

# Irenaeus of Lyon and the Divine Logos: A Study of *Adversus haereses*

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**Abstract:** - *The concept of the divine Logos was a central topic not only in the Church, but also among the philosophers and theologians of the first centuries of our era. Irenaeus of Lyon, the most significant apologist of that time, focused on human participation in the divine Logos, especially in his main work Adversus haereses. Based on the Holy Tradition and the Scriptures, he offered an orthodox view of the Logos as equal with God, the Creator of the universe. Irenaeus explained that the Logos is inherent in all creatures, but more so in humans and spiritual beings. Because of the divine Logos, rational beings are able to recognize the inner life of God. As a contrast, Irenaeus also outlined false Gnostic ideas about and misunderstandings of the Logos. In sum, he followed the official teaching of the Church and apostolic doctrine about the origin of the divine Logos as the Only-begotten Son of God, the intermediary and co-creator of the cosmos.*

## Introduction

As the most significant theologian of the second century, Irenaeus of Lyon<sup>1</sup> became famous for his main work, *Unmasking and Refutation of the Gnosis Falsely So-Called*.<sup>2</sup> His second important

<sup>1</sup> Irenaeus was born around 140 in Smyrna, Asia Minor, and died in 202 in Lugdunum. In his youth he was a pupil of Polycarp of Smyrna, and later—during the reign of Marcus Aurelius—he became a presbyter and bishop in Lyon. He studied in Palestinian Caesarea, as well as in Rome under Pope Anicet. In Lyon, he took action against the Gnostics. See also B. Altaner, A. Stuiber, *Patrologia*, Warszawa, 1990, 186; J. M. Szymusiak, M. Starowieyski, *Słownik wczesnochrześcijańskiego piśmiennictwa [Glossary of Early Christian Literature]*, Poznań 1971, 206–207.

<sup>2</sup> In this article I am using the critical edition: A. Rousseau, L. Doubleau, SCh, Paris 1979, namely vol. 1, SCh 263 and 264; vol. 2, SCh 293 and 294; vol. 3, SCh 210 and 211; vol. 4, SCh 100; vol. 5, SCh 152 and 153. I use the English edition, namely, the translation: Philip Schaff, *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, Omaha 2019. The first two books of Irenaeus' *Against Heresies* were translated by A. Roberts. The groundwork for the translation of the third and fourth books was furnished by W. H. Rambaut. A. Roberts and William Rambaut, trans., in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*,

Study was *Demonstration of Apostolic Preaching*,<sup>3</sup> which he wrote after *Adversus haereses*. This eminent Christian writer greatly appreciated philosophy, but he put the living Tradition of the Church before philosophical considerations. He was the first to respond to the threat of gnosis in the official teaching of the Church.

The five books of *Adversus haereses* do not constitute a unified work. As individual parts, they were created gradually in the form of lecture supplements. Irenaeus based these writings on his knowledge of gnosticism, which he acquired by analyzing the gnostic writings, as well as the texts of earlier writers, such as Clement of Rome,

vol. 1, Buffalo, 1885. The original works are mostly lost, but survived in the Latin version from the early 3rd century. Hereafter the acronym AH is used, referring to the work in the original language.

<sup>3</sup> The critical edition: A. Rousseau, *Demonstratio apostolicae praedicationis*, SCh 406, Paris 1995, and the English edition: A. Robinson, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, London 1920. Hereafter the acronym DAP is used, referring to the work in the original language. This work is linked by content to the second part of *Adversus haereses* (Books III–IV).





Irenaeus points out that the invisible God acts with power and gives creatures a deep spiritual understanding and sense of his almighty greatness (*magnam mentis intuitionem et sensibilitatem*). Through the Logos that inheres in creatures (*ratio mentibus infixata*), people know that there is one only God, the Artist, and the Lord of all things.<sup>21</sup> Thanks to the Logos, they can sense the Creator, who with will and power (*virtuti et voluntati eius*) created the substance for creation.<sup>22</sup> Rational beings recognize the God who made the universe through his Word (*omnium fabricator*) and who is also a wise architect (*sapiens architectus*) and a great King (*maximus rex*).<sup>23</sup> They accept that God who created the world is the only one and that there is no other God apart from him (*solus est Deus, et non est alius Deus praeter eum*).<sup>24</sup>

The author of *Adversus haereses* explains that God, who is completely Logos and Mind (*totus Logos and totus Nus*), transcends all human notions.<sup>25</sup> One

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<sup>21</sup> See AH II 6.1; 7.5; 9.1; 10.1; Mt. 11:27; Lk. 10:22. Irenaeus explains that the truth about the one and only Creator of the world (*mundi fabricator Deus*) was preserved by ancient people through oral transmission and then through the prophets of God. The pagans draw this knowledge directly from the creation (*ab ipsa conditione*), and the Church has this knowledge from the apostolic tradition (*ab apostolis traditionem*).

