

New and Improved:

Discovering Recapitulation and the Theology of Irenaeus of Lyons

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The study of the early church Fathers has remained an important endeavor as students of the Bible continue to query how the early church understood the teachings of Jesus and how to apply them. Irenaeus of Lyons, a Bishop writing in the late second century, saw the entire biblical narrative pointing to a single comprehensive work of Christ. His word to express this is *recapitulation*.¹ Historically speaking, Irenaeus has not been highly influential and tends to be overshadowed by others who held a more prestigious positions or had more sensational viewpoints. This is regrettable, as he writes as one quite near to the original Apostles and presents formative theological understandings that the early church was built upon. Although others may have overlooked Irenaeus, uncovering his framework for looking at Scripture through his ideas of hypothesis and economy, building toward his broader concept of recapitulation, will unveil the union of God with humankind and how God's plan continues to unfold through the church.

Given the importance of the oral tradition in the 2nd century, we have relatively few writings from the early church that have been preserved. Some of the more primary writings by those nearest to Jesus were held as authoritative and eventually gathered into the Biblical canon. As the church grew beyond the original disciples to subsequent generations, various interpretations and doctrines were put forth and claimed to be true to the Gospel. The need to combat some of these teachings and distinguish 'orthodox' views from the rest became a central motive behind the preaching and writing of the church leaders in the late 2nd century, including Irenaeus.

¹ Jennifer Anne Cox, *Autism, Humanity and Personhood: A Christ-Centred Theological Anthropology* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2017), 92. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.dtl.idm.oclc.org/lib/dtl/detail.action?docID=4857942>.

The authority of the church fathers comes from their proximity to Jesus through their relationships with the original Apostles. Polycarp was known to have been under the teaching of the Apostle John, and Irenaeus had learned under Polycarp. In his *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius records some of Irenaeus' memories of hearing Polycarp tell of his "intercourse with John and with the others who had seen the Lord." He says, "I listened to them attentively, noting them down, not on paper, but in my heart. And continually, through God's grace, I recall them faithfully."²

This connection to Polycarp and his spiritual family line gives Irenaeus a place of great stature among the early fathers. Swedish theologian Gustav Wingren writes that, "as far as theological interpretation of man is concerned, it would be difficult to find anyone to surpass Irenaeus either then or in the later periods."³ Irenaeus is also one of the earliest writers to have produced such a large volume that has been preserved. Some scholars have said that "Irenaeus provides the most comprehensive early exposition we have of mainstream theology."⁴

As much as he holds an important place in church history, Irenaeus was an early church father who has had only marginal influence over the centuries. None of his works have survived in the language they were written.⁵ His writings were mostly lost in the West until Erasmus

² Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 1*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co, 1890), 5.20.6-7, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/250105.htm>.

³ Gustaf Wingren, *Man and the Incarnation: A Study in the Biblical Theology of Irenaeus* (Philadelphia : Muhlenberg Press, 1959), xii, www.archive.org.

⁴ Denis Minns, "Irenaeus of Lyons," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Patristics*, ed. Ken Parry, 71-83 (Hoboken: Wiley, 2015), 71, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.dtl.idm.oclc.org/lib/dtl/reader.action?docID=4035393>.

⁵ Armitage Robinson, "Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching: The Document and It's Value," (New York: Macmillan Co, 1920) Introduction, <https://ccel.org/ccel/irenaeus/demonstr/demonstr.iii.i.html>.

printed a translation of *Adversus Haereses* (Against Heresies, or AH) in 1526.⁶ Another writing, *On the Apostolic Preaching*, was only recently discovered in an Armenian church, in 1904.⁷

While there is some debate, most place Irenaeus' birth between 130-140 in Asia Minor.⁸ As a young man he heard Polycarp in Smyrna in the mid-150's and later traveled to Gaul, where he became bishop of Lyons in the late 170's or so. Gaul was a mixed setting of Greek, Celtic and Latin languages and a Christian community that had seen intense persecution in the years surrounding Irenaeus' arrival. Irenaeus developed "a reputation as a peacemaker" and held to one common faith between the churches.⁹ This context of persecution is important to understanding Irenaeus and the passion which comes through in his writings. It's also essential to see the religious tensions that Irenaeus was in the midst of.

