

## The preamble of the *Gospel according to John* – Its significance in the hermeneutical conflict between the Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons and the gnostic school of Valentinus

**Abstract:** The main purpose of this paper is to highlight a *locus communis* in the field of translation studies, namely that a translation is never free of the underlying assumptions with which one embarks on the difficult journey of rendering a meaning not only from one language into another, but also within the same language. As Roman Jakobson once observed, the act of translating is a universal one and its domain covers both the transfer between two languages, and the transfer that takes place each moment within the same language (Jakobson 1959, 233). Just as in deciphering utterances within our own language, we constantly act as interpreters with our own biases and worldviews when we approach ancient texts, and much more so when we approach a sacred text, our own intimate assumptions often get the better or the worse of us or anyhow interfere with our approaching the text. There has never been an empty space between a reader and a text, but a whole constellation of intentions, figures and texts – in short, a tradition of some sort or another. This is precisely the case with a text like the *Gospel according to John*, and especially with its preamble, which generated, immediately after its emergence within the *oikoumene*, an avalanche of interpretations. We shall endeavor to highlight two of them as being the main contenders of that day, namely the interpretation offered by the gnostic school of Valentinus, and that of the Bishop of Lyons, Irenaeus. We shall try to show that the marked differences in interpreting this same text depend on the evident different doctrines which the two parties embrace. In doing so, we shall also underline the implications of this hermeneutical conflict for the subsequent development of the Christian doctrine. Of main importance for this analysis will be the concept of Tradition, one of the main pillars of faith used by Irenaeus of Lyons in order to refute and overthrow (*Adversus haereses*, II.Pr.2) the gnostic reading (and appropriation) of this Gospel. The paper will endeavor to answer the rather difficult question of why the Valentinians lost the doctrinal and hermeneutical battle with, then, not yet the official contender of the Christian doctrine, as we know it today.

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## 1. The Preamble of the *Gospel according to John* in the exegesis of Ptolemaeus' school

We begin by exposing the kernel of the dispute such as it is presented to us in the paragraphs 8.5 to 9.3. from the first book of *Adversus haereses*. Here, Irenaeus of Lyons offers a summary of the interpretation given by the Ptolemaeus' school to the preamble of the *Gospel according to John*. The context is given by the gnostic exegesis of different new testamentary scriptural texts, which, in the view of Ptolemaeus' school, intimate, if read between the lines, the whole gnostic doctrine of the Pleroma, the generation of the Aeons in pairs or syzygies, the fall and redemption of the last Aeon, Sophia, the banishment of its Intention, called Achamoth, from the Pleroma, the generation of the Demiurge and the subsequent formation of the lower world.

The paragraphs 8.5. to 9.3. give a rather lengthy report on this kind of exegesis applied to the *Gospel according to John*. That this interpretation was important for the Bishop of Lyons is shown by the fact that Irenaeus is not satisfied to give only a summary of it (which he usually does when it comes to the gnostic exegeses), but offers a large quotation either from a work of Ptolemaeus himself, or from one of his disciples' work. The quotation begins as follows: "John, the Lord's disciple, wishing to enounce the genesis of all things by which the Father emitted all things, establishes a certain Principle, the first born by God, whom he called also Son and Only-Begotten, in which the Father emitted all things seminally. John says that the Logos was emitted by this Principle and within him the entire substance of the Aeons, to which the Logos himself subsequently gave form. Since, therefore, John speaks of the first genesis, he rightly begins his teaching from the Principle, that is, the Son, and from the Logos" (*Adversus haereses*, I.8.5). The fragment might be taken as a hermeneutical framework within which its author inserts and gives (his) meaning to the first verse of the *Gospel according to John*. The passage follows immediately afterwards and cannot be rendered as we are accustomed to read it as *In the beginning was the Word and the Word was unto God, and God was the Word. This was in the beginning unto God* (Jn 1.1-2), but should be translated in this case, keeping in mind the aforementioned interpretation, by *In the Principle was the Logos and the Logos was unto God and God was the Logos. This was in the Principle unto God*. As it is already clear, the gnostic interpretation hypostatizes the Greek feminine common noun ἄρχή into a proper name, Ἀρχή, which in the Ptolemaeus doctrine is the first emanation of the Pre-Father or the Abyss, namely the Intellect, Only-Begotten, Son, Father of all things and Principle. Thus, the Logos is only the third Aeon in the process of emanation that begins with the first Father, and not the Word of God made flesh from the orthodox doctrine.

