was the unintended and degenerate offspring of a wayward Aeon;<sup>21</sup> and (most

<sup>12</sup> Here I depart from Michael Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 98-100, who does not see a consistently negative portrayal of the demiurge as a unifying element of Gnosticism.

<sup>13</sup> For more on the Platonic demiurge, see William Wainwright, “Concepts of God,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Spring 2017 Edition, Edward N. Zalta, ed., (<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/concepts-god/>), accessed March, 2017. Also Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism,”* 20, and Lloyd P. Gerson, “Demiurge,” in Ted Honderich, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> *Haer.* 1.23.2, 24.4-6, 25.1.

<sup>15</sup> *Haer.* 1.5.4.

<sup>16</sup> *Haer.* 1.5.3, 1.17.1.

<sup>17</sup> *Haer.* 1.29.4, 30.6.

<sup>18</sup> *Haer.* 1.7.1, 1.25.2.

<sup>19</sup> *Haer.* 1.30.

<sup>20</sup> *Haer.* 1.17.2.

<sup>21</sup> *Haer.* 1.5, 1.16.3, 1.18.4, 1.19.1, 1.29.4. In the Valentinian account, the various heavenly Aeons come into being as emanations from the true Father. Sophia, the ‘last and youngest of the Aeons’ is a female Aeon who leaves her consort (Desired) and strives to comprehend the unknowable Father; this knowledge is beyond her grasp. Her passion to know the unknowable causes her to fall into grief and despair, out of which the material content of creation springs into being. But being female, she can only give birth to substance, not form (for the Gnostics, “form” comes from the male). This unformed material substance is personalized as Achamoth—a being with substance but no form. Form is granted to her by one of the higher male Aeons, and then from her are formed three types of substances – the spiritual, the ensouled, and the material (in descending levels of ontological worth). The demiurge, who is himself an ensouled being, owes his existence to Achamoth, who is his mother. The demiurge separates the ensouled substance from the material substance, thus shaping the material world that is visible to humanity. The demiurge mistakenly supposes that he has made all of these things himself, and that he is the true and only high God.

memorably) humans, upon their death, were to insult him as the means of ascending to the heavenly realm.<sup>22</sup>

Both implicitly and explicitly, the Gnostic demiurge is set in stark contrast to the "true Father"—the beneficent, even if unknowable source, of all that is. The demiurge, in varying accounts, is either ignorant of the higher heavens and the existence of the true Father, or he is jealous and envious that he has been relegated to the lower material world. Indeed, the demiurge is set in contrast with all that is good in the celestial realm. For the Gnostics, the greater Aeons who dwell within the Pleroma (i.e., the highest heavens) are in closer geographical and ontological proximity with the Father, and are opponents of the demiurge.<sup>23</sup>

For the Gnostics, this unhappy account of the demiurge served to darken their cosmology. The Gnostic sects offered varied accounts regarding the creation of matter, but none of them were flattering. For the Valentinians, matter was created out of the sorrow, grief, and tears of a wayward Aeon whose passions had led her astray.<sup>24</sup> In another passage this wayward Aeon is compared to Judas, and then again to the hemorrhaging woman of the gospels (with matter analogously compared to her hemorrhage).<sup>25</sup> In Simon and Saturninus, matter was formed by envious and evil angels, of which the demiurge was one.<sup>26</sup> The material world, insofar as it owes its origin or form to the demiurge, is guilty by association.<sup>27</sup> Further, the existence of matter was never intended by the true Father and is thus incapable of salvation; it will ultimately and permanently be destroyed by fire.<sup>28</sup> Thus the Gnostic association between the demiurge and the material world served to slander in a single stroke both the demiurge and his creation.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>22</sup> *Haer.* 1.21.5.

<sup>23</sup> The Gnostics generally maintained a hyperized version of Platonic emanation, taking the Platonic concept of emanation and expanding it (often to absurd limits). The true unknowable Father was the ontological source of the succeeding pantheon of celestial beings, who were in turn the ontological source of lesser beings, on down to humans. The number of emanations varied in the Gnostic sects—from thirty to as many as three hundred and sixty, and beyond. See *Haer.* 1.24.3-4, 2.16.2, 30.9.

<sup>24</sup> *Haer.* 1.2.3, 1.3.1, 1.4.1-3, 1.5.1, 2.13.7.

<sup>25</sup> *Haer.* 1.3.3.

<sup>26</sup> *Haer.* 1.23.2-3, and 1.24.1, respectively.

<sup>27</sup> In many respects, the Gnostics begin with a general Platonic suspicion about the material world, but they turn this suspicion into outright hostility by demonizing the demiurge.

<sup>28</sup> *Haer.* 1.6.1, 1.7.1, 2.29.3. See also Tatian, *Graec.* 12, who suggests that the angels fell when they turned to what was inferior in matter and conformed their life to it. A similar sentiment as Tatian is conveyed in Origen, *Princ.* 1.8, 1.3-4, and Gregory of Nyssa. See William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson, *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, Etc.* Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Volume 5. Repr. (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), 9-10. While Tatian, Origen, and Gregory do not insist that the material world is evil, they nonetheless have a basic metaphysical pessimism about the material world. On this point, they share more with Gnosticism than they do with Irenaeus.

<sup>29</sup> Here again I depart from Williams' view that the Gnostics were not anti-materialist. The evidence he cites seems rather to invalidate the position he is arguing for. Williams argues unconvincingly that the social and political life of the average Gnostic was not anti-material, and therefore it is improper to use the term "anti-material" as a label to describe

Clearly much is at stake for Irenaeus on this point. He cannot grant the Gnostic separation between the demiurge and the “true Father” without simultaneously demonizing the Creator God of the Old Testament (who Irenaeus insists is the Father of Jesus)<sup>30</sup> and the material world (into which Jesus incarnated Himself). It will not surprise us, then, to discover that Irenaeus will, on occasion, refer to God as the *demiurgus*. While this is not his only way of referring to God as Creator (he seems more typically to use *conditor* and *factor*) he nonetheless is quite willing at times to press the terminological association between God and the demiurge. In the first book of *Adversus haereses*, Irenaeus spends the majority of his efforts simply cataloguing the various strands of Gnostic teaching to serve as a negative foil before developing his own thoughts. But as he starts his second book, he more purposefully begins to establish the basic contours of his own system and engages with Gnostic thought more evaluatively and critically. Toward this end, he refers to God as the *demiurgus* in the first chapter of book two; for Irenaeus, the fact that God is the demiurge is the “greatest principle” that undergirds the entire Christian faith handed down by the apostles and taught in Scripture. He writes:

It is necessary, then, that we begin with the first and greatest principle, that is, the Creator God [*Demiurgo Deo*], who made the heaven and the earth, and all things that are therein (whom these men blasphemously style the fruit of a defect), and to demonstrate that there is nothing either above him or after him; nor that, influenced by any one, but of his own free will, he created all things, since he is the only God, the only Lord, the only Creator [*Conditor*], the only Father, alone containing all things, and himself commanding all things into existence.<sup>31</sup>

And again in book four of *Adversus haereses*,

There is therefore one God, who by the Word of Wisdom created and arranged all things; but this is the Creator [*Demiurgus*] who has granted this world to the human race, and who as regards his greatness, is indeed unknown to all who have been made by him for no one has searched out his height, either among the ancients who have gone to their rest, or any of those who are now alive; but

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Gnosticism (*Rethinking “Gnosticism”*, 100-101). Yet Williams himself admits that there is a paucity of evidence that gives us insight into the lives of average Gnostics (101), leaving his argument largely one of conjecture. No more convincing is Williams’ argument about the close connection between Gnosticism and Platonism (107-08). According to Williams, insofar as the Gnostics were making “efforts to reduce the cultural distance” between themselves and the reigning philosophical system of their world, we should understand them to be world-affirming. Williams is correct that the Gnostics were drawing upon Platonic categories, but this is hardly evidence that Gnostics were world-affirming. Indeed, just the opposite might more naturally be argued. Williams does not take seriously enough the anti-material elements in Platonism. While the Platonic tradition offers varied accounts of the material world, some more positive than others, assessed on the whole, the entire soteriological narrative of Platonism leans strongly in a non-materialist (indeed often anti-materialist) direction.

<sup>30</sup> *Haer.* 1.22.1.

<sup>31</sup> *Haer.* 2.1.1.



as regards his love, he is always known through him [i.e. Christ] by whose means he ordained all things.<sup>32</sup>

The Gnostics tried to slander Irenaeus' God by associating Him with the demiurge; Irenaeus turns this on its head and lifts up the demiurge by associating him with the true God. What is more, by insisting that the demiurge and the true God are one and the same, Irenaeus is, at the same time, insisting upon the goodness of the material world. Insofar as the demiurge is indeed the true and high God, what He has willfully and purposefully made is necessarily good and worthy of admiration.