Most of Irenaeus' writings were aimed at refuting teachings that he saw as outside the true Gospel as passed down from the Apostles. The main target for Irenaeus was Gnosticism, but he also addresses Valentinians and Marcionism, among others. It's through these debates that Irenaeus not only states what the 'false' teachings were, but he also "insisted that what he understood and presented as the Christian faith was the same message found everywhere throughout the church in his day."¹⁰ We don't get the sense that Irenaeus was presenting new or original ideas, but that he was trying to combat these in Gnosticism and others. "In all his writings Irenaeus sought only to stamp out these objectionable innovations, and forge into a

⁶ Minns, 78.

⁷ James R. Payton, Jr, *Irenaeus on the Christian Faith: A Condensation of Against Heresies* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 3.

⁸ Payton, Jr, 1.

⁹ Kelly M. Kapic and Hans Madueme, eds. *Reading Christian Theology in the Protestant Tradition* (London, UK: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2018) 51, <https://libguides-thedtl-org.dtl.idm.oclc.org/c.php?g=1105524>.

¹⁰ Payton, Jr, 1.

unity what the Church throughout the world had taught since the days of the Apostles.”¹¹ To establish his ideas, Irenaeus uses three key terms that need to be examined: hypothesis, economy, and recapitulation.

Hypothesis: The Jesus Lens

Living about 150 years after Jesus’ ministry and 150 years before the Council of Nicaea, it’s important to note that Irenaeus had a fairly developed sense of the Trinity. In one of many examples, he writes, “So then the Father is Lord and the Son is Lord, and the Father is God and the Son is God; for that which is begotten of God is God. And so in the substance of power of His being there is shown forth one God; but there is also according to the economy of our redemption both Son and Father.”¹² With this in mind, it’s important to understand the particular way he looked at Scripture, something I’ll call, “The Jesus Lens”. Irenaeus, like many other patristic fathers, interpreted all Scriptures through the Incarnation. They saw Jesus everywhere they looked. “For Irenaeus, placing Jesus Christ as the cornerstone allows one to read the scriptures as a well-constructed edifice rather than treating it as a quarry from which to draw individual stones to be laid according to some other scheme.”¹³ Irenaeus called this his *hypothesis*, which might be described as the overall ‘gist’ of the work that explains how it all fits

¹¹ Wingren, xvi.

¹² Irenaeus, *The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, trans. J. Armitage Robinson (New York: Macmillan Co, 1920), Ch. 47, https://www.google.com/books/edition/St_Irenaeus_The_Demonstration_of_the_Apo/3WMMAAAAIAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1.

¹³ John J. O’Keefe and Russell R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 40.

together.¹⁴ He writes, “If any one, therefore, reads the Scriptures with attention, he will find in them an account of Christ...”¹⁵

I’m not sure that this point can be overstated. In fact, Irenaeus might say, Jesus *is* the point, the center-point of human history, and the key to understanding all that came before him or after.¹⁶ “Irenaeus’ fundamental theological conviction, indeed his overarching Christian conviction, is that the crucified and exalted Jesus Christ is the personal revelation of God’s truth in its fullness... When Irenaeus considers the mystery of humanity he does so through the Christology of scripture as read from the perspective of the empty tomb.”¹⁷ The main failure of many heretical interpretations is that they don’t identify the hypothesis presented in the Bible, namely Jesus. Using the example of mosaic tiles, he points out that the heretical teachers rearrange things and compose a distorted picture.¹⁸ “In short, to read rightly, one needs to know the overall plan.”¹⁹

Economy: God’s Plan Revealed

With Jesus as the lens and center point, we can proceed to what Irenaeus called the *economy* of God. This Greek idea of *oikonomia* or ‘household management’, can be described as

¹⁴ O’Keefe, 35-36.

¹⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, trans. Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co, 1885), 4.26.1, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103.htm>.

¹⁶ Cox, 91.

¹⁷ Irenaeus M.C Steenberg, *Of God and Man: Theology as Anthropology from Irenaeus to Athanasius* (London: T & T Clark, 2009) 51, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.dtl.idm.oclc.org/lib/dtl/detail.action?docID=601961>.

¹⁸ *Against Heresies*, 1.8.1.

¹⁹ O’Keefe, 35.

the “ends and means.”²⁰ Irenaeus presents a picture of God that is purposeful about what he is doing and why. This economy was hidden over the ages, but has been revealed in Christ. It was not God’s second thought, but was the plan from the beginning.²¹ This idea is not necessarily unique to Irenaeus, but is a “concept central to patristic theology.” However, the purposeful order and divine arrangement “is crucial for Irenaeus; the correct hypothesis of scripture must express its economy.”²² In other words, there is a reason for Jesus to be the center of all things; it’s the hub that everything else turns on. All of this is building to God’s *magnum opus*, the culmination of all things, which Irenaeus calls *recapitulation*.

