

Irenaeus:

On the Apostolic Preaching

Rev Dr Jos M. Strengolt

1 Introduction to Irenaeus and On the Apostolic Preaching (OAP)

1.1 Why was this book written?

Together read and > discuss: OAP 1.

1.2 History of documents of OAP

The oldest manuscript of the book is an ancient translation in Armenian. This document was found in 1904 in Erevan (Armenia) in the Church of the Blessed Virgin, by Dr Karapet Ter-Mekerttshian, one of the most learned of the Armenian clergy. The manuscript must probably be dated between 1270–1289, in the time of the learned Archbishop John (1259- 1289), the brother of King Haitun of Cilicia. A note at the end states that it was written for this archbishop.

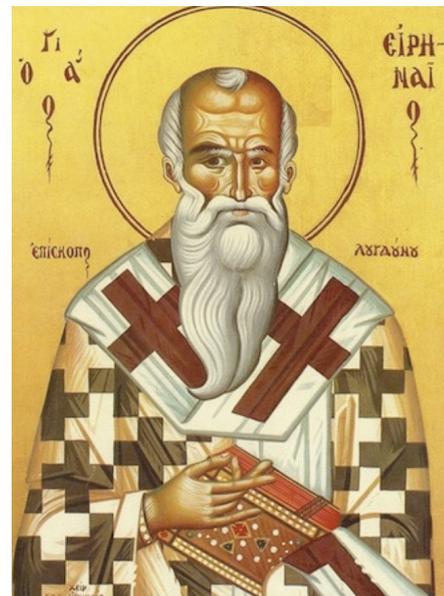
Scholars think the manuscript was transcribed from an earlier Armenian copy that was translated between 572-591 from a Greek manuscript by Armenians who had fled to Constantinople because of a Persian invasion. The Armenian copy is a very literal translation of the original Greek. The first translation of the Armenian document was made in German in 1907 by the German theologian Adolph von Harnack; he is the one divided it into 100 ‘chapters’.

1.3 Importance of OAP in the early church

We do not know how this book was used in the early Church. Eusebius mentions it in Church History, 5.26 as one of the ‘elegant’ writings of Irenaeus. He does not say how the book was used.

1.4 Who was Irenaeus?

Irenaeus was born in Asia (Turkey) between 115-142 AD and he died ca. 202. While young, he had seen and heard bishop Polycarp (d. 155) at Smyrna. During persecutions under Emperor Marcus Aurelius, Irenaeus was a priest (maybe already the bishop?) in Lyon (France). His bishop Photinus (already in prison?) send him to Rome in 177/178 with a letter for Pope



Eleutherius regarding Montanism, an excitable charismatic movement.

Upon his return to Lyon, Irenaeus succeeded the martyred Pothinus as bishop (if he was not already appointed bishop before). He worked as a pastor, a missionary and a writer – mostly against Gnosticism that was creating troubles for the Church in France and elsewhere.

In 190/191, Irenaeus pleaded with Pope Victor (189-198) to lift the excommunication of the Churches in Asia Minor because they stuck to celebrating Easter according to the lunar calendar. Irenaeus pointed to the gracious discussions in the past between Anicetus and Polycarp, and how their different views did not lead to a breakdown of the Christian communion.

Irenaeus wrote many works, but of those only *Against Heresies* and OAP still exist, and not even in the original Greek. This we know of his other works:

- Letter addressed to the Roman priest Florinus *On the Monarchy, or How God is not the Cause of Evil* (a fragment in Eusebius)
- *On the Ogdoad*, against the Ogdoad of Valentinus the Gnostic, written for the

same Florinus, who had gone over to the sect of the Valentinians (fragment in Eusebius)

- Treatise against Greek philosophy entitled *On the Subject of Knowledge* (mentioned by Eusebius)
- Treatise on schism, addressed to Blastus (mentioned by Eusebius)
- Letter to Pope Victor against the Roman priest Florinus (fragment preserved in Syriac)
- Another letter to the same Pope on the Paschal controversies (extracts in Eusebius)
- Other letters to various people on the same Paschal subject (mentioned by Eusebius, a fragment preserved in Syriac)
- Book of ‘divers discourses’, probably a collection of homilies (mentioned by Eusebius)
- Other minor works for which we have less clear or less certain attestations.

1.5 What did Gnostics believe?

There were many forms of Gnosticism, and most of what we know about this, has come to us through sources that may have given a less than kind description. Gnostics were dualists, teaching that there are two great opposing forces: good versus evil, light versus darkness, knowledge versus ignorance, spirit versus matter. Because the world is material, and rather imperfect, they could not believe that God had created it. How can the perfect produce the imperfect, the infinite produce the finite, the spiritual produce the material? One solution was to say that there were thirty beings called AEons, and that God had made the first AEon, which made the second AEon, which made the third, and so on to the thirtieth AEon, which made the world.