## II. GOD CREATES DIRECTLY WITH HIS OWN TWO HANDS

As we have seen, Irenaeus is not content to merely assert that God is the ultimate source of creation (through endless emanations). For Irenaeus, God is the willing and personal Creator who Himself freely and personally makes and forms all things. Yet here Irenaeus must strike a balance. While he is keen to maintain the direct and personal involvement of the Father in creation, he is likewise compelled to ascribe a robust place to the Son and the Spirit as the means by which the Father created the world. Irenaeus is led into this tension through his commitment to the apostolic teaching contained in Scripture, most notably John 1:3. "All things were made by him [the Word], and without him nothing was made."<sup>33</sup> It is at this point that Irenaeus' proto-Trinitarian framework emerges. It is important for Irenaeus that the activity of the Son and the Spirit in creation not be severed from the creative will of the Father. He writes:

It was not angels, therefore, who made us, nor who formed us, neither had angels power to make an image of God, nor anyone else, except the Word of the Lord, nor any Power remotely distant from the Father of all things. For God did not stand in need of these [beings], in order to accomplish what he had himself determined with himself beforehand should be done, as if he did not possess his own hands. For with him were always present the Word and Wisdom, the Son and the Spirit, by whom and in whom, freely and spontaneously, he made all things.<sup>34</sup>

This basic Trinitarian starting point is consistent throughout Irenaeus' writings, and is established early in *Epidexis*, where Irenaeus holds together the creative activity of God the Father through the Son in the Spirit. He writes:

<sup>32</sup> *Haer.* 4.20.4. See also 4.2.1. In book five Irenaeus begins with regular frequency to use the term "demiurge" as a way of referring to the true God. See also Justin, *1 Apol.* 8, 58, who likewise refers to God as the demiurge.

<sup>33</sup> Steenberg remarks, "No single verse of New Testament writing is of stronger influence on Irenaeus' cosmological consideration than John 1:3." See Steenberg, *Irenaeus on Creation*, 69. Steenberg lists some of the following uses of this text in Irenaeus: *Epid.* 43; *Haer.* 1.8.5, 1.9.2, 1.22.2, 2.2.5, 3.8.2-3, 3.11.1-2, 8, etc.

<sup>34</sup> *Haer.* 4.20.1.

Thus then there is shown forth One God, the Father, not made, invisible, Creator of all things; above whom there is no other God, and after whom there is no other God. And, since God is rational, therefore by the Word he created the things that were made; and God is Spirit, and by the Spirit he adorned all things: as also the prophet says: "By the word of the Lord were the heavens established, and by his Spirit all their power." Since then the Word establishes, that is to say, works bodily [σωματοποιέω] and grants existence, and the Spirit arranges and forms the various powers, rightly and fittingly is the Word called the Son, and the Spirit the Wisdom of God. Well also does Paul his apostle say: "One God, the Father, who is over all and through all and in us all." For "over all" is the Father; and "through all" is the Son, for through him all things were made by the Father; and "in us all" is the Spirit, who cries "Abba Father," and fashions humanity into the likeness of God. Now the Spirit shows forth the Word, and therefore the prophets announced the Son of God; and the Word utters the Spirit, and therefore is himself the announcer of the prophets, and leads and draws humanity to the Father.<sup>35</sup>

Here the Father creates all things; the Son "establishes and grants existence" to all things; and the Spirit "arranges and forms" all things.<sup>36</sup> This tri-fold unity is neatly captured in Irenaeus' reading of Romans 11:36. For Irenaeus, the "over all" refers to the Father, the "through all" refers to the Son, and the "in all" refers to the Spirit. Thus for Irenaeus, the personal, creative activity of God is not compromised by the creative activity of the Son and the Spirit. The Father, "by his Word and Spirit, makes, and disposes, and governs all things."<sup>37</sup>

Irenaeus does not utilize the language of "trinity" or the later catchwords of the fourth century, but his conceptual framework is substantively consistent with the later accounts of the Trinity that will emerge in the Nicene formula.<sup>38</sup> For Irenaeus, the relational and ontological unity between Father, Son, and Spirit is such that the creation of the world by the Father

<sup>35</sup> *Epid.* 5. This same basic Trinitarian formula is likewise highlighted in *Epid.* 6, as part of the "rule of faith." Here Irenaeus speaks of God the Father, the Creator of all things; the Word of God, through whom all things are made; and the Spirit of God who is poured out upon the earth, renewing humanity unto God.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Irenaeus' translation of Genesis 1:1 in *Epid.* 43, "Moses says in Hebrew, *Baresith Bara Eloim Basan Benuam Samenthaves*, the translation of which...is: A [S]on in the beginning God established then heaven and earth." The underlying Armenian is difficult and Irenaeus scholars do not agree about the best way to translate the text. The translation depends on whether one takes "son" as nominative or accusative. J. P. Smith, in his "Hebrew Christian Midrash in Irenaeus *Epid.* 43," *Biblica* 38 (1957): 24-34, argues in favor of the accusative, and Behr, in his translation of *Epidexis* leaves it intentionally vague. See Behr, *On the Apostolic Preaching*, 109, n.121 for a helpful summary of the issues.

<sup>37</sup> *Haer.* 1.22.1.

<sup>38</sup> That Irenaeus' "Trinitarian" framework is substantively consistent with the later Nicene articulation, see Gunton, *The Triune Creator*, 52-56; and especially Steenberg, *Irenaeus on Creation*, 61-100. Steenberg helpfully observes, "Irenaeus' perception of the eternal life in the relationship of the three is indicative of the kind of Trinitarian language and vision



via the Son and the Spirit is not a mediated act of creation by the Father, but is the very means by which the Father himself creates directly.

Here we encounter Irenaeus' famous "two hands" analogy.<sup>39</sup> For Irenaeus, the Son and the Spirit are not intermediate agents of creation (like the Gnostic angels or the demiurge) but rather the "two hands" of the Father himself. "Now humanity is a mixed organization of soul and flesh, who was formed after the likeness of God, and molded by his hands, that is, by the Son and Holy Spirit, to whom also he said, 'Let us make humanity'."<sup>40</sup>

The proto-Trinitarian implications here are fascinating. But for our purposes the salient point to note is the way that Irenaeus insists on a Father-Son-Spirit formula that holds all three together in a way that preserves the personal creative activity of the Father. Given Irenaeus' confrontation with the Gnostics, it is not sufficient to simply assert that the Father is the ultimate and indirect agent of creation—as though God were like a king who gave commands to have a palace built. Rather, Irenaeus is at pains to insist that the *Father Himself* is the Creator of the world, without mediators. Thus the Son and the Spirit do not merely work alongside the Father (as second and third independent creating agents), or serve as proxies or mediators of the Father's creative power, working on the Father's behalf. Instead, the Son and the Spirit must in some way be an extension and embodiment of the Father's personal creative will. Thus the "two hands" metaphor works powerfully to convey the creative unity that Irenaeus is so keen to preserve, insofar as the hands of an individual are organically (even ontologically) unified with that individual. To say that John built a cabinet with "his own two hands" is saying (essentially) the same thing as "John built the cabinet himself." As Lawson rightly notes, "The 'Two Hands of

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that would be expounded more fully in the debates following Arius; and though we must not overestimate his Trinitarian articulation, we must not underestimate it either" (63).

<sup>39</sup> Just as Irenaeus' "two hands" metaphor underscores the Father's immediate involvement in creation, a similar point could be made through an exploration of Irenaeus' "Logos" theology. See Jackson Lashier, "Irenaeus as Logos Theologian," *Vigiliae Christianae* 66 (2012): 341-61.

<sup>40</sup> *Haer.* 4. preface, 1. See also 4.20.1. The "two hands" metaphor seems original to Irenaeus. Yet it occurs later in the non-Gnostic *Teaching of Silvanus*, part of the *Nag Hammadi* collection (the only non-Gnostic tract in *Nag Hammadi*). The text is of Alexandrian origin and likely late third century. The author writes, "Only the hand of the Lord created all these things. For this hand of the Father is Christ, and forms it all. Through it, all has come into being, since it became the mother of all. For he is always Son of the Father." For more on the origin and dating of this tract, see Birger A. Pierson, "Introduction," in *Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The Revised and Updated Translation of Sacred Gnostic Texts* (ed. Marvin Meyer. New York: Harper One, 2007), 499-503. For more on the "hands" metaphor in *Silvanus*, see Steenberg, *Irenaeus on Creation*, 81-84. The Egyptian province of *Silvanus*, along with its later date may suggest that Irenaeus' "hands" metaphor was quickly and widely distributed. Steenberg observes that this is not an entirely unrealistic possibility, given that the *Oxyrrhynchus Papyri* 3.045, which dates from the close of the second century and is likewise of Egyptian locale, contains the earliest known fragment of Irenaeus' *Adversus haereses* (c.f., Robert Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons* [New York: Routledge, 1997], 6-7). Or it may mean that the "hands" metaphor was not unique to Irenaeus, and was a common trope in early Christian writing. Both possibilities are intriguing with respect to the wider currency of Irenaeus' proto-Trinitarianism.

