

Irenaeus and the Covenants: 'Immortal Diamond'

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Irenaeus' very first reference to covenants in *Adversus haereses* falls in the section that introduces the Rule of Truth (*Haer.* 1.10.1-3). He asserts the importance of the covenants, that one must discover the reasons for them and why there are several of them (*Haer.* 1.10.3). In *Haer.* 4.9.3, he adds that the 'successive covenants' provide the steps by which humanity 'gradually attains to perfect salvation'. For Irenaeus, the biblical covenants prepare humanity for the vision of God, that communion with God that leads to participation in incorruptibility (*Epid.* 40; *Haer.* 4.20.7).

Given the richness of Irenaeus' statements, it is remarkable that his treatment of the covenants theologically has gone largely unnoticed until fairly recently¹. In fact, he employs the term 'covenant' more often than 'recapitulation'². However, the covenants are treated nearly always in association with a biblical text, so that they are easily overlooked. Further, Irenaeus does not develop his ideas about the covenants systematically in *Adversus haereses*, the work most often studied. The shorter *Epideixis*, on the other hand, treats the several covenants more fully, in a historically organized framework³. Indeed, Irenaeus builds his history between Creation and the Incarnation around the covenant narratives concerning Noah, Abraham, and Moses (*Epid.* 8-29), truncating or eliminating most other events in that history altogether⁴. This fact further reveals his interest in the covenants. The climax of the *Epideixis* (*Epid.*

¹ Recent interest in the subject was sparked by E. Ferguson, 'The Covenant Idea in the Second Century', in *Texts and Testaments: Critical Essays on the Bible and Early Church Fathers*, ed. W. Eugene March (San Antonio, 1980), pp. 135-62. Subsequent studies include J.L. Duncan, III, 'The Covenant Idea in Ante-Nicene Theology' (Ph.D. diss. University of Edinburgh, 1995), pp. 132-56; and various articles. The bibliography is discussed in my 'Zealous for the Covenant': *Irenaeus and the Covenants of Israel*, *Traditio Exegetica Graeca* (Leuven, forthcoming), Chap. 1.

² The term 'recapitulation' (ἀνακεφαλαιώσις) appears only 60 times in Irenaeus' two major works, 'covenant' (διαθήκη) 85 times.

³ See S. Graham, 'Structure and Purpose of Irenaeus' *Epideixis*', *SP XXXVI* (2001), 210-21.

⁴ A. Rousseau rightly points out this feature, comparing it to the covenant list in *Haer.* 3.11.8 (*Irénée de Lyon, Démonstration de la prédication apostolique*, SC 406 (Paris, 1995), 61-2). This assumes that a covenant is implied in the Mosaic narrative of *Epid.* 25-29, although it is not so specified. It can be inferred from the contrast between 'old' and 'new' covenants in *Epid.* 86-97. Nevertheless, there are tensions in the text. See the discussion in S. Graham, *Zealous*, Chap. 3. See also *Haer.* 4.9.1; 4.12.3.

86-97) is focused on the last covenant, called the 'new covenant of the gospel through Jesus Christ' (*Haer.* 3.11.8; cf. *Epid.* 90-91), and the 'covenant of the adoption' (*Epid.* 8). The *Epidetixis*, then, provides a useful basis for examining Irenaeus' treatment of the covenants. Here, it will be used to consider how Irenaeus unfolds the progression and meaning of the several covenants that prepare the way for the human to become fully alive in God (*Epid.* 97; *Haer.* 4.20.5, 7).

Irenaeus sees in the covenants forerunners and exemplars of the relationship humanity can and will have with God according to the divine economy. Each successive covenant, a particular event that has taken place in human history, builds up humanity and points it toward the next step, ultimately leading to communion between God and humanity following on the new covenant (*Epid.* 6). Three aspects of Irenaeus' treatment of the covenant narratives will be considered here: first, that they involve real relations between God and humanity through the Logos (*Epid.* 5); second, that they are real events in human history; and third, that they are ordered to the growth and progress of humanity toward God.

Real Relations

It is useful first to consider the first humans, created in God's image and likeness (*Epid.* 11) and placed in the Paradise, where the Logos of God would walk and talk with the human, 'prefiguring the future, which would come to pass, that he would dwell with him and speak with him and would be with [humankind], teaching them righteousness' (*Epid.* 12)⁵. The divine-human relationship in the Paradise is Irenaeus' benchmark for all divine-human relationships – the future one prefigured in the Paradise will come about when the same Logos takes on flesh and again dwells and speaks with all humanity (cf. *Epid.* 44; 92). The delightful situation in the Paradise is destroyed by the disobedience of Adam and Eve (*Epid.* 16) – a breaking of the relationship – and their consequent expulsion⁶.