<sup>22</sup> See AH II 10.3.

<sup>23</sup> See AH II 11.1; 12.2; 13.8. Irenaeus criticizes the Gnostics for accepting that an angel or some power that is different from God, and that does not know God, made this universe (*fecit hanc universitatem*). In *Adversus haereses* he writes that all gnostic science about emanations such as *Ennoia* (Thought), *Sige* (Silence), *Nous* (Mind), *Aletheia* (Truth), *Logos* and *Zoe* is untrue. In his view, it is not rational to think of such emanations as independent entities that exist outside the entity that sustains them.

<sup>24</sup> See AH II 16.3. See also DAP 5.

<sup>25</sup> See AH II 13.3. According to Irenaeus, God is “unspoken” (*inenarrabilis*) because he is “all-inclusive thought” (*sensus capax omnium*), which is “unlike human thought” (*non similis hominum*

can only try to describe him because of his love for creatures (*propter dilectionem*), always taking into account his incomprehensible grandeur.<sup>26</sup> It is therefore a mistake to transfer terms which refer to the words spoken by human beings to the eternal Word of God (*Dei aeternum Verbum*), and to describe the origins of the Logos as similar to the formation of human speech (*verbum hominum*). The divine Logos is Life, Indestructibility, Wisdom, Goodness and Truth (*et vita, et incorruptela, et sapientia, et bonitas, et veritas*), and these are not emanations from God (*emissiones*), but the names of his perfection, which always belong to him.<sup>27</sup> Thus:

“He is all intelligence, and all word, and in whatever respect He is intelligence, in that also He is word, and that this *Nous* is His *Logos*”.<sup>28</sup>

At the same time, Irenaeus contends that the ideas of the Gnostics about the Logos are not only unsustainable, but contradict apostolic doctrine.<sup>29</sup> He criticizes their reasoning and their claim that only they can be pneumatics (*spiritalis*), because “a certain particle of the Father of universe” was deposited in their souls (*particula quaedam universitatis Patris*).<sup>30</sup> The Bishop of Lyon writes that the misguided Gnostic teaching is blasphemy, not only against the Creator but also against Christ and the Holy Spirit.<sup>31</sup> He stresses that the Saviour’s

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*sensui*). He is also a light, but a light that is different from the light we experience and know with our senses.

<sup>26</sup> See AH II 13.4.

<sup>27</sup> See AH II 13.9.

<sup>28</sup> AH II 13. 8 (SCh 263, 124): “*Sic et qui ait, illum totum Sensum et totum Verbum, et in quo Sensus est in hoc et Verbum esse, et Verbum esse eius hunc Nun.*” See also AH II 17. 9-10.

<sup>29</sup> See AH II 18.3.7; 20.1; 22.5; 26.1; Mt. 7:7; 1 Cor. 8:1; 1 Jn. 1:5. Irenaeus writes that the assumptions and biblical comments of the Gnostics are wrong because they have lost the connection between research and truth.

<sup>30</sup> See AH II 19.3.7; 22.3; 25.3.

<sup>31</sup> See AH II 19.9; 20.3; 22.4; 25.4; Col. 1:18.





of the previously hidden Son (*adapertionem*).<sup>42</sup> He points out that it is impossible to explain the deity completely, or to depict the essence of the Only-begotten Son of God (*unigenitum Dei Verbum*). This mystery should be left to God himself (*agnitionem hanc concedendam esse Deo*).<sup>43</sup> As we read in the next passage of his work:

“God being all Mind, and all Logos, both speaks exactly what He thinks, and thinks exactly what He speaks. For His thought is Logos, and Logos is Mind, and Mind comprehending all things is the Father Himself”.<sup>44</sup>

In *Adversus haereses* Irenaeus presents a beautiful work of creation, which was accomplished through the divine Word and Wisdom (*per Verbum et per Sapientiam*).<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, he quotes the apostolic doctrine and the faith of the Church that man was formed by God, who is the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, the eternally existing Son (*semper coexistens Filius Patri*).<sup>46</sup> He claims that Christians are responsible for participating in the divine Logos by realizing the divine substance (*divinam substantiam*) and also for experiencing the goodness of God and the power of the Spirit.<sup>47</sup> In relations with other people we should be generous, show them goodness, and pray for them. In this way we will achieve communion with the Logos and will burn like the sun in the Father’s kingdom.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> See AH II 28.6.

<sup>43</sup> See AH II 28.7-8; 1 Cor. 2:10; 13:9.

