

The following is an excerpt from *Irenaeus on the Trinity* by Jackson Lashier via <https://Brill.com>

Begin Excerpt:

In this work, I have sought to communicate Irenaeus of Lyons' Trinitarian theology through a study of his understanding of the respective natures of God/Father, Logos/Son, and Sophia/Spirit, as well as through a study of the relationships among them, in both their immanent and economic manifestations. In order to avoid the errors of past scholarship that with few exceptions have prevented an accurate assessment of his Trinitarian theology, I placed Irenaeus' thought in the context of the second century through a comparative methodology that connected Trinitarian themes in his thought with that of Justin, Athenagoras, and Theophilus, as well as in polemical response to Valentinian theology. According to my guiding thesis, the Apologists' theology, known to Irenaeus through the works of Justin and Theophilus, was insufficient to meet the challenge posed by Valentinianism, particularly in its variant conceptions of the divine nature, the relationship of God to other divine beings, and the relationship of God to the world—in other words, in the very areas that bear on Trinitarian theology.

The differences between the Apologists and Irenaeus stem from the logic established in the latter's rhetorical polemic of *Haer. 2*, insofar as the Valentinian conception of God that Irenaeus presents and rejects can be understood as a radicalization of the Apologists' thought. Several convergences may be identified. Both the Apologists and the Valentinians conceive of the divine nature spatially, the former metaphorically and the latter literally. Despite their differences in use of theological language, the result of the spatial imagery results in a similar understanding of transcendence (God is in some manner separated from the material world and cannot work in it) as well as a similar understanding of the generation/emanation of divine beings (they literally separate or come out of God). Both the Apologists and the Valentinians bridge the spatial gap between God and the world with lesser divine beings who consequently serve as a filter between God and the world. For the Valentinians, these beings are the 29 Aeons of the divine *Pleroma*, with the actions of the last Aeon resulting in the existence of an unintended, inherently evil material creation. For the Apologists, these beings are the Logos and the Spirit. (That the Apologists, in accord with scripture, do not think of material creation as inherently evil is of little consequence for their understanding of the respective natures of the Logos and the Spirit.) They came out of the Father at their respective generations for the express purpose of working in the world on behalf of the Father, whose transcendence precludes such action. Both the Valentinians and the Apologists understand the generation of these lesser divine beings to involve both a spatial separation from the Most High God and a time element—prior to their generations, these beings did not exist distinct from the Father. For the Valentinians, they have no existence; for the

Apologists, they can be said to exist only as the Father's indistinguishable and interior reason and wisdom. They do not do anything in this stage that would necessitate distinction or personality. Thus, once separated, the Logos and the Spirit are divine but of a different and lesser divine nature than the Father. They are eternal but not eternally distinct. They pre-exist creation but can be located and seen in it. In other words, like the Valentinian Aeons, the Logos and the Spirit in the Apologists' thought exist in relationship with the Father in an ontologically subordinated hierarchy of gradated divinities. The Apologists' theology may be considered Trinitarian in the sense that they speak of three divine entities in accord with the tenets of the eclectic philosophy they attempt to correlate with Christian belief. Nevertheless, the Apologists do not account adequately either for the eternally distinct personalities of the three divine entities or their unity in distinction. The Apologists only maintain their unity, in the stage prior to the generation of Logos and Spirit, with a loss of their distinct personalities. Likewise, once the Apologists establish the distinctions of God and his agents by means of the generation, they forfeit any claim to the continuing unity of the three. The Apologists remain monotheists only in the sense that they identify the Father alone with the Creator God of the Jewish scriptures. The Logos and the Spirit are divine beings, but they are subordinated to the Father, who alone properly is called God. The demands of the Apologists' understanding of God's transcendence and active work in the world necessitate such a formulation.

Unlike the Apologists, Irenaeus explicitly states that correct thinking about God must be tied to the teaching of the church in scripture and as passed down from the apostles in the church's *regula fidei*. His interests lie neither in speculative theology nor in aligning Christian beliefs with philosophical doctrine. He is interested only with faithful interpretation of the church's teaching, and he found the topological theology of the 'Gnostics,' and the Valentinians in particular, incommensurate with this teaching. First, a spatially distant God could not be reconciled with the active and present God of scripture. Second, a spatially distant God, and a series of semi-divine Aeons, conflicted with the properties of spirit, which Irenaeus understands as the central description of the divine nature.

