

On the Refutation and Overthrow of the So-Called Knowledge

Excerpts from Book I*

Introduction and a Description of Various Gnostic Teachings

Certain men, rejecting the truth, are introducing among us false stories and vain genealogies, which “serve rather to controversies,” as the apostle said,¹ “than to God's work of building up in the faith.” By their craftily constructed rhetoric they lead astray the minds of the inexperienced and take them captive, corrupting the oracles of the Lord and being evil expounders of what was well spoken. For they upset many, leading them away by the pretense of “knowledge” from Him who constituted and ordered the universe, as if they had something higher and greater to show them than the God who made the heaven and the earth and all that is in them. By skillful language, they artfully attract the simple-minded into their kind of inquiry and then crudely destroy them by working up their blasphemous and impious view about the Demiurge. Nor can their simple hearers distinguish the lie from the truth.

For their error is not displayed as what it is, lest it should be stripped naked and shown up; it is craftily decked out in an attractive dress and made to seem truer than the truth itself to the inexperienced because of the outer appearance. As one better than I am has said about these matters: “A precious stone like emerald, which many value greatly, can be put to shame by a clever imitation in glass, unless there is someone on hand who can test it and show what was done deceptively by art. And when brass is mixed with silver, what untrained person can easily prove it?” So then, lest some should be made prey of through my fault, like sheep by wolves, not recognizing them because of their outwardly wearing sheep's clothing —

whom the Lord warned us to guard against² — and because they talk like us, though thinking very differently, I thought it necessary, my dear friend, after reading the *Commentaries*, as they call them, of the disciples of Valentinus and having met some of them and so become familiar with their point of view, to expound to you those portentous and profound “mysteries”, which not all accept, since not all have sufficiently purged their brains. Then you, being informed about these things, may be able to make them clear to all your people and to warn them to be on their guard against this abysmal folly and blasphemy against Christ. As well as I can, then, I will briefly and clearly describe the position of the present false teachers, I mean the followers of Ptolemaeus, who is an offshoot of the school of Valentinus. I will further provide, as far as my modest ability extends, the means of overthrowing it, showing how absurd and foreign to the truth are the things they say. I am neither practiced in writing nor trained in rhetoric, but my love for you and yours encourages me to bear my witness about these teachings which have been hidden till the present but have now by the grace of God come to light. “For there is nothing hidden that shall not be revealed, nor secret, that shall not be made known.”³

You will not expect from me, a resident among the Celts and mostly accustomed to a barbarous language, rhetorical skill, which I have never learned, nor power in writing, which I have not acquired, nor beauties of language and style, which I am not acquainted with. But what I write to you out of love, plainly and truly and simply, you will surely receive in love, and

*The entire book can be read here:

<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.ix.ii.html>

¹ 1 Ti 1:4

² See Mt 7:15.

³ Mt 10:26

you can then amplify for yourself — having greater ability than mine — what I have given you, as it were, in basic principles. With your breadth of mind you will be able to make much more fruitful what I have said to you in brief and will be able to present powerfully to your people what I have feebly expounded to you. As I have endeavored, in response to your long-held desire to know their position, not only to make it plain to you but also to give you the necessary means of showing its falsity, so do you perform a similar service for the rest, according to the grace that the Lord has given you, so that men may no longer be ensnared by their plausibilities, which are as follows....

...

Now the Church, although scattered over the whole civilized world to the end of the earth, received from the Apostles and their disciples its faith in one God, the Father Almighty, who made the heaven and the earth and the seas and all that is in them, and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was made flesh for our salvation, and in the Holy Spirit, who through the prophets proclaimed the dispensations of God — the comings, the birth of a virgin, the suffering, the resurrection from the dead, and the bodily reception into the heavens of the beloved Christ Jesus our Lord and His coming from the heavens in the glory of the Father to restore all things and to raise up all flesh, that is, the whole human race, so that every knee may bow, of things in heaven and on earth and under the earth, to Christ Jesus our Lord and God and Savior and King, according to the pleasure of the invisible Father, and every tongue may confess Him⁴ and that He may execute righteous judgment on all. The spiritual powers of wickedness and the angels who transgressed and fell into apostasy and the godless and wicked and lawless and blasphemers among men He will send into the eternal fire. But to the righteous and holy and those who have kept His commandments and

⁴ See Ph 2:10-11.

have remained in His love — some from the beginning [of life]⁵ and some since their repentance — He will by his grace give life incorrupt and will clothe them with eternal glory.