After the hermeneutical context and the text to be interpreted, the author begins the actual interpretation as follows: “After John first distinguished the three terms, God, Principle and Logos, he unites them again to show both the emanation of each of the two of them, that is, of the Son and of the Logos, and the union between them, and of both of them to the Father. For the Principle is in the Father and from the Father, and the Logos is in the Principle and from the Principle. Thus, he rightly said: *In the Principle was the Logos*, for he was in the Son; *and the Logos was unto God*, for the Principle was also unto God; *and God was the Logos* is a logical consequence, because that which is born from God is God; *This was in the Principle unto God*, [saying by which] he showed the order of emanation. *All things were made through him and without him nothing was made* (Jn 1.3), for the Logos was the cause of formation and genesis for all the Aeons that came into existence after him” (*Adversus haereses*, I.8.5).

For the Ptolemaic author of this fragment, this interpretation of the first three verses of the *Gospel according to John* represents a hermeneutical model for all the subsequent passages. Reading between the lines, he finds adumbrated the genesis of the first eight Aeons of the Pleroma. We must stop here for a moment to recall in a few words the gnostic system of Ptolemaeus, such as it is exposed by the Bishop of Lyons.

## **2. Ptolemaeus’ doctrine in the first book of *Adversus haereses***

At the basis of Ptolemaeus’ doctrine one can discern a vision of divinity which is common with the philosophical doctrines of the day. Following the platonic speculation exposed in *Parmenides*, Medio-platonic philosophy emphasizes the unspeakable and unknowable character of the One, who, properly speaking, cannot receive neither the affirmative, nor the negative attributes, or, if he receives them, he surpasses them by his absolute transcendence. This absolute transcendence of the One is represented in the Ptolemaic system by the one called the Pre-Principle, Pre-Father and Abyss. This is the basis of the entire Ptolemaic system and the origin of the divine Pleroma formed by 30 Aeons. As in Platonism, Medio-Platonism and the Neo-Platonic philosophy, which developed from the third century A.D., the Ptolemaic gnostic system feels the need of separating the absolute One from the entities responsible for the formation of the cosmos, because the supreme God could not be made responsible for the act of creation, if he were to remain transcendent. Notwithstanding this necessity, in Ptolemaeus’ doctrine, the Abyss is the origin for the rest of the Aeons which, in the Valentinian gnostic mythology, are self-subsisting entities and which, from a philosophical perspective, are considered to be divine dispositions. All the Aeons are generated in complementary pairs of masculine and feminine entities. Thus, from the primordial Aeon, the Pre-Father, by fecundation of

the Aeon Thought (also called Grace and Silence), it is issued forth the aeonic pair of Intellect (Νοῦς, also called Only-begotten, Father and Principle of everything) and Truth. In Ptolemaeus' system, this is the primordial Tetrad. In its turn, the Intellect emanates the pair of Logos and Life, and from these two are emanated Man and Church. We thus reach the Ogdoad of Ptolemaeus' system. The pair of Logos and Life will emanate ten other Aeons, that is the Decade, and the pair of Man and Church will give birth to twelve other Aeons, i.e. the Dodecade. At the end of this process of emanation the Pleroma reaches its fulfillment of 30 Aeons.