God' is much more than a corollary of the doctrine of Creation. It is itself the expression of the doctrine of an immediately present and active God."<sup>41</sup>

All of this serves to underscore the goodness of creation. God not only approves of the material world; He has not only ordained that it come into existence; He has even further called it into being with His own Word, and has arranged it and shaped it by His own Spirit. He has Himself, with His own two hands, brought life and existence to the material world. The overall effect of Irenaeus' "two hands" metaphor is to highlight his basically pro-material cosmology. The Gnostic "Father" will not sully himself with matter. But Irenaeus' God is not afraid to dig his hands into the rich black soil.

### III. CREATION EX NIHILO

For Irenaeus, the fact that God created the world out of nothing is as important as the fact that God created it. Irenaeus is one of the earliest extant Christian writers to affirm the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*.<sup>42</sup> Here Irenaeus claims for the Christian tradition a doctrine that was still up for grabs among at least some otherwise orthodox Christian thinkers. While non-Gnostic Christianity universally affirmed God as Creator, some early Christian writers seem to suggest an eternal creation. Origen is noteworthy here, as are Justin and Athenagoras.<sup>43</sup> But Irenaeus takes it as axiomatic that

<sup>41</sup> John Lawson, *The Biblical Theology of Irenaeus* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 122. For more on the "two hands" motif in Irenaeus, see Lawson, *Biblical Theology*, 199-239; Wingren, *Man and Incarnation*, 21-24; Steenberg, *Irenaeus on Creation*, 80-84; and Gunton, *Triune Creator*, 52-56. Throughout his work, Gunton adopts Irenaeus as his patron saint, drawing heavily on Irenaeus' notion of the "two hands."

<sup>42</sup> Theophilus also articulates a doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. See his *Autol.* 2.4, 2.13. So too Tatian, *Graec.* 5. For more on the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* in Irenaeus, see Paul Gavrilyuk, "Creation in Early Christian Polemical Literature: Irenaeus against the Gnostics and Athanasius against the Arians," *Modern Theology* 29.2 (2013): 22-32; Jacques Fantino, "La creation ex nihilo chez saint Irénée," *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 76.3 (1992): 421-42; J. C. O'Neil, "How Early Is the Doctrine of *Creatio Ex Nihilo*?" *Journal of Theological Studies* 53.2 (2002): 449-65; and J. G. Bushur, "Joining the End to the Beginning': Divine Providence and the Interpretation of Scripture in the Teaching of Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons," (PhD diss., University of Durham, UK, 2009), 34-73.

<sup>43</sup> See Origen, *Princ.* 1.4.3. Athenagoras seems to assume the basic Platonic account of creation, where the demiurge shapes matter, rather than bringing it into existence. See *Leg.* 10.2f. Scholars are divided about this doctrine in Justin. The relevant passages are *1 Apol.* 1.10, 58, where Justin speaks of God shaping unformed matter. Notably, Justin does not make a statement one way or the other regarding how this unformed matter came to be. Osborne states, "If one looks to concepts rather than to words... it is clear that Justin would never have considered the concept of unoriginated matter because it contradicted his central belief about God, the sole unoriginated." See Eric Osborne, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 67. That Irenaeus so clearly articulates a doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* where Justin fails to do so shows that Irenaeus is willing to push beyond Justin, despite the close association of their thought. For a general assessment of this doctrine in early Christian thought, see Gunton, *Triune Creator*, 57-96. For a helpful assessment of this doctrine in Irenaeus see Steenberg, *Irenaeus on Creation*, 38-49.

God is not only the shaper of the material world, but also the originator of the material world.<sup>44</sup> He writes:

The rule of truth which we hold is that there is one God Almighty, who has made all things by his Word, and has fashioned and formed, out of that which had so far no existence, all things so that they may have existence. Just as Scripture says: "By the Word of the Lord were the heavens established, and all the might of them, by the Spirit of his mouth." And again, "All things were made by him, and without him was nothing made." There is no exception or deduction stated; but the Father made all things by him, whether visible or invisible, objects of sense or of intelligence, temporal, on account of a certain character given them, or eternal; and these eternal things he did not make by angels, or by any powers separated from his thought. For God is not in want of all these things, but is he who, by his Word and Spirit, makes, and sets up, and governs all things, and commands all things into existence,—he who formed the world, for the world is of all [*etenim mundus ex omnibus*],—he who fashioned [*plasmavit*] humanity,—he [who] is the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, above whom there is no other God, nor initial principle, nor power, nor pleroma; he is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, as we shall prove.<sup>45</sup>

And again,

While humans, indeed, cannot make anything out of nothing, but only out of matter already existing, yet God is in this point pre-eminently superior to humans, that he himself invented the matter of his work, since previously it had no existence.<sup>46</sup>

Irenaeus' doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* stood in strong contrast to Gnostic thought.<sup>47</sup> For the Gnostics, as we have already seen with the Valentinians, the true Father does not willingly create the material world out of nothing, but rather the material world is (even if indirectly) ultimately sourced in his own being. The Gnostics' descending ontological chain of

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<sup>44</sup> Thus Irenaeus' insistence of creation *ex nihilo* also served not only to distinguish Christianity from Greek thought, such as we find in Plato's *Timaeus* and Aristotle's *Physics*, but also to clarify for the Christian community what he believed to be correct Christian teaching vis-à-vis Christianity.

<sup>45</sup> *Haer.* 1.22.1.

<sup>46</sup> *Haer.* 2.10.4.

<sup>47</sup> The one exception possibly being that of Basilides. "God is non-being because he is above being, the cosmos pre-existing in the world seed is non-being because it has still to be realized in time and space, and the world seed is created out of non-being in the absolute sense, out of nothing." Quoted in Osborne, *Irenaeus*, 68. C.f., Hippolytus, *Haer.* 7.22.1.6; 10.14.2. The meaning of the passage is unclear. Osborne rightly observes that Basilides' contention that "God is non-being" introduces an element into his thought that makes his expression of creation *ex nihilo* distinct from Irenaeus and Theophilus. What does it mean that creation is out of nothing, when God Himself is non-being? See Osborne, *Irenaeus*, 68-69. Notably, Basilides is the one Gnostic sect that neither demonizes the demiurge nor separates the demiurge and the true God, a point to which we will return below.

being, originating from the Father all the way down the hemorrhage of a wayward Aeon (who was herself an emanation ultimately sourced in the Father), requires that the material world is ultimately of the same essence as the Father; the account is essentially monistic. Thus the demiurge, for his part, does not create matter but only shapes what is already pre-existent. None of this, in itself, necessitates the demonization of the demiurge or the material world. Indeed, in some respects, this is not far off the basic Platonic narrative.<sup>48</sup> Yet this monistic account creates theodicy problems for the Gnostics. At various points, the Gnostics posit that the high God “has something subjacent and beyond himself, which they style vacuity and shadow.”<sup>49</sup> This vacuity and shadow account for the original chaos out of which ignorance has its origin. But if all things are sourced in the Father’s own essence, then is not the Father in some way the cause and source of ignorance and evil?

The Gnostics generally attempted to handle this difficulty by positing a vast “geographical” distance between the true Father and the material world of ignorance. The material world, and the demiurge that dwells therein, are pushed to the bottom of the ontological ladder. With each step down the ladder, there is a bit of an “ontological leak” that accounts for an increasing level of ignorance and chaos. Minns helpfully summarizes the effect of all this on Gnostic cosmology, “All the distress we suffer is simply part of the cosmic rubbish left behind by the primordial near-catastrophe within the divine realm. The gnostic knows this, and knows that he or she does not belong to the shadowy world of matter and soul, multiplicity and diversity, but to the divine Pleroma of light and spirit.”<sup>50</sup> But as a theodicy goes, this is not entirely successful;<sup>51</sup> Irenaeus seizes the opportunity and presses the point:

But whence, let me ask, came this vacuity? If it was indeed produced by him who, according to them, is the Father and Author of all things, then it is both equal in honor and related to the rest of the

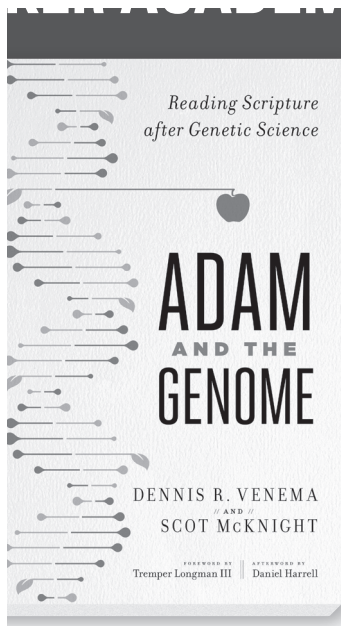
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<sup>48</sup> The Gnostic scheme (while different) is clearly indebted to the basic philosophical and ontological framework found in Plato’s *Timaeus*. In *Timaeus*, matter is already pre-existent, and the demiurge shapes matter according to the eternal forms which stand above him and are independent of him (28b-29d). (In this respect the Gnostic “true Father” stands in for the Platonic “forms.”) The demiurge creates the gods, who are then told to create humans and beasts, lest humans and beasts, created directly by the demiurge, rival the gods (see 41b-d). Thus the Platonic scheme, like the Gnostic scheme, assumes some measure of ontological “leak” at each stage of creation. The Gnostics lay hold of this basic insight and exploit it, using it to demonize the demiurge and the material world. A notable difference, however, between the *Timaeus* and the Gnostics is that Plato in his *Timaeus* does not suggest a doctrine of emanation that necessitates a strict ontological unity between the forms, the demiurge, and the material world. The Platonic tradition, including Neo-Platonism, is dualistic, rather than monistic like the Gnostics.