Having received this preaching and this faith, as I have said, the Church, although scattered in the whole world, carefully preserves it, as if living in one house. She believes these things [everywhere] alike, as if she had but one heart and one soul, and preaches them harmoniously, teaches them, and hands them down, as if she had but one mouth. For the languages of the world are different, but the meaning of the [Christian] tradition is one and the same. Neither do the churches that have been established in Germany believe otherwise or hand down any other tradition, nor those among the Iberians, nor those among the Celts, nor in Egypt, nor in Libya, nor those established in the middle parts of the world. But as God's creature, the Sun, is one and the same in the whole world, so also the preaching of the truth shines everywhere, and illumines all men who wish to come to the knowledge of the truth. Neither will one of those who preside in the churches who is very powerful in speech say anything different from these things, "for no one is above [his] teacher,"⁶ nor will one who is weak in speech diminish the tradition. For since the Faith is one and the same, he who can say much about it does not add to it, nor does he who can say little diminish it.

This matter of having more or less understanding does not mean that men change the basic idea and imagine another God above the Framer⁷ and Maker and Nourisher of this universe — as if He were not enough for us — or another Christ or another Only-Begotten. But it consists in working out the things that have been said in parables and building them into the foundation of the Faith: in expounding the

⁵ *i.e.* those born into Christian families

⁶ Mt 10:24; Lk 6:40

⁷ or Demiurge

activity and dispensation of God for the sake of mankind; in showing clearly how God was long-suffering over the apostasy of the angels who transgressed and over the disobedience of men; in declaring why one and the same God made some things subject to time, others eternal, some heavenly, and some earthly; in understanding why God, being invisible, appeared to the prophets, not in one form, but differently to different ones; in showing why there were a number of covenants with mankind and in teaching what is the character of each of the covenants; in searching out why God shut up all in disobedience that he might have mercy on all; in giving thanks that the Word of God was made flesh and suffered; in declaring why the coming of the Son of God [was] at the last times, that is, [why] the Beginning was made manifest at the end; in unfolding what is found in the prophets about the end and the things to come; in not being silent that God has made the despaired-of Gentiles fellow heirs and of the same body and partners with the saints; and in stating how this mortal and fleshly [body] will put on immortality and this corruptible incorruption; and in proclaiming how he says, "What was not a people is a people, and what was not beloved is beloved," and, "Many more are the children of the desolate than of her who has a husband."⁸ With reference to these things and others like them the Apostle exclaimed, "Oh the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!"⁹ But [this greater skill] does not consist in imagining beyond the Creator and Framer¹⁰ the Mother of these things and of Him,¹¹ the Desire of a wandering Aeon¹², and coming to such a point of blasphemy nor in falsely conceiving of the Pleroma¹³ above her, now with thirty, now with an innumerable crowd of Aeons, as these

teachers who are indeed void of divine understanding say. But as I said before, the real Church has one and the same Faith everywhere in the world.

Let us now look at the inconsistent views of these men — since there are two or three of them anyway — how they do not even agree on the same topics but vary from each other both about things and about names. The first of these, Valentinus, who adapted the principles of the so-called Gnostic heresy to the individual character of his school, thus expounded it, defining that there is an unnamable Dyad, of which one is called Ineffable and the other Silence. Then, from this Dyad a second Dyad was produced, of which he calls one part Father and the other Truth. From the Tetrad were produced Logos¹⁴ and Zoe¹⁵, Anthropos¹⁶ and Ecclesia¹⁷, and this is the first Ogdoad¹⁸. From Logos and Zoe, he says that ten Powers were produced, as I said before, but from Anthropos and Ecclesia, twelve, one of which, falling away and suffering a lack, brought about the rest of the business. He postulated two Boundaries, one between the depth and the rest of the Pleroma, dividing the begotten Aeons from the unbegotten Father, and the other separating their Mother from the Pleroma. Christ was not produced from the Aeons within the Pleroma, but was conceived by the Mother who was outside, according to her knowledge of better things but with a kind of shadow. He, being male, cast off the shadow from himself and returned into the Pleroma. Then the Mother, being left with the shadow and emptied of spiritual substance, brought forth another Son, and this is the Demiurge, whom he also calls almighty over things subject to him. He taught that there was also produced with him a left-hand Ruler, as do those falsely called Gnostics whom we shall speak of. He sometimes says that Jesus was produced by him who was

⁸ See Eph 2:19; 1 Co 15:54; Ro 9:25; & Gal 4:27.

⁹ Ro 11:33

¹⁰ or Demiurge

¹¹ that is, Sophia

¹² An Aeon was an aspect of deity in Gnostic thought.

¹³ the collective "fullness" of the divine

¹⁴ "Word"

¹⁵ "Life"

¹⁶ "Man"

¹⁷ "Church"

¹⁸ a group of eight

separated from their Mother and reunited with the others, that is, the Desired; sometimes from him who returned to the Pleroma, that is, from Christ; sometimes from Anthropos and Ecclesia. And he says that the Holy Spirit was produced by the Truth to inspect and fructify the Aeons, entering into them invisibly, through whom the Aeons produced the plants of truth.