One peculiar feature of the Ptolemaic system is that it posits the appearance of evil, one of the main philosophical problems that haunted the antique thought, within the divine Pleroma, and not within the material cosmos. The one responsible for the birth of evil is, thus, precisely the divine world, following a catastrophic event that took place in its bosom. In the gnostic mythology, the last Aeon of the Dodecade and of the Triacontade, Sophia or Wisdom, gives birth to an Intention or Desire, accompanied by passion, to know the transcendent Father and to embrace his greatness, a knowledge that was the strict domain of the Intellect. From the exposition made by Irenaeus, one may infer that this desire to know the Pre-Father was infused in the other Aeons by Intellect himself, but that they craved somewhat moderately to know him without acting towards this end. This desire becomes an irresistible force in the last Aeon, Sophia, who launches herself towards the knowledge of the Pre-Father and, consequently, gives birth to the Intention or Desire, which, although a pneumatic substance, has no form, for Wisdom has emitted her outside of the natural contact with her pair. Following this event, through the agency of the Only-Begotten, the Pre-Father emits another Aeon, the Limit, also named Cross, who puts an end to the assault of Sophia who risked being wiped out of existence because of her passion. By the intervention of the Aeon Limit, Sophia is reestablished within the Pleroma, but her Intention, or Achamoth, is thrown outside of it. The genesis of the universe begins only in this moment, for the souls of the Demiurge and of men, and the material elements are born from the fear, the sorrow and the conversion (or the attempt to return to the Pleroma) of Achamoth.

Meanwhile, the Pre-Father emits again through the Only-Begotten another aeonic pair, Christ and Holy Spirit, the function of which is to prevent a similar future tragedy. For this purpose, the pair sets the Aeons in order and teaches them that the first Father is unknowable and impossible to comprise. According to Irenaeus, as a token of their gratefulness, all the Aeons emitted then a last Aeon, "the star and perfect fruit of Pleroma", namely Jesus, also called the Savior. This is the Savior who, according to Valentinian doctrine, will descend upon the psychic Christ generated by the Demiurge, and who announced the true God. One can surely recognize

here the Docetism of the Valentinian doctrine that denies the incarnation of the Savior and breaks the unity of Christ's Person in a multitude of entities, either aeonic or not. Exegetically, Ptolemaeus justifies his Christology by resorting to a peculiar interpretation of the *Gospel according to John*.

### **3. The Ogdoad alluded to in the preamble of the *Gospel according to John***

As we have seen above, for Ptolemaeus and his followers the preamble of the Johannine gospel conveyed a hidden knowledge which announced the genesis of the divine Pleroma and its powers. In the front stage of this theogony we found the first three Aeons, the supreme God, the Principle and the Logos. Following the hermeneutical method that he has ascribed to the reading of John's preamble, the Ptolemaic author discovers new Aeons in the sacred text: "But John continues: *What was made in him was Life* (Jn 1.4), and here he also indicated the pair of the Logos, for, in his words, all were made by him, but Life was in him. Consequently, this Life that was in him, was more closely connected with him than those that were made by him, because Life is with him and through him bears fruit. And since he adds *And Life was the light of Men* (Jn 1.4), by having said "Men" he readily disclosed by the same name also the Church in order to uncover through a single name the communion of the pair – for, from [the pair] of Logos and Life was born [the pair] of Man and Church. [...] By these words, then, John has clearly revealed, amongst other things, also the second Tetrad, namely Logos and Life, Man and Church. But he truly revealed also the first Tetrad. For, by speaking about the Savior and by saying that all things outside of Pleroma have received their form through him, John asserts, at the same time, that the Savior is the fruit of the entire Pleroma. [...] And John says that he is also Son and Truth and Life and Logos which was made flesh, whose glory he states we have seen and that his glory was the one that belonged to the Only-Begotten that was given to him by the Father, full of Grace and Truth (Jn 1.14). Thus, John has revealed with precision also the first Tetrad when he mentioned the Father, the Grace, the Only-Begotten and the Truth. In this manner, he has also mentioned the first Ogdoad, Mother of all the Aeons, for he has indicated the Father, the Grace, the Only-Begotten, the Truth, the Logos, the Life, the Man and the Church" (*Adversus haereses*, I.8.5).