<sup>44</sup> AH II 28.5 (SCh 294, 280): “*Deus autem totus existens Mens et totus existens Logos, quod cogitate, hoc et loquitur; et quod loquitur, hoc et cogitate: Cogitatio enim eius Logos, et Logos Mens, et omnia concludens Mens, ipse est Pater.*”

<sup>45</sup> See AH II 30. 9: “*Hic Pater, hic Deus, hic Conditor, hic Factor, hic Fabricator, qui fecit ea per semetipsum, hoc est per Verbum et per Sapientiam suam.*”

<sup>46</sup> See AH II 30.9; Mt. 11:27.

<sup>47</sup> See AH II 31.3.

<sup>48</sup> See AH II 30.1; Mt. 13:43.

In his writing, Irenaeus gives a precise description of human reason (*sensus hominis*)<sup>49</sup> in the context of the erroneous teaching of the Gnostics on the participation of the soul in the divine Logos.<sup>50</sup> He explains that all beings were created by the Power of God (*per virtutem Dei*) and are directed by the greatness of his Wisdom (*per sapientiam eius gubernantur*).<sup>51</sup> In particular, he points to spiritual beings such as angels and archangels, and to thrones, reigns and countless other powers.<sup>52</sup> All were planned and created (*disposuit et perfecit*) as wonderful and great works of God the Creator (*omnia opera a Demiurgo facta sunt*).<sup>53</sup> We read about this in the following passage of *Adversus haereses*:

“All things which proceed from Him, whatsoever have been made, and are made, do indeed receive their own beginning of generation, and on this account are inferior to Him who formed them, inasmuch as they are not unbegotten. Nevertheless they endure, and extend their existence into a long series of ages in accordance with the will of God their Creator”.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> See AH II 29. 3: “*Sensus enim hominis, mens, etcogitation, et intentio mentis, et ea quae sunt huiusmodi, non aliud quid praeter animam sunt; sed ipsius animae motus, et operationes, nullam sine anima habentes substantiam.*”

<sup>50</sup> See AH II 29.1-3; 30.1; 34.4. Irenaeus writes that the body endowed with the soul only participates in the existence of the soul as long as God wants it to, and the soul only “participates in life” (*participatur vitam*). Therefore, it is a mistake to identify a mental or sensual Demiurge as the one who created spiritual beings (*angelos suos spiritus*) and controls their entire substance (*universae spiritalis substantiae*).

<sup>51</sup> See AH II 30.9.

<sup>52</sup> See AH II 30.3.

<sup>53</sup> See AH II 30.5-6.

<sup>54</sup> AH II 34.2 (SCh 294,356): “*Quae autem sunt ab illo omnia, quaecunque facta sunt, et fiunt, initium quidem suum accipiunt generationis, et per hoc inferiora sunt ab eo qui ea fecit, quoniam non sunt ingenita; perseuerant autem et extenduntur in*

Irenaeus states that souls, spirits and all creatures participate in the Logos according to the grace and will of God (*secundum gratiam et voluntatem Dei*).<sup>55</sup> This special gift of participation in God's life is not derived from human nature, but from the divine (*secundum participationem vitae vivens facta est anima*). Thus all visible and invisible beings are created by the one and only God (*ex uno et eodem Patre omnia*).<sup>56</sup> Consequently, the divine Logos is constantly acting as intermediary in God's creation of the world, as co-creator of the cosmos.<sup>57</sup>

### Conclusion

In his main work *Adversus haereses*, Irenaeus of Lyon very clearly equates the eternal co-existence of the divine Logos with God. In his opinion, the Logos is equal with God the Creator of the universe. The Logos as the Only-begotten Son of God is the intermediary and co-creator of the cosmos. All created beings participate in the divine Logos. Furthermore, there is a communion of humankind with God through the Logos and in the Holy Spirit. The Logos transcends all human notions, and accordingly, human language is too limited to express fully the mystery of the eternal Word and the origins of the Logos. However, the apologist nevertheless describes the perfect Logos as Life, Indestructibility, Wisdom, Goodness and Truth. The Logos introduces differentiation among existing entities and give them cause and specific purpose. Based on the apostolic doctrine and the Scriptures, Irenaeus also explains that deeper participation in

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*longitudinem saeculorum, secundum uoluntatem Factoris Dei.*"

<sup>55</sup> See AH II, 34, 3; Ps. 21,5; 148,5-6.

<sup>56</sup> See AH II, 35, 4.

<sup>57</sup>The article is based on a PhD dissertation that was originally published in the Polish language: J. Trzebuniak, *Uczestnictwo w boskim Logosie według greckich Ojców Kościoła II wieku [Participation in the Divine Logos according to the Greek Fathers of the Church of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century]*, "Verbinum" (2019). See also R.M. Leszczyński, *Starożytna koncepcja Logosu [The Ancient Concept of Logos]*, Warszawa 2003, 263–268.

the divine Logos can be achieved through study and experience. Overall, all beings can participate in the Logos according to the special grace and will of God.

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