Recapitulation: Restored to Perfection

In simplest terms, recapitulation might be stated as, “God getting things back on track.” Or as one pastor/professor has said, “To put the head back on something that the head has been lopped off!”²³ At first, this sounds clear enough, but Irenaeus takes us deep into understanding how Jesus and his Incarnation was used to restore humankind. Theologian Eric Osborn suggests that recapitulation does four things: “It corrects and perfects mankind; it inaugurates and consummates a new humanity.”²⁴ Recapitulation points to a “final repetition, summing up,

²⁰ Dotan Leshem, "Retrospectives: What did the Ancient Greeks Mean by Oikonomia?" *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 30, no. 1 (Winter, 2016): 225-38, <http://dtl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/retrospectives-what-did-ancient-greeks-mean/docview/1762035660/se-2>.

²¹ Sarah Hinlicky and Paul R. Hinlicky, “In Which We Recapitulate Irenaeus,” May 4, 2021, in *Queen of the Sciences: Conversations between a Theologian and Her Dad*, Podcast, <https://www.queenofthesciences.com/e/in-which-we-recapitulate-irenaeus/>.

²² O’Keefe, 37.

²³ Hinlicky.

²⁴ Eric Francis Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 97, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.dtl.idm.oclc.org/lib/dtl/detail.action?docID=201780>.

drawing to a conclusion. As a term in rhetoric, it refers to the end of a speech, when the speaker drives home the point with a summary of the strongest arguments.”²⁵

An elder contemporary of Irenaeus, Justin Martyr also used the word recapitulation, but to a much smaller degree. It is quite likely that Irenaeus borrowed the term from Justin, yet “we are unable with our present knowledge to derive this far-reaching doctrine of recapitulation which we find in Irenaeus from any source earlier than Irenaeus himself.”²⁶

To look more adequately into Irenaeus’ thoughts on this, let’s look at a sequence of concepts present in his writings: Creation, Correction, Covenant, and Consummation.

Creation

Our story begins at Creation. A key verse for Irenaeus is, “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...’”²⁷ The idea that humans are made in the image of God is “of fundamental significance in Irenaeus, both for defining the purpose of man’s creation, and for determining the meaning of the Incarnation.”²⁸ For Irenaeus, part of having a likeness in the image of God is that we have free will, which is actually an expression of God’s omnipotence.²⁹ He writes, “God made man a free [agent] from the beginning, possessing his own power, even as he does his own soul, to obey the behests of God voluntarily, and not by

²⁵ O’Keefe, 39.

²⁶ Wingren, 80.

²⁷ Gen 1:26, NRSV.

²⁸ Wingren, xiv.

²⁹ Wingren, 36.

compulsion of God. For there is no coercion with God, but a good will [toward us] is present with Him continually.”³⁰

Before man fell to sin and turned away from God, there was a unity and communion between the creator and his creation. “Adam was made in the image and likeness of God. By sin the likeness became lost, though the image has remained untouched. By faith in Christ man may recover the lost likeness.”³¹ Irenaeus tells us, “God indeed makes, but man is made; and truly He who makes is always the same; but that which is made must receive both beginning, and middle, and addition, and increase.”³²

The distinction between God as creator and humankind as his creation “makes it possible for humans to be saved and for God to be the kind of God who saves. If creation is an accident or a tragedy that separates humans from God, then what kind of hope does Christ offer in revealing divinity?”³³ Stepping back, we see the theme of unity in Irenaeus’ convictions. “He proclaims the unity of God and the coherence of the world he has made, the unity of revelation and the integrity and meaning of human history.”³⁴

As Irenaeus looks at creation, he sees a problem for which Jesus is the answer. Creation and salvation are connected from the beginning, not distinct and unattached from each other.

³⁰ *Against Heresies*, 4.37.1.

³¹ Henry Chadwick *The Early Church* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 80.

³² *Against Heresies*, 4.11.2.

³³ Kapic, 57.

³⁴ Paul Parvis, “Who was Irenaeus? An Introduction to the Man and His Work” in *Irenaeus: Life, Scripture, Legacy*, ed. Sara Parvis and Paul Foster, 13-24 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 24, <https://muse-jhu-edu.dtl.idm.oclc.org/book/25141>.