In rendering this passage, we were again forced to capitalize the common nouns of "life" and "men", which thus become proper names for two Aeons. Reading the whole quotation brought forth by Irenaeus of Lyons, one can discern a certain structure of interpretation or mode of reading. First, we have a brief announcement of the doctrine, then the sacred text, which should give testimony to the doctrine, next the interpretation that,

basically, confirms the doctrine. In all this development, the main focus is the doctrine, and not the sacred text that becomes merely an adjacent – although a useful – tool for the gnostic revelation. One could get the impression that he faces what we, as moderns, are acquainted with as a kind of ideological hermeneutics. In fact, this is precisely the accusation directed in other words against the Valentinian school by the Bishop of Lyons, who – as we shall see – says that the Gnostics invented a doctrine (or doctrines) that afterwards they tried to back by falsifying the Scriptures through interpretation.

One could reply that this structure of interpretation was superimposed by Irenaeus' reading of the Ptolemaic gnostic corpus and thus does not pertain to the Gnostic School per se. To find a solution to this problem, one should analyze similar interpretations made to the same Johannine text by adherents to the Valentinian doctrine. Fortunately, we have two such interpretations, one made by Heracleon that can be reconstructed from the quotations given by Origen in his *Commentary to the Gospel according to John*, and the other can be found in what is now known under the title of *Excerpts from Theodotus*, fragments that were preserved by the Christian writer Clement of Alexandria.

One could again retort that, in their turn, these two interpretations are susceptible of having been twisted by their Christian foes and, thus, could not be reliable in an attempt to reconstruct the original hermeneutical structure. Brought to its extreme, this attitude leads the one embracing it to reject the entire testimony of the first Christian Fathers with regard to the gnostic doctrines of their day. Moreover, by doing this, it will be implied that this testimony is a complete falsification, one which was forged to impose another ideology, namely the doctrine of the Catholic Church. For this point of view, the discovery of the Nag Hammadi gnostic corpus was a disappointment, since in broad lines it confirmed the testimony of the first Christian Fathers regarding the gnostic doctrines of the first two centuries after Christ. Surely, one could make a strong case against some specifics of their testimony directed as this was against what was perceived as being a very dangerous enemy, a foe admittedly attacked more than once with the weapons of libeling and defamation. Notwithstanding this, the testimony of the Church Fathers from the first three centuries remains in its general features a reliable one.

#### **4. Heracleon's commentary to the *Gospel according to John***

The first commentary made to the Johannine gospel is considered to be that of Heracleon's. This is important, for it shows us the high place enjoyed by this sacred text in Valentinus' school. In fact, the *Gospel according to John* seems to have been used first in gnostic circles before it entered the canon

of the New Testament. One might argue that, precisely for this reason, a Christian writer like Justin the Martyr avoided recognizing it, and consequently, never quotes the gospel. Some scholars contend (maybe rightly so) that the gospel was known and accepted in orthodox circles before Irenaeus of Lyons made of it the summit of the four gospels, but admit nonetheless that the orthodox party was reluctant in its regard because of the Johannine gospel's being adopted by the Valentinians (Hill, 2004). However that may be, the *Gospel according to John* played an enormous role in the controversy between the Valentinians and the orthodox Christians, and the commentary of Heracleon to it played no small part in that debate (Thomassen, 2010, 173). It is for this reason that the great Origen, in his own commentary to the gospel, stops to recall and refute what he calls the 'theory' of Heracleon.