⁵ Cf. *Epid.* 19; 22. All translations of the *Epidetixis* used here are adapted from J. Behr, ed., *St. Irenaeus of Lyons: On the Apostolic Preaching* (Crestwood, N.Y., 1997). These passages exemplify the 'speaking God' noticed in *Adversus haereses* by C. Kannengiesser, 'The "Speaking God" and Irenaeus's Interpretative Pattern: The Reception of Genesis', *Annali di storia dell'esegesi* 15 (1998), 337-52.

⁶ ... Oh, pity and indignation! Manshape, that shone
Sheer off, dissevered a star, death blots black out...

(G. M. Hopkins, 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection', in *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W.H. Gardner and N.H. MacKenzie, 4th rev. and enlarged ed (Oxford, 1967), pp. 105-6).

In the *Epidetixis*, the only occasions after the first disobedience when the Logos converses and communes with humanity are in the covenants and with the covenant-mediators. The evidence that Noah interacted specifically with the Logos before and after the flood is not entirely clear in the *Epidetixis*: he hears and follows 'God's commands at the time of the covenant, and before that, of the flood' (*Epid.* 19; 22); however, Irenaeus specifies the Logos (as Son) in *Haer.* 4.10.1; 4.36.3; 2.30.9. Irenaeus' Abraham, however, walks and talks directly with the Logos, as a 'friend of God' (*Epid.* 24; 44; 45; cf. *Haer.* 3.15.3; 4.5.2-4.7.4; cf. *Jas* 2:23) – the imagery evokes the first humans in the Paradise (*Epid.* 12). Moses, too, hears and speaks with the Logos in the burning bush and on the Mountain (*Epid.* 2; 40; 46), 'just as anyone might speak with a friend' (*Haer.* 4.20.9). In the *Epidetixis*, all other human encounters with the Logos, before his Incarnation, are prophetic or visionary (*Epid.* 42b-65; cf. *Haer.* 4.33.10-15; 4.20.6-10), even those of Jacob and David (*Epid.* 45; 47⁷).

In order to open the new covenant of the adoption (*Epid.* 8; 91), the Logos comes to humanity, to converse with all, becoming visible to all in the flesh (*Epid.* 32). Irenaeus describes the 'new covenant' in terms of the prophecy in *Jer* 38:31-34 (LXX): the relationship between the Logos and believers becomes so intimate that the divine law (that is, the Great Commandment, *Mat* 22:37-40; cf. *Haer.* 4.12.3) is written directly on the human heart (*Epid.* 90). The Logos brings the Spirit of God and restores to humanity its lost likeness to God (*Epid.* 5; 97; cf. 11), making communion with the Father possible (*Epid.* 6). Until the culmination of the new covenant, all these encounters are with the Logos, not God the Father and Creator – even in the case of the new covenant (*Epid.* 47; cf. *Haer.* 4.6.1-7).

Real Historical Events

Irenaeus takes the covenant events to be absolutely historical. To the modern reader, this seems an unsophisticated reading. However, by stressing their historicity, Irenaeus preserves the covenants from being reduced to myths or 'fables' of the sort that he accuses the heretics of concocting (*Haer.* 1.8.1; 1.9.1-5)⁸. Neither are the covenants themselves types, although their signs so function. Irenaeus carefully separates the covenant agreements from their signs (*Haer.* 4.16.2), which enables him to retain their historical value and reclassifi-

⁷ The covenantal encounters with the Logos are not described as (prophetic) 'visions', *par* D. Minns, *Irenaeus*, Outstanding Christian Thinkers (Washington, D.C., 1994), pp. 49-50; nor are they separated in kind from the enfleshment of the Logos. See discussions in Behr, *Apostolic Preaching*, n. 127 on *Epid.* 45; and R. Polanco-Fernandois, *El concepto de profecía en la teología de san Ireneo* (Madrid, 1999), pp. 177-91.