Gnostics claimed to be Christians, but Christians with a difference. They said that Jesus had had two doctrines: one fit for the common man, and preached to everyone, and the other an advanced teaching, kept secret from the multitudes, fit

only for the chosen few, the spiritual elite.

They, the Gnostics, were the spiritual elite, and although the doctrines taught in the Church were not exactly wrong, and were in fact as close to the truth as the common man could hope to come, it was to the Gnostics that one must turn for the real truth.

One of the foremost Gnostics at the time of Irenaeus was Marcion, who spread his views in Rome and elsewhere. He rejected the whole Old Testament and many writings of the apostles as belonging to the religion of the evil creator-god Yahweh. The Father of Jesus Christ was in his view a higher God than the wicked Yahweh.

The response of Irenaeus to the Gnostics was twofold. He maintained that the bishops went back in an apostolic succession to the Apostles, so the bishops were the best guarantee for knowing the original Christian message and the correct interpretation of Scripture. True doctrine should be humbly received from the community of those bishops. And related to this, he declared which books were Scripture, and he rejected many alternative Gnostic writings as evil.

1.6 Date of OAP

In his book *Against the Heresies* (3.3.3), Irenaeus mentions that he wrote that book when Eleutherius was the bishop of Rome. This was from 175-189 AD. As in chapter 98 of OAP Irenaeus refers to *Against the Heresies*, it is clear that he wrote this toward the end of the 2nd century.

2 Content of On the Apostolic Preaching

2.1 Synopsis of OAP

1. Preface (1-3a)
2. Exposition of Apostolic Preaching (3b-42a)
 - 2a. Of God and Man (3b-16)
 - 2b. Salvation History until the coming of Christ (17-30)
 - 2c. Salvation by Son of God (31-40a)
 - 2d. Summary and conclusion (40b-42)

3. Scriptural (Old Testament) Proof of Apostolic Preaching (42b-97)
 - 3a. Preface to this section (42b)
 - 3b. Eternal existence of Jesus Christ (43-52)
 - 3c. Human birth of Jesus (53-66)
 - 3d. Predictions about all aspects of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus (67-85)
 - 3e. Calling of gentiles predicted by prophets (86-97)
4. Conclusion (98-100)

2.2 Of God and Man (3-16)

> **Read** OAP 3-6 and discuss how this teaching of Irenaeus related to the heretical Gnostic movements of his time. Consider:

- Apostolic message
- Usage of the terms ‘God’ and ‘Father’
- Baptismal formula
- Salvation explained
- God as the cause of all things
- Complete harmony of God, Word and Wisdom – Father, Son and Holy Spirit
- Prophecies of the Old Testament
- Jesus as a real human being

2.3 The fashioning of Man

> **Read** OAP 11 and discuss how this description of man is different from the Gnostic view.

2.4 Incarnation, virgin birth, death, resurrection

> **Read** OAP 30-33, 37-39 and discuss per chapter how Irenaeus teaches the Christian faith in apposition to Gnosticism.

2.5 How Irenaeus argues

In his earlier work, *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus used Old and New Testament writings extensively. Not so in OAP. He uses the Old Testament much, but hardly quotes the apostles or the Gospels. Why is this?

Irenaeus first outlines the apostolic message without much reference to the writings of the apostles, and then shows how this message is actually based on the Old Testament writings and how these Jewish Scriptures predicted this apostolic message. Thereby he at the same time authenticates both the apostolic message and the Scriptures of the Old Testament.

This seems a clever manner to draw attention away from discussions about the interpretation of the Gospels and the letters of the Apostles, to the content of the message as handed over from bishop to bishop. (see OAP 3) This creates authority for the Orthodox Church of Irenaeus against the Gnostics. He shows that the Old Testament is not a book about an evil, vengeful God but a book about The Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. He also suggests that dreams and visions and strange interpretations of the Bible as practiced by Gnostic teachers are simply wrong. In this context, see how he advises people to interpret Scripture:

> **Read** together OAP 52.

2.6 Conclusion of OAP (98-100):

> **Read** OAP 98 and see how Irenaeus stresses the need to maintain the apostolic tradition. Take good notice: the concept of apostolic tradition was to defend the church against heresy.

> **Read** OAP 99 and discuss what the core of the anti-Gnostic message is.

> **Read** OAP 100 and note the great importance of the proper Trinitarian Gospel.