<sup>49</sup> *Haer.* 2.3.1.

<sup>50</sup> Denis Minns, *Irenaeus: An Introduction* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 25.

<sup>51</sup> This is, admittedly, a perennial problem for all monist accounts—not just the Gnostics. Vast ontological chains of being generally only serve to mask theodicy problems, not resolve them. For more on how Gnostic cosmology was driven by theodicy, see Paul Gavriluk “Creation in Early Christian Polemical Literature,” 22-32.



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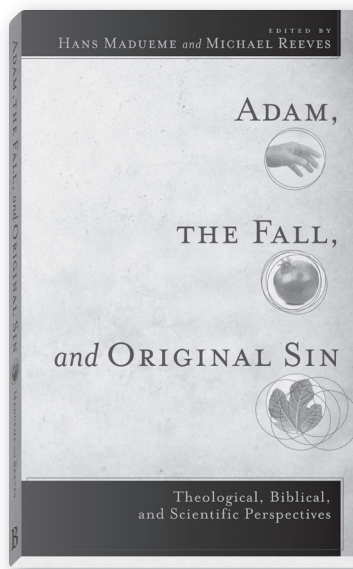
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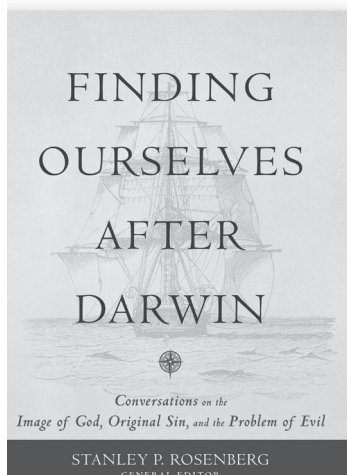
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Aeons, perchance even more ancient than they are. Moreover, if it proceeded from the same source it must be similar in nature to him who produced it, as well as to those along with whom it was produced [*Si autem ab eodem emissum est, simile est ei qui emisit, et his cum quibus emissum est*]. There will therefore be an absolute necessity, both that the Bythus [i.e., Father of all things] of whom they speak, along with Sige, be similar in nature to a vacuum, that is, that he really is a vacuum; and that the rest of the Aeons, since they are the brothers of vacuity, should also be devoid of substance [*vacuam et substantiam habere*]. If, on the other hand, it has not been thus produced, it must have sprung from and been generated by itself, and in that case it will be equal in point of age to that Bythus who is, according to them, the Father of all; and thus vacuity will be of the same nature [*eiusdem naturae*] and of the same honor with him who is, according to them, the universal Father.<sup>52</sup>

As Irenaeus points out, it is difficult to impugn one aspect of reality without simultaneously impugning the Father with whom all things share in essence. But Irenaeus' doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* avoids the pitfalls of the Gnostics' monist account. Irenaeus does not need to demonize creation or the demiurge in order to articulate a coherent theodicy. For Irenaeus, creation is inherently good precisely because it was made by God Himself. Yet it is not made from previously non-existing matter, and thus is ontologically differentiated from God. As such, any defects in the creation need not be ascribed to God's own nature or essence.

What is more, for Irenaeus, evil is not sourced in ontology, but in the will. At one point, the Gnostics critique Irenaeus' position by arguing that God should not have made angels and humans in such a way that they could rebel. This is seen by the Gnostics as evidence of weakness on the part of the demiurge, and is proof that the god of the Old Testament is not the true Father. Irenaeus responds by saying that if God had made angels and humans impeccable by nature, rather than by will, then their goodness would amount to nothing. They would in such case be ignorant of goodness and thus not truly possess it. He writes:

Thus it would come to pass, that their being good would be of no consequence, because they were so by nature rather than by will, and are possessors of good spontaneously, but not by choice; and for this reason they would not understand this fact, that good is a comely thing, nor would they take pleasure in it. For how can those who are ignorant of good enjoy it? Or what credit is it to those who have not aimed at it? And what crown is it to those who have not followed in pursuit of it, like those victorious in the contest?<sup>53</sup>

Irenaeus' doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* makes it possible for evil to be sourced in creaturely will, rather than in God's own being. Further, the

<sup>52</sup> *Haer.* 2.4.1. Irenaeus uses the same basic argument in 2.7.2, and 17.1-8. Either the Father shares the passion of Sophia (which besmirches the Father), or Sophia is without passion (which wrecks the Gnostic narrative).

<sup>53</sup> *Haer.* 4.37.6.



goodness of the material world is likewise safeguarded. It is creaturely freedom (not God's own essence) that has brought death into the world; this in turn has distorted the integrity of creation.<sup>54</sup> The net effect of all of this is that Irenaeus is able simultaneously to maintain the integrity of God's own ontological goodness, while at the same time safe-guarding the original goodness of humanity and the material world.

Along with creating theodicy concerns, the Gnostics' monism threatened to undermine any sense of divine transcendence in Gnostic theology. The Gnostics' true Father cannot achieve transcendence and dignity by ontology, since he ultimately shares his essence with all things. Indeed, in some Gnostic accounts, enlightened humans are of the same untainted substance as the Father, in so far as they owe their origin to him.<sup>55</sup> Again, the Gnostics must deploy geography in the place of ontology. For the Gnostics, the "unknowable" and transcendent Father is unknown and transcendent only because he is so far away, not because he is wholly other. In order to make the Gnostic Father worthy of worship and adoration, he must be pushed far above and away from the world of materiality. Again, this monistic account need not have resulted in a negative view of the material world. But the vast distance between the Father and the world served to emphasize and heighten the negative cosmology of the Gnostic system. The further one moved away from the world of materiality, the closer one drew to God. The implied critique of the material world is evident.

But Irenaeus' doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* establishes the transcendence of God by highlighting the ontological inequality that exists between Creator and creature. The Creator and creature are wholly other—the latter completely dependent on the former for both form and being. This ontological gap between Creator and creature allows Irenaeus' God to draw near to His creation without confusion of being, and without compromising God's transcendence. And God does draw near to His creation via the Word and the Spirit. This geographic nearness in turn creates space for a more generous account of the material world; God, while remaining completely other, dwells close to—indeed incarnates into—the world He has made and lovingly cares for.

We might summarize it thus: for both Irenaeus and the Gnostics, God is the ultimate source of the material world; but only Irenaeus' God will admit to it.

#### IV. THE MATERIAL WORLD IS GIVEN AS A GIFT TO HUMANITY

Irenaeus' positive cosmology is evident in the way he frames his account of the material world as a gift to humanity. For Irenaeus, humanity is the highpoint of creation, the apex of God's creative artistry—even over and above that of the angels; humanity uniquely alone bears the image and likeness of God. As such, Irenaeus emphasizes the human "dominion" aspect of the Genesis account,<sup>56</sup> and assigns the material world to humanity's

<sup>54</sup> *Epid.* 17.

<sup>55</sup> See *Haer.* 1.6-7, and 1.8.3.

<sup>56</sup> Gen 1:26-28.

lordship. In the opening chapters of *Epidēixis* (a key passage to which we will return numerous times) he writes:

But the man<sup>57</sup> he formed [πλάσσω] with his own hands, taking from the earth that which was purest and finest,<sup>58</sup> and mingling in a measure of his own power with the earth. For he traced his own form [πλάσμα] on the formation,<sup>59</sup> that that which should be seen should be of divine form [θεοειδής]:<sup>60</sup> for the image of God was the man formed and set on the earth. And that he might become living, he breathed on his face the breath of life; that both for the breath and for the formation the man should be like unto God.<sup>61</sup> Moreover he was free and self-controlled, being made by God for this end, that he might rule all those things that were upon the earth.<sup>62</sup> And this great created world, prepared by God before the formation of man, was given to the man as his place, with all things whatsoever in it.<sup>63</sup>

With the above passage we have reached the climax of Irenaeus' creation narrative in *Epidēixis*. Adam is formed from the purest and finest material of the earth, with a mixture of God's own divine power mingled in. The man is then given lordship over the "great created world" which has been "given to the man as his place." Irenaeus will go on to note that the Devil's envy of humanity is ignited because of "the great gifts of God which he had given to humanity."<sup>64</sup> Irenaeus does not specify the nature of these "great gifts" but

<sup>57</sup> Here the reference is to Adam, the first human, rather than humanity generically. Cf., Gen 2:7. Eve is not introduced until *Epid.* 13. The Greek glosses here and throughout are drawn from A. Rousseau, *La Démonstration de la Prédication Apostolique*, Sources Chrétiennes vol. 406 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1995).

<sup>58</sup> Ian McKenzie notes the explicit connection made elsewhere by Irenaeus between Adam's creation out of "virgin" soil and Christ's virgin birth (*Haer.* 3.18.7, 3.21.10) thus heightening the divine and Christological identity of Adam. See MacKenzie, *Irenaeus's Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching: A Theological Commentary and Translation* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2002), 101-02.