A second [teacher] says that there is a first Ogdoad, a right-hand and a left-hand Tetrad, as he would have them called, one light, the other darkness. And the Power that fell away and suffered lack was not begotten of the thirty Aeons but of their fruits.

There is another distinguished teacher among them, who, striving after something more sublime and an even greater knowledge, speaks thus of the first Tetrad: "There is a certain Proarche¹⁹ before all things, beyond any thought or speech or name, whom I call Monotes²⁰. With this Monotes is another Power, whom I call Henotes.²¹ This Henotes, and this Monotes, being the One, sent forth — but not as causing an emanation — the intelligible Arche²² over all things, which Arche is known in speech as Monad²³. With this Monad there also reigns a Power of one substance with him, which I also call the One. These powers, Monotes and Henotes, Monad and the One, sent forth the other productions of the Aeons."

Iu, iu, and feu, feu! Truly we may utter these exclamations from tragedy at such bold invention of ridiculous nomenclature and at the audacity that made up these names without blushing. For when he says, "There is a certain Proarche before all things, above all thought, which I call Monotes," and again, "With this Monotes there reigns a Power, which I call Henotes," it is obvious that he admits that he is talking about his own inventions and that he

has given names to his inventions that no one else had given them before. It is clear also that he himself dared to make up these names and — unless he had been on hand — the Truth would have had no name. There is no reason why someone else shouldn't assign names like these on the same basis: There is a royal Proarche above all thought, a Power above all substance, indefinitely extended. Since this is the Power, which I call the Gourd, there is with it the Power that I call Super-Emptiness. This Gourd and Super-Emptiness, being one, emitted, yet did not emit, the fruit, visible, edible, and delicious, that is known to language as the Cucumber. With this Cucumber, there is a Power of like quality with it, which I call the Melon. These Powers, the Gourd, Super-Emptiness, the Cucumber, and the Melon, sent forth the remaining crowd of the delirious Melons of Valentinus. For if the language that is used about all kinds of things is to be transferred to the first Tetrad, and anyone can assign names as he pleases, who would prohibit [our using] these names, which are much more credible and in common use and generally known?...

...

The rule of truth that we hold is that there is one God Almighty, who made all things by His Word and fashioned and formed, out of what had no existence, all things that exist. So says the Scripture to that effect: "By the Word of the Lord were the heavens established, and all the might of them, by the spirit of His mouth." And again, "All things were made by Him, and without Him was nothing made."²⁴ There is no exception or deduction stated. But the Father made all things by Him, whether visible or invisible, objects of sense or of intelligence, temporal — on account of a certain character given them — or eternal; and these eternal things He did not make by angels or by any Powers separated from His thought. For God needs none of these things but is He who — by

¹⁹"Pre-Beginning"

²⁰"Uniqueness"

²¹"Oneness"

²²"Beginning"

²³"Unique"

²⁴Jn 1:3

His Word and Spirit — makes and disposes and governs all things and commands all things into existence; He who formed the world...; He who fashioned man; He [who] is the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob — above whom there is no other God nor initial principle nor power nor Pleroma. He is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, as we shall prove. Holding, therefore, this rule, we shall easily show — notwithstanding the great variety and multitude of their opinions — that these men have deviated from the truth. For almost all the different sects of heretics admit that there is one God, but then, by their pernicious doctrines, they change [this truth into error] — even as the Gentiles do through idolatry — thus proving themselves ungrateful to Him who created them. Moreover, they despise the workmanship of God, speaking against their own salvation, becoming their own bitterest accusers, and being false witnesses [against themselves]. Yet, reluctant as they may be, these men will one day rise again in the flesh, to confess the power of Him who raises them from the dead. But they shall not be numbered among the righteous on account of their unbelief.

Since, therefore, it is a complex task to refute and convict all the heretics, and since our design is to reply to them all according to their special characteristics, we have judged it necessary, first of all, to give an account of their source and root, in order that, by getting a knowledge of their most exalted Chaos, you may understand the nature of the tree that has produced such fruits.

Now Simon the Samaritan was that magician of whom Luke [spoke]....²⁵

...

Cerdon, who took his start from the followers of Simon and settled at Rome under Hyginus (who held the ninth place in the Episcopal succession from the apostles) taught

that the God preached by the Law and the Prophets was not the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. For the former was known and the latter unknown, the former righteous and the latter good.