The paragraphs 100 to 104 from Book II give us a glimpse of what Heracleon believed to be the meaning of the Johannine preamble. Origen is scandalized by the hermeneutics of this disciple of Valentinus when this one interprets the verse *All things were made through him* (Jn 1.3) by saying that the "all things" spoken of here comprise only the corruptible cosmos, and "Neither the aeon nor the things in the aeon have been made through the Word" (Origen, 1989, 120). Furthermore, Heracleon makes a clear distinction between the Word and the creator of this world or the demiurge: "The one who provided the creator (τῷ δημιουργῷ) with the cause for making the world, that is the Word, is not the one 'from whom', or 'by whom', but the one 'through whom' [it was made]" (Origen, 1989, 121). The same distinction between the "Father of truth" and the creator or demiurge is also manifest in a quotation of Heracleon given by Origen in paragraph 97 from Book XIII (Origen, 1993, 88). One can thus safely say that, in keeping with the Valentinian doctrine, Heracleon makes a clear distinction between this corruptible world and the divine world of the Aeon or the Pleroma. But the most striking Valentinian feature of Heracleon's commentary is the difference he makes between the Word and the demiurge of this world – a feature implied in the commentary to the same text made by the Ptolemaic author quoted in *Adversus haereses*.

That the same hermeneutical structure was applied by Heracleon in reading the preamble of the Johannine gospel is suggested by Origen's observation that, to the scriptural text *Without him nothing was made* (Jn 1.3), the gnostic commentator added, "without warrant from Scripture, the words 'of the things in the cosmos and in the creation'". Origen adds himself that "Nor does he prove this with plausible argument, since he considers himself worthy to be believed like the prophets or apostles..." (Origen, 1989, 120-121). Basically, this is the same accusation that Irenaeus directed against Ptolemaeus' school, namely that, when interpreting a text, the Valentinians force it to mirror the doctrine they embrace.

## 5. The *Excerpts from Theodotus*

The fragments from Theodotus preserved by Clement of Alexandria offer a much more striking resemblance of approach. We shall quote the text in full to observe this similarity.

“The disciples of Valentinus understand the verse *In the beginning was the Word and the Word was unto God and God was the Word* (Jn 1.1) in the following manner. For they say that the *Principle* (Αρχή) is the Only-Begotten, who is also called God, since he [John] openly declares him in the suite of the text as being God by saying: *The Only-Begotten God, which is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known* (Jn 1.18). And [John] reveals the Logos, which was in the Principle (that is, in the Only-Begotten – in Intellect and Truth) to be the Christ, [that is] – Logos and Life. Thence he says with reason that he too is God, for he is in the God-Intellect. *What was made in him* (in the Logos) *was Life* (Jn 1.3-4) (that is, his pair). This is the reason why the Lord said: *I am the Life* (Jn 11.25; 15.6). Thus, the Father, being unknowable, wanted to make himself known to the Aeons and through his own Thought (for he knew himself), which is Pneuma of knowledge in knowledge, he issued forth the Only-Begotten. So, the one who came forth from knowledge (that is from the paternal Thought) has become Knowledge, that is the Son, since *the Father was made known through the Son* (Jn 1.18; Mt 11.27; Lk 10.22). And the Pneuma of love (τῆς ἀγάπης) mixed itself with the Pneuma of knowledge, as the Father with the Son and the Thought with the Truth, the Knowledge coming forth from Truth as from Thought. And, on the one hand, the *Only-Begotten Son who abided in the bosom of the Father* (Jn 1.18) made known to the Aeons through knowledge the Thought [of the Father], since he himself was issued forth by the bosom of the Father. On the other hand, the one seen down here is no longer called by the Apostle *Only-Begotten*, but as *of the Only-Begotten – glory as of the Only-Begotten* (Jn 1.14)” (*Extraits de Théodote*, 6.1-7.3).

Here, the order of exposition is rearranged. First, we have the sacred text to be interpreted, the interpretation, and then a brief exposition of the doctrine. One might suppose that the rearrangement was operated by Clement himself for exposition reasons. However that may be, one can discern here the same hermeneutical structure as in the Ptolemaic quotation, with a superior clarity in the latter, we might add.

