

Bio for
Irenæus
The Second Bishop of Lyons¹
(AD ~115 – ~202)

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- Irenaeus was one of the first theologians of the early church and the second bishop of what was then called Lugdunum in Gaul.
 - Irenaeus was Greek, born in Smyrna, in Asia Minor, to a Christian family.
 - He was a pupil of Polycarp.
 - He may also have attended the school of philosophy founded by Justin Martyr in Rome, though he never became a philosopher like Justin.
- In ~177, Irenaeus was an elder in Lugdunum, and he was chosen by those in that church to carry a letter to Rome regarding the Montanist² controversy.
 - While he was gone, a persecution occurred, and the first bishop of Lugdunum was killed.
 - When Irenaeus returned, he was chosen to be the next bishop.
- His most famous work is *On the Refutation and Overthrow of the So-Called Knowledge³*, more commonly known as *Against Heresies*, written ~185.
 - It consists of five volumes, originally written in Greek.
 - Book I — a description and history of the various sects of Gnosticism
 - Book II — the valuelessness of the doctrines of Gnosticism
 - Book III — the falsehood of the doctrines of Gnosticism
 - Book IV — sayings of Jesus and how he fulfills the Scriptures
 - Book V — more sayings of Jesus and of Paul
 - Sadly, only fragments of the original Greek exist today, but we have the entire work in Latin and the last two volumes in Armenian.
 - The primary heretical group covered by this book is Gnosticism, particularly the variety espoused by Valentinus.
 - “Christian” Gnostics believed that the God of the Old Testament (called the Demiurge) was evil and not the God of the New Testament (The Father). This Demiurge created the imperfect world; the Father showed it mercy.
 - They believed that humans are dualistic beings made of a pure soul and an impure body created by the Demiurge.

Sources:

<http://www.earlychurch.org.uk>

<http://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.html>

http://www.religionfacts.com/christianity/history/church_fathers.htm

¹ Lyons is located in modern France.

² The Montanists were a heretical group who counted as authoritative ecstatic prophecies.

³ “So-called knowledge” refers to the “secret knowledge” of Gnosticism.

- They held that they possessed a “secret knowledge” of Jesus’ teachings, which allowed them to escape from the trap of the body.
 - Wisdom, Sophia, was personified as a type of deity and the mother of the Christ.
 - Valentinian Gnostics believed that Jesus was not both God and man; instead, they argued that the Christ and Jesus were separate beings temporarily unified.
 - Valentinian Gnostics believed in a spiritual, not a bodily resurrection.
 - Marcion, another Gnostic, had written an edited version of Luke, which was the only Gospel his followers used.
 - Marcion founded a rival church denomination in ~143, after he had been rejected as a bishop.
 - Some branches of Gnosticism were ascetic; others licentious. Irenaeus writes mostly about the latter groups.
 - Irenaeus considered all Gnostics to be “descendants” of Simon Magus.⁴
- In 1945, a library of books was discovered, the Gnostic Gospels, which caused many to doubt the truth of Irenaeus’ descriptions of Gnosticism. However, Irenaeus was speaking about specific groups of Gnostics, and much of what he wrote does match the information in the Gnostic Gospels.
- The more recent discovery of “The Gospel of Judas” confirms that what Irenaeus wrote about Gnostic opinions of Judas were true.
- He argued strongly that Christians should accept the doctrinal authority of the Church, since they could trace their leaders back to the Apostles, unlike the Gnostics.
- He focuses much of his writing on the plan of God’s creation. Death and pain are not evil; they are things that help us mature into God’s likeness.
- He held that in Jesus, as the second Adam, all things would be “recapitulated”.
- He quotes from most of our New Testament as well as *1 Clement*.
- He is the first writer to say that there are four canonical Gospels.
- In ~190, he wrote a letter to the Bishop of Rome, asking him to reconsider his excommunication of the Asia Minor churches for their celebration of the Passover.
- Although counted among the martyrs traditionally, he most likely died of natural causes in ~AD 202 in France.

⁴ See Acts 8.