⁸ See the important article of R. Norris, 'Theology and Language in Irenaeus of Lyon', *Anglican Theological Review* 76 (1994), 285-95.

what can be considered typologically (see *Haer.* 2.24.3; 3.12.11; 4.16.1). The covenants of Israel, mediated by Noah, Abraham, and Moses, are not signs pointing to the covenant of the gospel, nor are they inferior to it, but they prepare for it: they differ from the direct interaction with the incarnate Logos of God in the new covenant in degree, but not in kind. In short, the covenants take a particular place in Irenaeus' conception of human progress through history. By stressing their historicity, he also effectively refutes any rejection of the covenants of Israel themselves on the basis of being irrelevant to the new covenant (cf. *Haer.* 4.8.1).

Further, by focusing his historical narrative of salvation history before Christ (*Epid.* 8-29) on the covenant narratives, Irenaeus establishes a specific relationship between the history of sin and punishment before the Incarnation, and the covenants of Noah, Abraham, and Moses. The three covenants overlay a series of seven sin-and-punishment episodes between the time the first legislation for humanity, not to eat of the tree, is introduced (*Epid.* 15) and the time when humanity's obedience to God will be made possible by the obedience of the Incarnate Son (*Epid.* 31), and humanity will have restored to it, through the Spirit, its lost 'likeness' to God (*Epid.* 33; 97). The covenants provide a counterpoint to the pattern of sin and punishment, by demonstrating that humanity still has potential for righteousness. More importantly, the covenants demonstrate the continued divine provision for humanity despite sin – human disobedience does not displace the divine economy.⁹

The covenants are connected to one another historically in a progression (*Haer.* 4.9.3). It is noteworthy that in Irenaeus' depiction, Noah's blessing and curse on his sons at the time of creation's renewal, incorporated into the promises of the Noachic covenant itself (*Epid.* 22), are fulfilled (*Epid.* 21), respectively, in Abraham (*Epid.* 24), who inherits Shem's blessing (*Epid.* 21), and in the conquest of Canaan by the Hebrews coming from Egypt, in the case of Ham (*Epid.* 24; 28). The blessing on Japheth must await the 'close of the age' at the 'calling of the gentiles' (*Epid.* 21; 42a): it is fulfilled when the new covenant has been opened universally. In this way the Noachic covenant associated with the renewal of creation is connected to the succeeding covenants, culminating in the new covenant opened by the Second Adam. Abraham's covenant points directly to Moses, four hundred years later (*Epid.* 24; 25; 27). The Mosaic covenant, in its turn – particularly the Law and the tabernacle connected to Moses – prefigures and prophesies faithful servanthood and the church, to come with the new covenant (*Epid.* 26; cf. 40-41).

⁹ The place of the covenants in the divine $\delta\iota\kappa\omicron\nu\omicron\mu\omicron\tau\alpha$ is noticed but not developed by J. Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford, 2000), p. 33; it is only hinted at by J. Fantino, *La théologie d'Irénéus: Lectures des Écritures en réponse à l'exégèse gnostique, une approche trinitaire*, Cogitatio fidei 180 (Paris, 1994), p. 95, and E.F. Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 20-2, 82-3.

Human Growth and Progress

Through the covenants, humanity is prepared for 'the vision of God', that is, communion with God, by the mediation of the Logos (*Epid.* 7). The continued divine-human encounters in the covenants, and the progression among them, has already been illustrated. The covenants prepare humanity to enjoy a companionship with the Logos, such as the first humans in the Paradise enjoyed. Noah, obedient and thus righteous, enjoys salvation from the flood, his sons a blessing for growth (*Epid.* 19; 21). Abraham, devoted follower of the Logos, enjoys the companionship of the Logos on the basis of his faith and is rewarded with a land and a people (*Epid.* 24; *Haer.* 4.5.4; 4.7.1). The Hebrews with Moses are given a relationship with God and a law that will keep them from straying from God (*Epid.* 8; 26). All these things are necessary for the sinful human that Irenaeus – and scripture – depicts, and all of them are provided by the God whom the faithful follower seeks. It is no different in the time of the new covenant.