We can thus conclude this brief interlude by saying that the quotation given by Irenaeus in the first book of his *Adversus haereses* was not at all randomly chosen and reflected a *modus interpretandi* common in Valentinus’ school.



## 6. Irenaeus' refutation of the Ptolemaic interpretation

That the quotation was not randomly chosen is manifest for another important reason. The use the Valentinians made of the Johannine gospel and the peril of its appropriation by them triggered in Irenaeus not only a doctrinal response, but also a passionate one. Irenaeus thought of himself as being connected to the Apostolic times and teaching by a single and sacred link, namely Saint Polycarp of Smyrna, the presumed disciple of John the Apostle. Thus, for Irenaeus the Gnostics' use of Johannine gospel was a blow to his most inner convictions. One can say that this is the reason why a hermeneutical dispute became for him a personal one. A simple reading of the entire *Adversus haereses* could show us that the *Gospel according to John* is the most quoted gospel. Moreover, the preamble of this gospel is the most quoted piece of sacred text in the whole work (Mutschler, 2010, 331, 337). This makes Irenaeus the first Christian author before Origen to use the *Gospel according to John* in such a substantial manner. The Bishop of Lyons comes back to it again and again, whenever he finds the chance to use the Johannine gospel against the Valentinians who were the first to promote it. By so doing, Irenaeus places the Johannine gospel the first in order of significance – a mark that would endure for centuries after him.

What Irenaeus found most dangerous, wrong and distasteful in the Valentinian hermeneutics was its method of interpretation. When he begins his refutation of the Ptolemaic interpretation of the Johannine preamble, Irenaeus uses the term “stratagem” (ἡ μέθοδος) to disclose the hidden meaning of his opponents' method. “Stratagem” here implies deceitfulness both with regard to the readers, and to the ones who use it. He literally says that “by using this stratagem, they deceive themselves, abusing the Scriptures and trying to forge from them their fiction” (*Adversus haereses*, I.9.1). As we have mentioned above, Irenaeus accuses the Ptolemeans of what we would say today is an ideological attitude in interpreting a text: “For, inventing their own theory [in advance], then gathering sayings and names scattered here and there [in the Scriptures], [eventually] they alter them, as we have already said, [changing] in something unnatural that which has a natural meaning” (*Adversus haereses*, I.9.3. – 9.4.). For Irenaeus, disclosing the gnostic doctrines gives reason enough to refute them, since he believes that their theories and interpretations are so irrational and out of reach with reality that a simple unmasking would bring by itself their overthrowing (*Adversus haereses*, I.31.3). That this is not at all the case is shown by the simple fact that Irenaeus embarks on the difficult journey of refuting the gnostic doctrines using rational arguments and scriptural ones drawn from both the sacred texts and the authority of what he believes to be the Apostolic teaching and tradition. Both methods are applied here *in nuce*.

As with the second book of his work, Irenaeus begins here with a rational refutation of the Ptolemaic interpretation: “For, in the first place, if John would have proposed himself to reveal the higher Ogdoad, he would have maintained the order of emanations and would have placed the first Tetrad (being as they say the most venerable one) among the first names and then would have added to it the second one so as, through the order of the names, the order of the Ogdoad might be exhibited, and not at such a great distance, as if [John] would have completely forgotten it. [...] In the second place, if he would have wanted to intimate the pairs too, he wouldn’t have omitted to mention the name of the Church too, but he either would have been satisfied with regard to the other pairs to name the masculine Aeons (since the feminine ones might likewise be inferred) so as, through all the names, to preserve the unity; or, if he had first enumerated the pairs of the other Aeons, he would have revealed the pair of Man too, and would not have left us to divine her name” (*Adversus haereses*, I.9.1.).