<sup>59</sup> Robinson notes that the Armenian text here is equivalent to the Latin *plasma* or *plasmatio*.

<sup>60</sup> Smith glosses the Armenian here as "godlike."

<sup>61</sup> McKenzie appropriately comments, "The opening phrase of this Section 11 is forceful in setting out that which is peculiar to man by way of contrast with all that has gone before as background." McKenzie, *Irenaeus's Demonstration*, 101.

<sup>62</sup> Smith, "in order to be master of everything on earth."

<sup>63</sup> *Epid.* 11. See Robinson who notes a parallel in Papias, *ANF*, vol. 1, 52, no. 45. With respect to the last phrase, "with all things whatsoever in it," I follow Smith's translation *pace* Robinson. Robinson offers the primary translation of, "containing all things within itself," yet recognizes the awkwardness of the rendering; see his no. 44 on the passage. "So both the German translations; but they transfer the words so as to link them with 'this great created world.' What we seem to want is, 'to have all as his own,' if the words can bear that meaning." Smith's primary translation "with all things whatsoever in it" and Robinson's alternate rendering of "to have all as his own" are both more intelligible to the context. Rousseau's retrograde Latin version reads, *habens in se omnia*. Regardless the translation, the larger point is clear: the man is given the world as his place.

<sup>64</sup> *Epid.* 16. For more on the Devil's envy and its implicit affirmation of the material world, See Hiestand, "The Bishop, Beelzebub, and the Blessing of Materiality," *Bulletin of*

certainly lordship of the world looms large in Irenaeus' narrative as an obvious gift that God has given to humans.

Here we see the native connection between Irenaeus' cosmology and anthropology. For Irenaeus, anthropology and cosmology rise and fall together. The goodness of the world is seen clearly in the fact that the world has been given to God's highest creature—humanity. And the goodness of humanity is seen clearly in the fact that humanity has been given the bounty of the good material world. (The Gnostics, of course, use parallel logic to disparage both humanity and the material world).

## VI. PRO-MATERIAL ESCHATOLOGY

Irenaeus' commitment to the goodness of the material world can be seen clearly in his pro-material eschatology,<sup>65</sup> which closely follows the ordering of the eschatological events found in Revelation 20-21.<sup>66</sup> For Irenaeus, the defeat of the Anti-Christ ushers in the resurrection of the righteous, which is the definitive event that marks the dawn of the new age.<sup>67</sup> The righteous are raised to co-reign with Christ in a renewed earth for one thousand years.<sup>68</sup> Then follows the second resurrection and the Great White Throne judgment of Revelation 20,<sup>69</sup> which is itself followed by the passing away of the "fashion of this world"<sup>70</sup> and the ushering in of the new heavens and a new earth of Revelation 21:1-7.<sup>71</sup> The eternal state then commences, in which the people of God dwell with God in heaven, paradise, or the New Jerusalem (each according to their just desserts). Irenaeus offers only the briefest of speculations about the eternal state; redeemed humanity will contain and be contained by the Word, "passing beyond the angels," and made after the image and likeness of God.<sup>72</sup>

Two aspects of this eschatological narrative are especially relevant to his broader pro-cosmological outlook: Irenaeus' chiliastic eschatology<sup>73</sup> and his affirmation of an eternal "new heavens and new earth" (following Revelation 21:1-7). We begin with Irenaeus' chiliastic eschatology.

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*Ecclesial Theology*, 4.1 (2017): 83-99.

<sup>65</sup> For a helpful summary of the main lines of Irenaeus' eschatology, see A. S. Wood, "Eschatology of Irenaeus," *Evangelical Quarterly* 41 (1969): 30-41. Wood's focus is on the question of hell and universalism, which is only tangential to our primary concern. But the overall presentation of Irenaeus is helpfully summarized.

<sup>66</sup> The only significant departure that Irenaeus makes from Rev 20-21 is that he does not mention the release of Satan and the subsequent rebellion of the wicked and the great white throne (Rev 20:7-15); instead he skips past this to John's vision of the new heavens and the new earth.

<sup>67</sup> *Haer.* 5.35.1.

<sup>68</sup> See the whole of *Haer.* 5.32-35.

<sup>69</sup> *Haer.* 5.35.2.

<sup>70</sup> *Haer.* 5.35.2.

<sup>71</sup> *Haer.* 5.35-36. See also *Epid.* 61.

<sup>72</sup> *Haer.* 5.36.3.

<sup>73</sup> "Chiliasm," from the Greek *χίλις*, for "thousand." Also referred to as "millenarianism," the belief—drawn from a literal reading of Rev 20:1-10—in a thousand year reign of Christ at the end of the world before the final judgment, in which the righteous dead are raised to co-reign with Christ.

## A. IRENAEUS' CHILIASTIC ESCHATOLOGY

The bulk of Irenaeus' eschatological thought is found in the last five chapters of book five of *Adversus haereses*.<sup>74</sup> In these dense chapters Irenaeus unpacks his vision for the redemption and consummation of the material world. As noted above, Irenaeus closely follows the timeline of Revelation 20–21. As such he works within the chiliastic framework of early Christian thought.<sup>75</sup> This thousand year span is referred to variously as “the times of the kingdom” or more simply “the kingdom.”<sup>76</sup> Throughout these chapters

<sup>74</sup> These chapters do not appear in all Latin manuscripts. This need not be grounds to deny their authenticity, and is perhaps more easily explained by the fact that the medieval tradition viewed chiliastic thought as heretical, and would have been inclined to purge Irenaeus' writing of such ideas. Quotations from these chapters have been collected by Harvey from Syriac and Armenian manuscripts (see Coxe, *ANF*, vol. 1, 561, no. 1), suggesting their authenticity. In support of the authenticity of these chapters, see Wingren, *Man and Incarnation*, 188–89; and Minns, *Irenaeus*, 142–44.

<sup>75</sup> Irenaeus is not without precedent in his view that there will be a literal thousand year reign of Christ upon a renewed earth. Justin affirmed a literal thousand year millennium (while acknowledging that some Christians reject it). See *Dial.* 80. So also Papias, *Frag.* 3.11–13, 5.1–4. Eusebius states that it was due to Papias that “many church writers after him held the same opinion, relying on his early date: Irenaeus, for example, and any others who adopted the same views.” See *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.11–13. See also Larry Crutchfield, “The Apostle John and Asia Minor as a Source of Premillennialism In the Early Church Fathers,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 31.4 (1988): 411–27, for a detailed look at early Christian writers/leaders who held this view.

<sup>76</sup> There is debate about the extent to which Irenaeus maintained a literal thousand year reign. A number of his recent interpreters have attempted to distance him from traditional chiliastic thought by arguing that he makes no mention of a literal thousand years in *Haer.* 5:32–36 (or elsewhere). See Wingren, *Man and Incarnation*, 190–92; Steenberg, *Irenaeus on Creation*, 52–53. For the definitive treatment on this perspective, see Christopher Smith, “Chiliasm and Recapitulation in the Theology of Irenaeus,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 48 (1994): 313–20. This claim is only narrowly accurate. While Irenaeus does not use the term “millennium” or “thousand” in the Latin text of these chapters, he is clearly working within the constraints of the events and timeline found in Revelation 20–21. For Irenaeus the “kingdom” has a beginning and an end, and is marked on both sides by the first and second resurrections (Rev 20:4 and 20:12, respectively). Thus Irenaeus' many references to the “kingdom” throughout *Haer.* 5.32–36 are most naturally understood as a reference to the millennial kingdom of Rev 20:1–10. Even Wingren notes this point, stating that “the *regnum* is not described as being of a thousand years' duration, but in fact corresponds to the millennium of the Book of Revelation,” (*Man and Incarnation*, 191). Further, it is clear that Irenaeus believes himself to be faithfully transmitting the chiliasm of Papias, who clearly maintained a literal thousand years (see *Haer.* 5.33.4). Likewise, Eusebius believes Irenaeus to be transmitting Papias, see *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.13. Even more convincingly, Minns (as recently as 2010) has shown that the 1910 Armenian text of *Adversus haereses*, does indeed include an explicit reference to the “thousand” years of Rev 20:1–10. The relevant passage occurs in the last paragraph of the last chapter of the last book of the Armenian *Adversus haereses*, where we find a reference to “the seventh thousand years of the kingdom of the just,” after which kingdom follows the new heavens and the new earth. See Minns, *Irenaeus*, 143–44. This corresponds to Irenaeus' view of the “kingdom” as a Sabbath rest, the final seventh age where God's people are rewarded. See *Haer.* 5.33.2, “These [earthly rewards are granted] in the times of the kingdom, that is, upon the seventh day.” In any case, whether the kingdom is for Irenaeus a literal thousand years, or more abstractly an extended age of time, is a question largely tangential to my primary concern, namely that he conceives of a future earthly kingdom

Irenaeus clarifies—in strong contrast to Gnostic teaching—that just as God will raise believers bodily from the dead, so too will He bring the material world to life again. He begins by summarizing his vision of the kingdom:

Inasmuch, therefore, as the opinions of certain [persons] are derived from heretical discourses, they are both ignorant of God's dispensations, and of the mystery of the resurrection of the just, and of the kingdom which is the commencement of incorruption, by means of which kingdom those who shall be worthy are accustomed gradually to partake of God [*capere Deum*]; and it is necessary to tell them respecting those things, that it becomes the righteous first to receive the promise of the inheritance which God promised to the fathers, and to reign in it, when they rise again to behold God in this creation which is renovated [*in conditione hac quae renovatur*], and that the judgment should take place afterwards. For it is just that in that very creation in which they toiled or were afflicted, being proved in every way by suffering, they should receive the reward of their suffering; and that in the creation in which they were slain because of their love to God, in that they should be revived again; and that in the creation in which they endured servitude, in that they should reign. For God is rich in all things, and all things are his. It is fitting, therefore, that the creation itself, being restored to its primeval condition [*redintegratam ad pristinum*], should without restraint be under the dominion of the righteous; and the apostle has made this plain in the Epistle to the Romans, when he thus speaks: "For the expectation of the creation [*creaturae*] waits for the manifestation of the children of God. For the creation [*creaturae*] has been subjected to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope; since the creation [*creaturae*] itself shall also be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God."<sup>77</sup>

Three important themes emerge from this passage. First, Irenaeus envisions a renewal of the earth during the time of the kingdom. According to Irenaeus, God will "renovate" creation to "its primeval condition," returning it to its Edenic state. Irenaeus will go on to clarify that this "primeval condition" includes the restoration of the animal world, and its harmonious subjection to humanity's benevolent lordship.<sup>78</sup> Yet Irenaeus does not envision a mere return to the past. As with his larger recapitulation theme, going back to the beginning is the means by which redemption moves forward. God's redemptive work in the cosmos enables the creation to move forward beyond Eden into the fruitful realm always intended by God. Thus, days

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of limited duration preceding the general resurrection of the dead and the eternal age when God will raise the righteous dead to reign with Christ upon a renewed earth.

<sup>77</sup> *Haer.* 5.32.1. The remaining chapters (up until 5.35.2, where he begins to discuss the new heavens and earth) are an extended development and apologetic for the claims he has made here.

<sup>78</sup> *Haer.* 5.33.4. Irenaeus arrives at this conclusion through a literal reading of Isa 11:6-9 and 65:25.

will come “in which vines shall grow, each having ten thousand branches, and in each branch ten thousand twigs, and in each true twig ten thousand shoots, and in each one of the shoots ten thousand clusters, and on every one of the clusters ten thousand grapes, and every grape when pressed will give five and twenty metretres of wine.”<sup>79</sup> Thus for Irenaeus, the “kingdom” is not merely an earthly kingdom in which the righteous co-reign with Christ, but even more an entire (indeed miraculous) maturing of the natural world into the state that God intended all along.

This raises the question about the extent to which Irenaeus viewed the material world as “fallen” in some way. In *Epid.* 17 Irenaeus notes the curse of the ground from Genesis 3:17, writing, “For under the beams of this sun man tilled the earth, and it put forth thorns and thistles, the punishment of sin.” Yet he does not press this idea throughout his writings, no doubt in part because of his anti-Gnostic context. Denigrating the material world would have played too much into the Gnostic’s hands. But in *Haer.* 5.32.1, Irenaeus does seem to imply that Adam’s failure in the garden prevented the material world from becoming all that God had intended it to be. It is only after the perfection of humanity and the overthrow of the Devil that creation is able to flourish. Irenaeus’ perspective on patience, growth and gradual maturity seems to be at work here. Just as Adam was perfect yet infantile, so too Adam’s world was perfect yet infantile.<sup>80</sup> The maturing trajectory of both was forestalled by sin. In redemption, both are together brought to full maturity in the millennial kingdom.

Throughout these last five books of *Adversus haereses* Irenaeus shows a tenacious refusal to adopt an allegorical interpretation of the biblical texts that speak of a renewed earth and an earthly kingdom. Irenaeus is aware that other Christian writers have adopted allegorical approaches to the prophetic visions of a renewed earth, but he views such interpretations as inadequate.<sup>81</sup> Those who do not leave room for a literal renewed earth are

<sup>79</sup> *Haer.* 5.33.3. This fecund vision is drawn from the “elders who saw John.”

<sup>80</sup> The idea of Adam and Eve’s infancy at the time of creation is a unique feature of Irenaeus’ anthropology. For more on this, see Hiestand, “Passing Beyond the Angels: The Interconnection Between Irenaeus’ Account of the Devil and His Doctrine of Creation” (PhD diss., The University of Reading, UK, 2017), 83-88; The definitive essay on this is Matthew Steenberg, “Children in Paradise: Adam and Eve as ‘Infant’ in Irenaeus of Lyons,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, Vol. 12.1 (Spring 2004): 1-22.

<sup>81</sup> *Haer.* 5.33.4. Minns appropriately remarks, “So much of Irenaeus’ fight had been in favour of the positive value of the material creation, and especially of the human body, that he could not countenance so spiritualizing an interpretation.” Minns, *Irenaeus*, 142. Though see also *Epid.* 61, where Irenaeus is understood by some scholars to have changed his mind in favor of the allegorical interpretation of these passages. So Smith, *Proof*, 196, no. 270. But *Epid.* 61 need not be read in this way. Rather Irenaeus seems to be affirming both interpretations. He begins *Epid.* 61 by stating that “the elders say that it really will be even so at the coming of Christ.” The key interpretive phrase then follows: “Indeed, even now this symbolically signifies the gathering together in peaceful concord people of dissimilar races and dissimilar customs through the name of Christ.” (The Latin retrograde reads, “*Iam enim symbolice significat dissimilis generis et[dis]similium morum hominum per nomen Christi congregationem concordem in pace.*”) If Irenaeus intends the reader to understand that he is rejecting the elder tradition, he is too subtle. The passage is more naturally read as a development and further application of the elder tradition. For Irenaeus, it need not be



"ignorant of God's dispensations" and have derived their opinions from "heretical discourses." No doubt the heretical discourse Irenaeus has in mind here is the Gnostic variety, which maintained the ultimate destruction of the material world (including human bodies) in a cosmic conflagration.<sup>82</sup> But he also has in mind other Christian writers who—perhaps nervous about such "crass" interpretations—have adopted allegorical approaches. He writes:

If, however, any shall endeavor to allegorize these [passages], they shall not be found consistent with themselves at all points, and shall be confuted by the teaching of the very expressions... For all these and other words were unquestionably spoken in reference to the resurrection of the just, which takes place after the coming of Antichrist, and the destruction of all nations under his rule; in [the times of] which [resurrection] the righteous shall reign in the earth, waxing stronger by the sight of the Lord.<sup>83</sup>

Irenaeus' commitment to a literal reading of the biblical prophecies can be seen throughout *Haer.* 5.32-36. With repeated force, Irenaeus links together the scriptural promises of earthly reward with the "times of the kingdom." Notably, Irenaeus views the restoration of the material world as a fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12-15 regarding his seed inheriting the land of Canaan. Insofar as Abraham's seed had not yet inherited the land, we are to understand this promise as literally fulfilled in the church at the end of the age, when the Antichrist has been defeated and the world restored.<sup>84</sup> Likewise Isaac's prophecy concerning Jacob and his seed (Genesis 27: 27-29), Isaiah's vision of a pacified animal kingdom (Isaiah 65:25),<sup>85</sup> Jeremiah's prophecy about God's people inheriting the land (Jeremiah 23:7-8), Ezekiel's vision of God's people dwelling securely with houses and vineyards (Ezekiel 28:25-26), Daniel's promise that the whole kingdom under heaven should be given to God's people (Daniel 7:27), Jesus' promise that the meek shall inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5), Jesus' promise to drink again from the cup of the vine in the age to come (Matthew 26:27), and the apostle Paul's vision of creation being set free

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"either or." The future literal concord of the animals is symbolically portrayed by the human concord that has already been achieved by the work of Christ in the present.

<sup>82</sup> On this point Irenaeus complained that according to Gnostic thought, there would be nothing left of humans to enter the pleroma. See *Haer.* 2.29.3. This vision also set Irenaeus apart from much of the later Christian tradition. Eusebius, for instance, rejects Irenaeus' chiliasm by saying that Irenaeus received it from Papias, who according to Eusebius, was "a man of very limited intelligence," see *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.13. The general movement of Christian theology in Platonic directions, embodied most fully in Origen (of which Eusebius was an unapologetic heir), was no doubt responsible for much of the demise of early chiliasm. For more here, see Minns, *Irenaeus*, 140-42.

<sup>83</sup> *Haer.* 5.35.1.

<sup>84</sup> *Haer.* 5.32.2. See also the same in *Epid.* 91-95.