Instead he sees them as “the one economy that can only be understood when the victorious lamb opens the books, so that ‘unveiled,’ one can see how Scripture has always spoken of Christ...”³⁵

Correction

In *Against Heresies* we read, “For in the same way the sin of the first created man receives amendment by the correction of the First-begotten and the coming of the serpent is conquered by the harmlessness of the dove, those bonds being unloosed by which we had been fast bound to death.”³⁶

Irenaeus may have only used the word *correction* a few times in *Against Heresies*, however, the concept of how the Incarnation restored Creation is predominant throughout his writings and is central to the idea of recapitulation. The culmination of all things, or the ‘Divine Correction,’ is fundamentally related to Jesus and his redeeming work through the crucifixion and resurrection. “The first meaning which Irenaeus links with the concept of recapitulation is that of correction or rectification of what has gone wrong from the beginning of human history... God himself corrects, redeems, justifies, and rectifies by including the human objects of his action within himself.”³⁷ Irenaeus says, “For it was for this end that the Word of God was made man, and He who was the Son of God became the Son of man, that man, having been taken into the Word, and receiving the adoption, might become the son of God.”³⁸

³⁵ John, Behr, “Irenaeus of Lyons,” in *T&T Clark Companion to Atonement*, ed. Adam J. Johnson, 569-576, Bloomsbury Companions, 5, (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2021), 572, <https://libguides-thedtl-org.dtl.idm.oclc.org/c.php?g=1165619>.

³⁶ *Against Heresies*, 5.19.1.

³⁷ Osborn, 100.

³⁸ *Against Heresies*, 3.19.1.

God becoming man *in the flesh* through Jesus was important to Irenaeus. “The incarnation was physically necessary to save humanity from death and corruption. Sin had to be killed, death had to be deprived of power and replaced by life. The corruptible had to be united to the incorruptible so that mortality might be swallowed up in immortality.”³⁹ This is seen through the Apostle Paul writing, “And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him...”⁴⁰ Irenaeus notes, “He had Himself, therefore, flesh and blood, recapitulating in Himself not a certain other, but that original handiwork of the Father, seeking out that thing which had perished.”⁴¹

Recapitulation should not be viewed as a complete restart to Creation or a fix that left the original Creation old and fallen, instead, there is “profound unity between recapitulation as the recommencement of the first Creation and recapitulation as the struggle against sin and death... Creation in its purity returns at the moment when Christ’s struggle is crowned with victory. His victory is the natural fulfilment of His becoming man.”⁴²

Jesus accomplished his mission against the devil who was determined to come in opposition to man. Irenaeus sees this, saying, “The Word of God, however, the Maker of all things, conquering him [the devil] by means of human nature, and showing him to be an apostate, has, on the contrary, put him under the power of man.”⁴³ As we see Jesus overcome death, we also see a new realization of man’s original purpose. “Through the birth of Christ

³⁹ Osborn, 101.

⁴⁰ Col. 1:21-22.

⁴¹ *Against Heresies*, 5.14.2.

⁴² Wingren, 123.

⁴³ *Against Heresies*, 5.24.4.

Creation returns to its purity, the original form of Creation is revealed in its perfectly developed form, and in him Life enters into the world of Death.”⁴⁴

Even as God sets things aright through the work of Jesus, mankind still has free will and must participate in this recapitulation. Irenaeus looks at Jesus’ teaching, “All things are possible to him that believes,” and says that this shows that God has preserved the freedom of man and his will is under his own control. “Such expressions demonstrate that man is in his own power with respect to faith.”⁴⁵ Those who remain apart from Christ will not only “lack the ‘supernatural,’ but that they do not even live a ‘natural’ life. They are ‘in Adam’ who was defeated and who forfeited the life which matched his own nature. In other words, they are in Death.”⁴⁶ This is echoed by Irenaeus, “as by the former generation we inherited death, so by this new generation we might inherit life.”⁴⁷

Covenant

Since Irenaeus sees Jesus and recapitulation throughout the entire Scriptures, including the Old Testament, he takes Jesus very seriously when he says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”⁴⁸ For Irenaeus, this ‘fulfillment of the law’ was part of the design from the beginning and has been happening in stages up to the time that Jesus was on the scene. “Salvation for Irenaeus, is not so much God’s unexpected intervention in history to rescue his faithful ones from destruction as it is the end-

⁴⁴ Wingren, 80.

⁴⁵ *Against Heresies*, 4.37.5.