Irenaeus confronts here the Valentinian hermeneutical method of searching in every saying of a scriptural text a hidden meaning with a rational method of interpretation, which postulates that such a text has a rational structure. Moreover, such a rational approach begins its interpretation by establishing the sayings that have been clearly stated so as to decipher afterwards the more obscure ones. For Irenaeus, if the meaning of a sacred saying does not reveal its true self, it is best to leave it as it is, and not to force upon it a fanciful interpretation. For the Bishop of Lyons, the canon by which one distinguishes the truth is the rational approach guided by the Apostolic teaching and tradition. He accuses the Gnostics of lacking both and of using deceitfully plausible reasons and false traditions.

Thus, using the postulate of the rational structure of a sacred text, Irenaeus refutes the Ptolemaic interpretation by saying that if this one were true then the text would have had an entirely different structure, but being such as it is, the interpretation cannot be but false. Next, by beginning with the sayings that have a clear meaning, Irenaeus shows that the Ptolemaic interpretation cannot be but patently false. “For, although John proclaims One Single Almighty God and One Single Only-Begotten, Christ Jesus, through Whom he says all things have been made, and that He is the Word of God, He the Only-Begotten, He the Creator of all, He the true Light, Which enlightens every man, He the Maker of the world, He the One Who came to His own, He Himself Who has become flesh and dwelt among us, they nonetheless, perverting the exegesis [of Scriptures] through a plausible discourse, maintain that, according to the [process of] emanation, another one is the Only-Begotten, whom they also call Principle, another one who became Savior, another one the Logos, son of the Only-Begotten, and another one Christ, the one who was emitted in view of setting aright the Pleroma” (*Adversus haereses*, I.9.2.). For Irenaeus, to postulate the existence

of different entities based on a text that expressly mentions only one is to violate it and break its logic. Furthermore, to break the link between the Word, Which *was in the beginning* (Jn 1.1) and was God, and the Word, Which *was made flesh and dwelt among us* (Jn 1.14), is for Irenaeus at least unreasonable and unsupported by the text itself.

The Bishop of Lyons concludes that “if some other among the Aeons would have become flesh for our own salvation, it would have been possible that the Apostle should speak about another, but since the Word of the Father Who descended is the same One Who ascended, the Only-Begotten Son of the One God, the One Who, according to the good pleasure of the Father, became flesh for the sake of men, John did not speak neither of some other, nor about some Ogdoad, but about our Lord Jesus Christ” (*Adversus haereses*, I.9.3.).

## 7. Tradition as the criterion for interpretation

As we have already said, Irenaeus supports his refutation not only by means of rational interpretation, but also by recurring to the authority of the Apostolic Tradition. For the Bishop of Lyons, Tradition means the teaching which the Apostles have handed over and which constitutes what he calls the Canon of Truth (κανὼν τῆς ἀληθείας: *Adversus haereses*, I.22.1). Its truthfulness and reality is assured by the transmission of the Apostolic charisma of the Holy Spirit through the ages in the succession of the bishops and presbyters of the Church. Such a succession unites the body of Christ with its Head. Thus, for Irenaeus, Truth and the criterion for discerning it cannot be the province of one group of men or of one man against another, but fully dwells within the symphony of the body of Christ, which is the Church. This teaching, which constitutes the heart of the Tradition, needs not be a written testament, for it is the life of the Church and as such can transmit the same content in different formulations of it. As a consequence, for Irenaeus the criterion for discerning a true doctrine or interpretation from a false one becomes the living Tradition of the Church proclaimed in an uninterrupted chain by the succession of bishops and presbyters. Using *this* criterion, Irenaeus utterly rejects what he calls in a derogatory manner the gnostic ‘theory’ (ἡ ὑπόθεσις), a “theory, which neither the Prophets announced, neither the Lord taught, neither the Apostles handed down” (*Adversus haereses*, I.8.1.).

For Irenaeus, the danger posed by the Gnostics was that, by claiming the same sacred texts and by pretending to follow a hidden tradition and teaching, they would eventually alter the true Tradition and Teaching and thus destroy the body of Christ. On the other hand, by claiming for himself the true reason and knowledge and the true tradition, Irenaeus of Lyons succeeded in giving a real deathblow to the doctrines he opposed.

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