With the new covenant, the possibility comes at last, for all humanity, to fulfil obediently the duties and legislation that were established from the beginning (*Epid.* 15) and to become what humankind was intended to be all along. This is effected by the Logos, who brings God's Spirit and mixes it with humanity, so that it might 'be according to the image and likeness of God' (*Epid.* 97)¹⁰. Thus the covenants are part of a theology which includes a conception of a provident God who arranges affairs in history for the benefit of humanity (*Haer.* 3.25.1). For Irenaeus, the Logos is dispenser ($\delta\iota\kappa\omicron\nu\omicron\mu\omicron\varsigma$) of divine grace for human benefit, rendering God visible through many economies ($\delta\iota\kappa\omicron\nu\omicron\mu\omicron\tau\alpha$) so that humanity might have a goal and might not be deprived entirely of God. 'For the glory of God is the living human, and the life of the human is the vision of God.' The Logos' revelation of the Father gives life *par excellence* (*Haer.* 4.20.7). So the covenants take their place as historical events in the scheme of the divine economies, which aim toward a culmination at the end of the age, in the salvation of all the faithful.

Indeed, the burden of the apostolic preaching that Irenaeus attempts to prove in the *Epidexis* is that the incarnate Logos, visible to anyone, opened up the last of the covenants in his passion, death, and resurrection. By having become visible in human flesh and having defeated death by means of that very flesh, he returns to the Father and can send the Holy Spirit, which restores the likeness to God (*Epid.* 97) that was lost in the disobedience of the first humans – that is, that joyful sympathy with and response to the divine legislation which,

¹⁰ A. Rousseau considers this passage a summary of Irenaeus' theological anthropology: humanity opens itself entirely to God, and finds its 'ultimate achievement' in becoming finally constituted of body, soul, and Holy Spirit; see *Démonstration*, 349-50, C. 97, n. 8, and Appendix I.

in the end, comes down to the Great Commandment to love God and neighbour (*Epid.* 95-96). The Logos thus makes possible something that was not possible before, even to Adam and Eve in the Paradise: he can now present humanity to God, and believers can speak directly with the Father (*Epid.* 96; cf. *Haer.* 4.26.1) and receive incorruptibility from God (*Epid.* 7). G.M. Hopkins expressed it well:

... Enough! The Resurrection,
A heart's-clanion!...

... In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and
this Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal
diamond,
Is immortal diamond!¹¹.

Polycarp *Contra Marcion* Irenaeus' Presbyterial Source in *AH* 4.27-32

Charles E. Hill, Orlando

Introduction

The importance of Polycarp of Smyrna to second-century Christianity is considerable. Near the beginning of his unusually long tenure of leadership at Smyrna he was praised, and prodded, in a famous letter written by Ignatius, bishop of the ancient and prominent Christian community of Antioch. Many who never met Polycarp surely knew him from this letter, which circulated widely in a collection of Ignatius' letters. At the time of Polycarp's death, the author of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* stated that the bishop of Smyrna was famous throughout Asia among Christians and pagans alike (19.1), and related how the hostile crowd acknowledged him as 'the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods' (12.2). Alongside the praise of his former student Irenaeus, we have the words of Polyocrates of neighbouring Ephesus from the early 190s which laud him as a venerable Asian martyr, witness to the Quartodeciman tradition, and a vital link with Jesus' disciple John (Eusebius, *HE* 5.24.4).

Sadly, of the man's literary output all that now exists under his name is a single, early epistle written to the Philippian church, which was also at some point included in the Ignatian corpus. We have, of course, the extremely valuable account of Polycarp's martyrdom, with its contemporary narrative of Polycarp's last days and some of his last words. Irenaeus too gives us a few historical reminiscences and anecdotes about Polycarp's life. In one tantalizing remark, Irenaeus insisted that he could remember much of Polycarp's oral teaching, having noted it down in his heart when he heard it, and having ruminated upon it for decades (*Letter to Florinus*, *ap.* Eusebius, *HE* 5.20.7). It will be the purpose of this paper to show that some of this oral teaching of Polycarp still exists, imbedded in Irenaeus' book *Against Heresies*, and is still recoverable. Some years ago, in an article on Cerinthus, I presented a short argument for identifying Polycarp as a source for Irenaeus in at least two places in the *Against Heresies* where his name is not mentioned¹. Here I wish to present a much fuller case involving significantly more data. Following a

¹ C. E. Hill, 'Cerinthus, Gnostic or Chiliast? A New Solution to an Old Problem', *JHS* 8 (2000), 135-72. I hope to provide even fuller documentation in a future study.

¹¹ Hopkins, 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire'.

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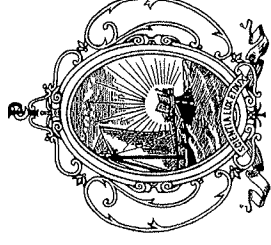
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