The difficulty he faced in arguing against Valentinian theology is the inadequacy of his immediate sources of the apostolic tradition to address these errant interpretations. Namely, the Apologists' interpretation of the *regula's* Father, Son, and Spirit as a distant Creator God and two intermediate, lesser divine beings could not reject adequately and fully either the Valentinian topological understanding of the divine *Pleroma* or the corresponding theory of emanation. Consequently, without impugning the writers who had passed on key aspects of the church's teaching to him and who, in some cases, had proved their faith either through martyrdom or through possession of an apostolic office, Irenaeus departs from their conception of God. Using scripture as read through the lens of the *regula* and the logic of the traditional definition of God

as spirit, Irenaeus took on the Valentinians, and as a result, he took Trinitarian theology in a new direction.

In contrast to the spatially distant God of the Valentinians (and Apologists), Irenaeus defines God's transcendence as 'absolute.' As such, God is of a higher order than his creatures, as the prophets proclaimed (Isaiah 55:8) and as Irenaeus understands the creation account in Genesis (*ex nihilo*). Only God is 'uncreated,' while every other being is defined by being created or having their source in him. Accordingly, Irenaeus understands all material creation to exist in God, who contains all things as the 'Fullness.' (Irenaeus uses 'containing' language apart from any notion of spatiality because of his guiding principle that God is spirit.) The theological upshot of this formulation of transcendence is the absence of a need for any barrier or filter separating God from his creation, as was necessitated by the Valentinians' (and Apologists') understanding. As 'absolutely' transcendent, God's nature cannot be infringed upon by material creation. He is free to move and work in creation in accord with the God to whom scripture testifies. To use Irenaeus' language, the God who creates with his hands always keeps his creation in his hands.

For Irenaeus, God's hands are the Logos/Son and the Sophia/Spirit, two figures he finds in scripture and in the church's *regula*; for that reason, he incorporates these figures into his understanding of God and the divine work in the economy. Following scripture, and the fourth Gospel in particular, Irenaeus understands the Logos/Son and Sophia/Spirit's respective works in the world, both prior to, during, and following the incarnation, as mediatory in nature—they perform the work and will of God/Father who alone is the source of the work of the economy. Nevertheless, since Irenaeus does not need to keep the transcendent God physically separated from material creation, the respective natures of Logos/Son and Sophia/Spirit are not required to be lesser or of a different quality than that of God/Father in order to perform this work. Instead, Irenaeus understands better than his predecessors that the agents of God's work must themselves be divine in the same way that God is divine—the agents of God's work are included with God in his 'uncreated' nature over against everything else that has their source or beginning in God.

In order to align this understanding of the relationship of God/Father and his two agents with the principle of a simple divine nature (stemming from the properties of spirit), Irenaeus conceives of an enduring unity among the three divine entities located in one divine and spiritual nature. According to the properties of spirit, all three divine entities fully and completely indwell one another such that Irenaeus can say both that the Son is in the Father and that the Father is in the Son (and in later books, the Spirit is included in this reciprocal, interpenetrating relationship). The relational unity is eternal insofar as the eternally reasonable and wise God can never be

without his Logos and his Sophia. Thus, their existence with and in the Father is maintained apart from any mediating work they may perform in the economy.

While God/Father, Logos/Son, and Sophia/Spirit exist in an eternal unity of spirit, Irenaeus does not consider them indistinguishable. Again taking his cue from scripture, Irenaeus believes that the Father generates the Logos/Son and the Sophia/Spirit. Although he says little directly regarding the generations because of scripture's silence on the matter, his polemical argument against the Valentinian theory of emanation reveals his understanding of generation as dictated by the spiritual and eternal unity he envisions among God/Father, Logos/Son, and Sophia/Spirit. First, he removes any time element in the process. Although Logos/Son and Sophia/Spirit are generated from God/Father, this generation does not result in a beginning point to their existence. As Logos and as Spirit, they are always with God in a spiritual unity and in agreement with a simple divine nature. Second, he removes any spatial connotations in the process. Although Logos/Son and Sophia/Spirit are generated from God/Father, they do not separate from him or come out of him. They remain in a spiritual and interpenetrating unity with God at all times, even when the Son is incarnate upon earth.