After him came Marcion of Pontus, who developed [Cerdon's] teaching, shamelessly blaspheming the God whom the Law and the Prophets proclaimed, describing Him as the author of evils, desirous of wars, changing His opinions, and contrary to Himself. But Jesus [was] from the Father who is above the God that formed the world and came into Judea in the time of Pontius Pilate, who was procurator of Tiberius Caesar. Manifest in human form to those who were in Judea, He abolished the Prophets and the Law and all the works of that God who made the world, whom he calls the World Ruler. In addition to this, he mutilated the Gospel According to Luke, removing everything about the birth of the Lord and much of the teaching of the words of the Lord, in which the Lord is recorded as clearly confessing the Creator of this universe as his Father. He persuaded his disciples that he was more veracious than the Apostles who handed down the gospel, giving them not a gospel but a mere fragment of a gospel. He also similarly cut up the Letters of Paul, removing whatever the Apostle said clearly about the God who made the world, that He is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and whatever the Apostle teaches by referring to the prophetic writings that predict the coming of the Lord.

Only the *souls* of those who have learned his teaching will come to salvation; the body, since it is taken from the earth, cannot be saved. To his blasphemy against God, he adds this, speaking diabolically indeed and in direct opposition to the truth: that Cain and those like him — the men of Sodom and the Egyptians and other such and, in general, all the nations that walked in all kinds of wickedness — were saved by the Lord when he descended into the lower regions and came running to Him and received Him into their realm. But Abel and Enoch and Noah and the other righteous and the

²⁵See Ac 8. Irenaeus proceeds to describe Simon as the father of all heretics, and then discusses various sects of Gnosticism in succession.

patriarchs, such as Abraham, with all the prophets and those who were pleasing to God, did not share in the salvation that the serpent who was in Marcion preached. For, he says, since they knew that their God was always testing them, they thought He was testing them then and so did not come to Jesus or believe His proclamation, and, therefore, their souls remained in Hades.

But since this man alone has dared publicly to mutilate the Scriptures, and more than any others to malign God shamelessly, I will refute him separately; convicting him from his own writings and from the words of the Lord and the Apostles that he preserves and uses, I will overthrow him, with the help of the Lord. But here it is necessary only to mention him, that you may know that all those who corrupt the truth and injure the teaching of the Church are the disciples and successors of Simon Magus the Samaritan. Although, in order to deceive others, they do not confess the name of their teacher, yet they teach his views. Setting up the name of Christ Jesus as a kind of decoy, but in one way or another introducing the impiety of Simon, they bring many to destruction, spreading their evil teachings under a good name and, by the sweetness and beauty of the name [of Christ], offering them the bitter and evil poison of the serpent, the prince of the apostasy....

...Others again declare that Cain derived his being from the Power above and acknowledge that Esau, Korah, the Sodomites, and all such persons are related to themselves.... They declare that Judas the traitor was thoroughly acquainted with these things and that he alone, knowing the truth as no others did, accomplished the mystery of the betrayal. By him, all things, both earthly and heavenly, were thus thrown into confusion. They produce a fictitious history of this kind, which they style the *Gospel of Judas*.....

It was necessary to prove clearly that — as their very opinions and regulations exhibit them — those who are of the school of Valentinus

derive their origin from such mothers, fathers, and ancestors and also to bring forward their doctrines, with the hope that perhaps some of them, exercising repentance and returning to the only Creator and God, the Former of the universe, may obtain salvation, and that others may not after this be drawn away by their wicked — although plausible — persuasions, imagining that they will obtain from them the knowledge of some greater and more sublime mysteries. But let them rather, learning to good effect from us the wicked tenets of these men, look with contempt upon their doctrines, while at the same time they pity those who, still cleaving to these miserable and baseless fables, have reached such a pitch of arrogance as to reckon themselves superior to all others on account of such knowledge or, as it should rather be called, ignorance. They have now been fully exposed; and simply to exhibit their sentiments is to obtain a victory over them.

Therefore, I have labored to bring forward and make clearly known the utterly disgusting carcass of this miserable little fox.²⁶ For there will not now be need of many words to overturn their system of doctrine when it has been shown to all. ...Since we have brought their hidden mysteries, which they keep in silence among themselves, to the light, it will not now be necessary to use many words in destroying their system of opinions. For it is now in your power, and in the power of all your associates, to familiarize yourselves with what has been said, to overthrow their wicked and undigested doctrines, and to set forth doctrines agreeable to the truth. Since, then, this is the case, I shall, according to my promise and as my ability serves, labor to overthrow them by refuting them all in the following book. Even to give an account of them is a tedious affair, as you see. But I shall furnish means for overthrowing them, by meeting all their opinions in the order in which they have been described, that I may not only expose the wild beast to view but may inflict wounds upon it from every side.

²⁶See SS 2:15; Lk 13:32.