<sup>85</sup> Throughout this section of *Adversus haereses* Irenaeus leans most heavily upon Isaiah's prophetic vision of earthly salvation. The references to Isaiah are many throughout these four chapters of *Adversus haereses* (e.g., Isaiah 6:11, 11:6-9, 26:19, 30:35-26, 31:9, 58:14, 56:17-25, etc.).

into the glory of the children of God (Romans 8:19-22)—all of these are linked to the “kingdom” rather than symbolically portraying the eternal age. “Now all these things being such as they are, cannot be understood in reference to super-celestial matters.”<sup>86</sup>

Second, Irenaeus’ recapitulation theme is at work here.<sup>87</sup> For Irenaeus, it is *iustos* and necessary that the same creation in which humanity suffered should be the creation in which humanity is restored. And likewise, it is just and proper that creation itself, insofar as it is the reward of the righteous, should be renewed before it is returned to humanity. Such recompense is the vindication of God’s people and God’s plan. Later in *Haer.* 5.34.2 (quoting Isaiah 30:35–26<sup>88</sup>), Irenaeus remarks, “Now the ‘pain of his stroke’ is that inflicted at the beginning upon disobedient humanity in Adam, that is, death; which stroke the Lord will heal when he raises us from the dead and restores the inheritance of the fathers.”<sup>89</sup> As we have already seen, for Irenaeus the “inheritance of the fathers” is the promise to Abraham that the church would inherit the land and rule the nations. Thus the pain of God’s “stroke” brought not only death, but the loss of humanity’s intended inheritance (i.e., possession of the earth). As such, the healing of the stroke brings not only life, but a restoration of humanity’s earthly inheritance. What humanity lost in Adam, God has given back to humanity in Christ.

Thus recapitulation is not merely an interpretive lens through which Irenaeus exegetes the relevant biblical passages.<sup>90</sup> For Irenaeus, the eschatological recapitulation of creation is the great and necessary *telos* of God’s redemptive activity that has been ever at work since the fall of humanity in Adam.<sup>91</sup> Irenaeus’ eschatological interpretation is soteriological to the core,

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<sup>86</sup> *Haer.* 5.35.2.

<sup>87</sup> Irenaeus’ recapitulation theme is a well-tread aspect of Irenaeus scholarship. Much of the discussion centers around its overall place and import in Irenaeus’ thought, as well as its origin; is it the unhelpful product of Hellenistic thought (Harnack and other earlier interpreters), or a deeply biblical and important theme (Wingren, Lawson, and other more recent interpreters). The conversation merits discussion, but need not detain us. It is enough to observe, that here and throughout, Irenaeus views the redemption secured in Christ as a “summing up” and eschatological fulfillment of God’s original intent for creation. For more on the theme of recapitulation in Irenaeus, see Thomas Holsinger-Friesen, *Irenaeus and Genesis: A Study of Competition in Early Christian Hermeneutics* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 1–41, where he helpfully details the history of interpretation of Irenaeus on this theme, from Harnack to the present; also Osborn, who identifies eleven ideas contained within Irenaeus’ use of the term—unification, repetition, perfection, inauguration and consummation, totality, triumph of *Christus Victor*, ontology, epistemology and ethics. See his *Irenaeus*, 97–98, and all of chapters five and six. An effective summary of recapitulation and its function in Irenaeus can be found in Minns, *Irenaeus*, 108–110.

<sup>88</sup> “And there shall be upon every high mountain, and upon every prominent hill, water running everywhere in that day, when many shall perish, when walls shall fall. And the light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun, seven times that of the day, when he shall heal the anguish of his people and do away with the pain of his stroke.”

<sup>89</sup> *Haer.* 5.34.2.

<sup>90</sup> Smith ably makes this point in his “Chiliasm and Recapitulation.”

<sup>91</sup> This is a point that was obscured in much of nineteenth and early twentieth century Irenaeus scholarship, but has more recently been acknowledged and expounded by contemporary Irenaeus scholars. See Smith, “Chiliasm and Recapitulation,” 313–15. Smith

and integral to his overall project. To remove or minimize this aspect of his thought is to do violence to his overall cosmological and soteriological framework. The restoration of the material world is the necessary means by which God makes good on His promises of "reward," and thus serves as a climactic moment in Irenaeus' broader soteriological narrative.

And finally, for Irenaeus there is strong continuity between the "times of the kingdom" and the eternal age to come. For Irenaeus, the restoration of creation that takes place in the "times of the kingdom" marks the "commencement of incorruption;" it is the dawn of the eternal age (which as we will see below, is also an earthly age). It is in the "times of the kingdom" that the redeemed of God "become accustomed to partake in the glory of God the Father, and shall enjoy in the kingdom intercourse and communion with the holy angels and union with spiritual beings, and those whom the Lord shall find in the flesh awaiting him from heaven."<sup>92</sup> This partaking of God is learned "gradually" and over time.<sup>93</sup> Notably Irenaeus does not mention the rebellion and defeat of Satan contained at the end of the chiliastic vision found in Revelation 12:7-10.<sup>94</sup> Instead he moves from his chiliastic vision immediately to the Great White Throne judgment of Revelation 12:11-15, which marks the dawn of the eternal age. It is impossible to know if this omission is intentional, or merely an oversight. In any case, by leaving out this cosmic conflict, Irenaeus conveys a smoother continuity between "the times of the kingdom" and the "new heavens and the new earth."<sup>95</sup> This strong continuity can likewise be seen in the way Irenaeus applies Isaiah's prophetic eschatological vision to both the "times of the kingdom" (with its vision of harmonious animal relations) and the "times after the kingdom" (with its vision of a new heavens and a new earth).<sup>96</sup>

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highlights the trend in Irenaeus scholarship to dismiss or downplays this aspect of Irenaeus' thought. It is variously "ignored," treated as an "unfortunate mistake," an "over-reaction" to Gnosticism, or a "regrettable but inevitable consequence of [Irenaeus] insisting too strongly in the idea of recapitulation." Smith argues persuasively and correctly that such approaches to Irenaeus' chiliasm fail to do justice to the import it plays in his overall system. See also the positive treatments of Steenberg, *Irenaeus on Creation*, 49-60, Osborne, *Irenaeus*, 138-40; Wingren, *Man and Incarnation*, 181-92; Lawson, *Biblical Theology*, 279-91; and most especially Minns, *Irenaeus*, 141-47.

<sup>92</sup> *Haer.* 5.35.1.

<sup>93</sup> This is consistent with Irenaeus' emphasis on growth as a key component of being made into the likeness and image of God. See *Haer.* 4.11.1-2, 4.38.1-3, and 5.36.3.

<sup>94</sup> In Rev 20:7-10, Satan is released from the abyss and marshals the wicked to his side. Fire comes from heaven and consumes the wicked and the Satan is thrown into the lake of fire.

<sup>95</sup> The continuity between these two ages is so strong in Irenaeus that some scholars have suggested that Irenaeus completely conflates the two into a single epoch, thus denying his chiliasm altogether. Smith's work has been most influential here (see Smith, "Chiliasm and Recapitulation"). Yet however much Irenaeus posits continuity between the "times of the kingdom" and the "new heavens and new earth," he is indeed careful to distinguish the two. See in particular his comments in *Haer.* 5.35.2, where he states, "But in the times of the kingdom," and then a few sentences later, "For after the times of the kingdom"—with the former a clear reference to the millennium and the latter a clear reference to the new heavens and new earth.

<sup>96</sup> Notably, however, Irenaeus is careful to apply Isaiah 11 (which makes no mention of a new heavens and earth, but does include a reference to a pacified animal kingdom) to the

Thus Irenaeus' vision of a renewed creation in the millennium marks the inauguration of a progression toward a cosmic perfection that is naturally and (almost) seamlessly brought to completion in the new heaven and the new earth of Revelation 21. For Irenaeus, the resurrection of the just and the renewal of their creation is the climax of his soteriological story; to limit this renewal to a thousand years would undercut the full redemptive scope of God's salvific activity.

Ultimately, Irenaeus' chiliasm is entirely consistent with his broader soteriological narrative and should not be viewed as a mere appendage. For Irenaeus, the material world is itself the reward that God gives to the righteous, for the material world was intended as their possession all along. Were God to fail in restoring creation, or fail to restore it to His people, He would fail in redeeming His people. Further, it is in the kingdom that God's people learn to live with Him and are nurtured into the fullness of the image and likeness of God. All of this serves to highlight the innate connection between Irenaeus' anthropology and cosmology, and necessarily underscores the goodness of creation. Creation is the place in which humanity comes to know and learn that God is good.<sup>97</sup> As such, creation itself is destined for renewal and redemption every bit as much as humanity.

#### B. AN ETERNAL NEW HEAVEN AND AN ETERNAL NEW EARTH

Our understanding of Irenaeus' pro-material cosmological framework is likewise informed by his eschatological vision of an eternal new heaven and earth. In the final two chapters of *Adversus haereses*, Irenaeus turns his attention away from the millennial kingdom of Revelation 20:1-11, and begins to speak about the eternal state. In doing so he explicitly draws upon

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"times of the kingdom" (*Haer.* 5.33.4), while applying Isaiah 65 (where there is a reference to the new heavens and earth, as well as a reference to the pacified animal kingdom) to the "new heavens and new earth" (*Haer.* 5.35.2).