Irenaeus further argues for the eternal distinctions of God/Father, Logos/Son, and Sophia/Spirit by their distinctive economic functions. In the context of the creative work, only God/Father is the source of the work, only Logos/Son establishes or brings the work into existence, and only Sophia/Spirit arranges or forms that work. In the context of the redemptive work, the Father alone sends the Son, the Son alone unites his divinity to flesh, and the Spirit alone remains with humanity after the Son's departure. Put metaphorically, the Father anoints, the Son is anointed, and the Spirit is the anointing agent. Nonetheless, these distinctive works do not depend upon the lesser divinities of the Logos/Son and Sophia/Spirit who work in the world on behalf of a God who cannot undertake such work by virtue of his transcendence. Quite the opposite, the work of Logos/Son and Sophia/Spirit in the world is based on the truth that they are divine in the same manner that the Father is divine (literally, they are 'God,' according to Irenaeus' mature interpretation of Ephesians 4:6). Accordingly, it is the nature of God to create and not to be created—both Logos and Sophia create and are not created. The Logos, who is invisible by nature, reveals the Father in the economy such that when humanity sees the Son (prophetically and literally), they see the Father. Likewise, the work of redemption involves the uniting of divine with material, a union affected by the work of the Logos/Son and Sophia/Spirit by virtue of their divine status. The result is a functional hierarchy—God/Father is the source of the work and the two agents perform that work—that assumes a prior spiritual or ontological unity. To put this understanding in modern Trinitarian terms, for Irenaeus, the economic manifestation of the Trinity depends on the reality of an immanent Trinity, which exists from eternity regardless of the presence of creation.

Irenaeus' theology thus may be considered Trinitarian in the full sense of the word. He believes in the existence of three equally divine and eternally distinct beings, named God/Father, Logos/Son, and Sophia/Spirit who exist as one God. He accounts for both their eternal unity through a common possession of one spiritual nature and their eternal distinction through the generation of the Son and Spirit from the Father and through their different functions in the economy. In Irenaeus' understanding, the two agents' equal divinity with the Father allows them to perform these economic functions. In contrast to the first trajectory of scholarship, this Trinitarian interpretation of Irenaeus' thought is neither anachronistic nor devoid of an immanent aspect. In contrast to the second trajectory of scholarship, this Trinitarian theology is not Nicene and indeed much more development occurs subsequent to Irenaeus to fully flesh out his understanding.

Nevertheless, it is not the case that Irenaeus has no place in the narrative of the development of the Trinity from its nascent presence in the New Testament to its full flowering in the fourth century. Rather, the lack of an accurate account of Irenaeus' Trinitarian theology in both trajectories of Irenaean scholarship to this point has precluded an appreciation of Irenaeus' role. The goal of this work was to produce an accurate account of Irenaeus' Trinitarian theology. Having accomplished this task, I will offer a few brief remarks on Irenaeus' place in the development of the Trinity as a way of concluding. What follows is intended not to be comprehensive but to serve as the opening remarks for potential future studies comparing Irenaeus' Trinitarian theology to the theologies of Trinitarian writers of later centuries.

Significantly, the areas in which Irenaeus departs from the Apologists point toward emphases in later Trinitarian thought. In particular, five areas are worth exploring. First, while Irenaeus does not utilize Father/Son language to argue for the eternity of the Son, as in the manner of Origen and Athanasius, his use of the title 'Father' to describe God in relationship to the Son prepares for this later argument. Second, while Irenaeus does not speak of an 'eternal generation' of the Son, as the Alexandrians do, his rejection of the connotation of a temporal starting point (and the resultant 'two-stage' Logos theology) is consonant with this later understanding. Third, while Irenaeus does not describe a generation of the Spirit, as the Cappadocians will develop, his arguments for the parallel, eternal natures of the Spirit and the Logos, using 'Sophia' as a pneumatological title, affirms the logic necessary for understanding an eternally processing Spirit. Fourth, while Irenaeus does not specify that the Son is of 'one essence' (ὁμοούσιος) or of 'one power' with the Father, as the Nicenes and pro-Nicenes insist, his emphasis on the one divine and spiritual nature and mutual indwelling of Father, Son, and Spirit anticipates if not fully expresses an argument of unity in essence. Fifth, while Irenaeus lacks a category (e.g., 'person') to describe the distinctions of Father, Son, and Spirit, his redefinition of 'God' to name

what is shared among the three and his emphasis on their titles to express their distinct functions, encapsulates the truth of a unity in essence, distinction in persons affirmation unknown prior to Irenaeus. These areas need further explanation and development, and they are not, perhaps, exhaustive of Irenaeus' contribution.

Regardless of the areas in which Irenaeus may have influenced later Trinitarian writers, I hope that this work has revealed Irenaeus' importance and genius in shifting the course of the second century's dominant theological trends with regard to the natures and interior relationships of God/Father, Logos/Son, and Sophia/Spirit, as well as their resulting expressions in the economy. The shift was occasioned by the historical need to reject the variant doctrines of God in 'Gnosticism,' in much the same way that Irenaeus' formulation of the 'economy' was occasioned by the historical need to reject variant understandings of the relation between the Old and New Testaments in Marcionism. Irenaeus' theology of the immanent Triune God deserves as much praise, recognition, and scholarly attention as is traditionally assigned his theology of the economy of salvation.

End Excerpt.