⁴⁶ Wingren, 85.

⁴⁷ *Against Heresies*, 5.1.3.

⁴⁸ Matt. 5:17.

stage of the process of organic growth which has been creation's 'law' since its beginning."⁴⁹

Again, we see that Jesus *is* the point. He sees the law as outward motivation and contends that now we are free to choose to come to faith. "For the law, since it was laid down for those in bondage, used to instruct the soul by means of those corporeal objects which were of an external nature, drawing it, as by a bond, to obey its commandments, that man might learn to serve God. But the Word set free the soul, and taught that through it the body should be willingly purified."⁵⁰ Osborn describes the extent of this 'fulfillment':

The totality of humanity and the universe is recapitulated in Christ. What happens in recapitulation? First the whole history of salvation is resumed, so that beginning, middle and end are brought together. Secondly, the sovereignty of Christ over all things is assumed; just as he reigns over the unseen world, so he is lord of the visible world, which he supports by the axis of his cross. Thirdly, all things are recreated, renewed, and set free. Lastly, all things achieve the purpose for which they were made; they are not merely repaired but are brought to perfecting in Christ.⁵¹

Consummation

The second coming of Jesus marks the consummation of God's redemptive work for Irenaeus. "Central to Irenaeus' hope is the resurrection of the body, which he expects at the time of Christ's return. Hope in such a resurrection is an integral part in the Christian tradition of faith Irenaeus is concerned to protect."⁵² He writes, "But when this [present] fashion [of things] passes away, and man has been renewed, and flourishes in an incorruptible state, so as to preclude the possibility of becoming old, [then] there shall be the new heaven and the new earth,

⁴⁹ Brian Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010) 29.

⁵⁰ *Against Heresies*, 4.13.2.

⁵¹ Osborn, 116.

⁵² Daley, 30.

in which the new man shall remain [continually], always holding fresh converse with God.”⁵³
Irenaeus sees the work of Jesus as something that has both taken place and is ongoing.

“In actual fact, the whole of Irenaeus’s doctrine of recapitulation in all its phases is oriented towards the Parousia [second coming of Christ]. From beginning to end recapitulation involves a continuum which stage by stage is realized in time. When the hostile powers have been defeated and expelled, this work of recapitulation is fulfilled and man restored.”⁵⁴

In Practice: The Church

It’s important to remember that the doctrine of recapitulation and the work of Jesus was not an abstract academic pursuit for Irenaeus. His larger focus was on building up the church. He was bishop at a parish that had seen brutal persecutions and the threat was still looming. The church was also seeing tensions arise in the form of opposing doctrines that could potentially dislodge some of the building-blocks of the church and distill the power and unity of the teachings passed down through the Apostles. “Christ mediates to enable man to participate in God... Man is joined to God as to another person, and faith is the way to participation.”⁵⁵ Even though it is “scattered throughout the whole world” Irenaeus saw the Church as the main steward of these doctrines. “She [the church] also believes these points [of doctrine] just as if she had but one soul, and one and the same heart, and she proclaims them, and teaches them, and hands them down, with perfect harmony, as if she possessed only one mouth.”⁵⁶ He continues to make the bold statement that God and his teaching is the same everywhere and that none of the church

⁵³ *Against Heresies*, 5.36.1.

⁵⁴ Wingren, 193.

⁵⁵ Osborn, 113.

⁵⁶ *Against Heresies*, 1.10.2

leaders will “teach doctrines different than these.”⁵⁷ The church is at the center of God’s work on the earth. Fellowship in the church is the modern expression of recapitulation, “for Christ is active now, after his resurrection but before the Last Judgement, in the Church- He lives now as man among those who hear His Word. The *Ecclesia* is those who have gathered around Christ. Christ’s work in itself is finished and complete, but it has not yet attended to every part of human life. This process of extension continues while time moves on to the ultimate dissolution and transformation of every part of Creation.”⁵⁸

The practices of baptism and the Eucharist within the church continue the revelation of Jesus’ saving work. In those days, baptism involved three immersions, which Irenaeus correlated to three points:⁵⁹ God the Father, through His Son, by the Holy Spirit gives us (1) regeneration, (2) incorruption, and (3) ministry of the Spirit.⁶⁰ Regarding the Eucharist, Irenaeus expounds, “For we offer to Him His own, announcing consistently the fellowship and union of the flesh and Spirit. For as the bread, which is produced from the earth, when it receives the invocation of God, is no longer common bread, but the Eucharist, consisting of two realities, earthly and heavenly; so also our bodies, when they receive the Eucharist, are no longer corruptible, have the hope of the resurrection to eternity.”⁶¹

For Irenaeus, there is a sense that we become like God through partaking in the sacraments. One of his most notable declarations reads, “Our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He

⁵⁷ *Against Heresies*, 1.10.2.