<sup>97</sup> Recent evangelical conversations about the eschatological renewal of creation, such as one finds in Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), and N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (San Francisco: Harper One, 2008), have been critiqued by Michael Allen, *Grounded in Heaven: Recentering Christian Hope and Life on God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), for instrumentalizing God, making Him merely a means to some other end (i.e., cosmic renewal). Allen's argues for a robust appropriation of the beatific vision as a means of maintaining a proper theocentric orientation in eschatology. Here Irenaeus manages to strike a remarkable balance. For Irenaeus, the restoration and perfection of creation is the very means by which the beatific vision of God comes to humanity. So his famous statement, "The glory of God is a living man, and the life of man consists in beholding God. For if the manifestation of God which is made by means of the creation, affords life to all living in the earth, much more does that revelation of the Father which comes through the Word, give life to those who see God," (*Haer.* 4.20.7). Creation is not a ladder to be climbed and then kicked away once one has reached the beatific top. Rather, the logic of the incarnation compels us to understand that creation itself is the eternal and necessary means by which God reveals the fullness of Himself to His creatures. Thus following Irenaeus, we need not choose between cosmic renewal on the one hand, or the beatific vision on the other.

the "new heavens and new earth" language of Revelation 21 (and Isaiah 65:17-18). He writes:

For after the times of the kingdom, [John] says, "I saw a great white throne, and him who sat upon it, from whose face the earth fled away, and the heavens; and there was no place for them." And he sets forth too, the things connected with the general resurrection and the judgment, mentioning the "dead, great and small" ... And after this, he says, "I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away" ... and Isaiah also declares the very same: "For there shall be a new heavens and a new earth, and there shall be no remembrance of the former, neither shall the heart think about them, but they shall find in it joy and exultation."<sup>98</sup>

Here we see the full expression of Irenaeus' confidence in God's cosmic redemption. The earth and heavens will indeed pass away<sup>99</sup> (as the Gnostic and Stoics declare), but they will pass away only to be replaced by an eternally fixed new heaven and an eternal new earth.<sup>100</sup> The holy city, the New Jerusalem, which is the anti-type of the old earthly city,<sup>101</sup> will descend from above and "then all things will be made new, and [the righteous] will truly dwell in the city of God."

This vision is in keeping with Irenaeus' larger cosmological outlook. He cannot cede the Bible's vision of new heaven and earth without undermining the integrity of the argument that he has made throughout the whole of *Adversus haereses*. This is perhaps even more fundamentally true with respect to the eternal state than his chiliasm. Creation is good because it has been made directly by God; and God is good because He has made such a great and good creation. To end his soteriological narrative with a super-celestial vision that does away with the cosmos would call into question the very integrity of God and His faithful commitment to humanity. In the final chapter of *Adversus haereses*, Irenaeus again connects anthropology and cosmology, insisting that the "loyalty" of God is contingent upon the "real establishment" of creation. He writes:

For since there are real [*veri*] humans, so must there also be a real establishment [*veram plantationem*], that they not vanish away among non-existent things, but progress among those which have an actual existence. For neither is the substance nor the essence of the creation annihilated [*Non enim substantia neque materia conditionis exterminatur*], for true [*verus*] and steadfast [*firmus*] is he who has established it. But "the fashion [*figura*] of the world passes away;" that is, those things among which transgression has occurred, since humanity has grown old in them [*quoniam veteratus est homo*]

<sup>98</sup> *Haer.* 5.35.2.

<sup>99</sup> Here Irenaeus references Paul's comment in 1 Cor 7:31, "The fashion of this world passes away," and Christ's words in Matt 26:35, "Heaven and earth shall pass away."

<sup>100</sup> See Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 80-85, who notes Irenaeus' unique emphasis in the Eastern Orthodox tradition regarding the salvation of the material world.

<sup>101</sup> See *Haer.* 5.32.2.

*in ipsis*]. And therefore this fashion has been formed temporary [*temporalis*], God foreknowing all things; as I have pointed out in the preceding book, and have also shown, as far as was possible, the cause of the creation of this world of temporal things. But when this fashion passes away, and humanity has been renewed [*renovato*], and flourishes in an incorruptible state, so as to preclude the possibility of becoming old ever again [*ut non possit iam veterescere*] there shall be the new heaven and the new earth, in which the new humanity shall be remaining [*in quibus novus perseverabit hom*], always holding fresh converse with God. And since these things shall ever continue without end [*Et quoniam haec semper perseverabunt sine fine*], Isaiah declares, “For as the new heavens and the new earth which I do make, continue in my sight, says the Lord, so shall your seed and your name remain.”<sup>102</sup>

For Irenaeus, “real” humans require a “real” creation, so that they do not vanish away. Here Irenaeus takes it as axiomatic that human beings are by nature tangible, embodied creatures. As such, humans will always require a material creation in which to live. Were God not to provide humans with a material creation, this would prove their undoing, and He would prove Himself less than “true” and “loyal” to His children. Irenaeus’ eschatological vision here eclipses even that of the renewed earth of the preceding chapters. The chiliastic kingdom is indeed a renovation of creation, but this final stage of cosmic salvation represents the ultimate perfection of God’s creative and redemptive work. No longer will humanity be able to “grow old” but will continue eternally ever young, “holding fresh converse with God” in the new creation that “shall continue without end.”

Notably Irenaeus goes on in the next two paragraphs to argue for a three-tiered eschatological reward system that seems to suggest a preference for a celestial (rather than terrestrial) redemption. He writes, “And as the presbyters say, then those who are deemed worthy of an abode in heaven shall go there, others shall enjoy the delights of paradise, and others shall possess the splendor of the city; for everywhere the Savior shall be seen according as they who see him shall be worthy.”<sup>103</sup> Irenaeus ascribes this system to the “presbyters,” who “affirm that this is the gradation and arrangement of those who are saved, and that they advance through steps of this nature.”<sup>104</sup> In many respects this move seems surprising and runs somewhat counter to his strong terrestrial eschatology; it is, one might have thought, too perilously close to the Gnostic three-fold division of humans as “spiritual,” “ensouled” and “fleshly”—each of whom have different experiences in the afterlife.<sup>105</sup> Yet Irenaeus is consistent in his dependence on the traditions that have been handed to him; the “presbyters” gave him his chiliasm and his vision for a new heaven and earth; he adopts their three-tiered reward system as well. Perhaps Irenaeus senses the ill-fit of this

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<sup>102</sup> *Haer.* 5.36.1.

<sup>103</sup> *Haer.* 5.36.1.

<sup>104</sup> *Haer.* 5.36.2.

<sup>105</sup> See *Haer.* 1.6-7, where the “spiritual” enter into the pleroma, the “ensouled” dwell halfway between the material world and the pleroma, and the “fleshly” are ultimately destroyed with the material world.



system; he does not spend much time discussing the three-tiered system, and even seems to suggest a certain fluidity between these three realms, with the saints moving back and forth throughout eternity. In any case, he immediately returns to the theme of cosmic and terrestrial renewal, which is how he finishes his book.

In the final chapter of book five, Irenaeus sums up the preceding chapters by again stressing the non-allegorical nature of the Scripture's promise for terrestrial redemption and God's people inheriting an earthly kingdom. Here again he blurs the lines between his chiliasm and the eternal state, with the former passing naturally and seamlessly into the latter without an earth-shattering apocalypse. He ends his work with a moving vision of cosmic and terrestrial redemption.

And in all these things, and by them all, the same God the Father is manifested, who fashioned humanity, and gave promise of the inheritance of the earth to the fathers, who brought it forth at the resurrection of the just, and fulfills the promises for the kingdom of his Son; subsequently bestowing in a paternal manner those things which neither the eye has seen, nor the ear has heard, nor has arisen within the heart of humanity.<sup>106</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Irenaeus' pro-material cosmology is consistent throughout his work. He never vacillates about the goodness of creation, and his insistence on the inherent integrity of creation provides a clear coherence to his system. For Irenaeus, the creation is inherently good because it has been given by a good God to a good humanity. More aspects of Irenaeus' cosmology could be marshalled in defense of this assertion,<sup>107</sup> but the salient point has been made. For Irenaeus, creation is not merely a temporary backdrop for an otherwise celestial narrative. Indeed, creation itself (the earth most especially) is the gift that God has given to humanity, and perhaps most especially to the human Son of God. It is the royal prize awarded to creation's Lord, and to all who belong to Him.

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<sup>106</sup> *Haer.* 5.36.3.

<sup>107</sup> One might also note here the fascinating way that Irenaeus connects the Eucharistic meal with the goodness of creation. He writes, "But our opinion [regarding the goodness of creation] is in accordance with the Eucharist, and the Eucharist in turn establishes our opinion," (*Haer.* 4.18.5; see all of 4.16.5-18.6; also 5.2.2). For more on the connection between the Eucharist and Irenaeus' cosmology, see Joel R. Kurz, "The Gifts of Creation and the Consummation of Humanity: Irenaeus of Lyons' Recapitulatory Theology of the Eucharist," *Worship* 83.2 (2009): 112-132.