⁵⁸ Wingren, 171.

⁵⁹ Hinlicky.

⁶⁰ *The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, Ch. 7.

⁶¹ *Against Heresies*, 4.18.5.

is Himself.”⁶² This statement might illustrate the way that Irenaeus actually sees recapitulation at work. Simply, Jesus became like us so that we can be like him. Irenaeus talked about how Jesus lived like us, “he passed through every age... thus sanctifying those who are of this age, being at the same time made to them an example of piety, righteousness, and submission...”⁶³

M.C. Steenberg, patristic scholar who became a monk and later took the name “Irenaeus” as his own⁶⁴ says, “This text [quoted above] has become the cardinal definition of a recapitulative soteriology. That which Christ comes to save, he saves by becoming... Christ’s salvific action is primarily to become human, to exist as human, redeeming what is human by joining it to God.”⁶⁵

Throughout Irenaeus’ writings we can see the theme of God’s actions to redeem us, but there is also a theme of our participation and *growth* as we are unified with him. Irenaeus does not see man as a static participant, “In actual fact, Irenaeus is continually thinking in terms of action and function. Man in Creation is in the process of development- he is a growing child with a destiny towards which he is moving. Man’s recapitulation is renewed growth.”⁶⁶ This ‘dynamic relationship’ between Creator and the created fills all of human history that was in preparation for the arrival of Jesus. When describing these interactions, Irenaeus has “an explicitly developmental, relational lens.”⁶⁷

⁶² *Against Heresies*, 5.Preface.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 2.22.4.

⁶⁴ Monastero Di Bose, “Irenei (Steenberg),” accessed July 20, 2022, <https://www.monasterodibose.it/en/hospitality/conferences/orthodox-spirituality/2018-discernment-and-christian-life/1570-speakers-ceiso-2018/12363-irenei-steenberg-2>.

⁶⁵ Steenberg, 44.

⁶⁶ Wingren, 126.

⁶⁷ Steenberg, 52.

This growth gives hope to all humankind. “Jesus assumed the humanity of Adam and lived out every stage of human life, sanctifying the entire human lifespan, and transforming human nature from within. He did this on behalf of all humanity. Recapitulation removes the need for categories of humanity. In Jesus, humanity is united to God and thus humans can become sons and daughters of God. Since humanity is seen in eschatological terms, it is what we are becoming that is important, rather than what we are now.”⁶⁸ This interaction and union with God is integral to our process toward perfection.⁶⁹

Conclusion

Irenaeus’ ideas of hypothesis, economy, and recapitulation might not fit neatly into our modern boxes of systematic theology, but this might only be illustrating that our framework for understanding needs to expand. His broad perspective that sees all of history through Jesus’ redemptive work on the cross is instructive to us today and helpful to keep us anchored to the fundamentals of our faith. For Irenaeus, Jesus’ Incarnation as the restorative hinge-point of history “is not simply a once-for-all act in the past. Rather it is the one economy of the one God affected by the one Son in the one human race which encompasses both creation and salvation, embracing our apostasy and death, yet turning them inside out, in the mystery of Christ, the Wisdom of God, in which the atonement is seen as the bringing into one of God and the human being.”⁷⁰ In Irenaeus’ words, “By summing up in Himself the whole human race from the beginning to the end, He has also summed up its death.”⁷¹

⁶⁸ Cox, 222.

⁶⁹ Osborn, 107-8.

⁷⁰ Behr, 574.

⁷¹ *Against Heresies*, 5.23.2.

In studying a painting, a person can observe and learn by getting close and examining the brushstrokes. However, to really appreciate the full picture, one needs to step back and see the larger view. We need to rediscover Irenaeus to help more of the church to see this larger view of God's story which is recapitulation, or the restoration of all things. This context is echoed in the Gospel of Luke, "For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."⁷² With the hypothesis of Jesus at the center and the understanding of God's economy, put in place since Creation, we get a more precise understanding of how Jesus accomplished this mission through recapitulation to restore the union between God and humankind, a mission that is still unfolding today through his church.

⁷² Luke 19:10.

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