At the high point of creation comes its disruption. Adam and Eve have been fashioned from the dust and for one another, lords over a creation that will support them as they aid one another in the growth toward perfection—a growth fostered by the Word who himself walks with them in the garden. Yet the course this growth will take shall soon change. We cannot simply say that the story of creation here becomes one of a ‘fall’, for there is an important sense in which Irenaeus’ view of the human economy cannot be paired with what has long since become the traditional conception of such a fall; or certainly of ‘The Fall’ with its consequent division of human nature into pre- and post-lapsidic states. Attempts are still made to read Irenaeus in this way, but by and large scholarship knows better.\(^1\) In his reading of creation’s interruption, Irenaeus shares much in common with the Jewish readers of Genesis 3, and at times surprisingly little with his near-contemporaries in the early Christian Church. Starting from the conception of Christ as one who saves by re-heading human nature as well as the human history of growth and stunted growth, he is able to read the story of the prohibition on the tree of life, humanity’s subsequent deception and transgression, and the end-results of the whole affair as largely a misdirection of the course of such growth, and only in a very qualified way as a ‘fall’ from some previously held position or ‘state’.\(^2\) As one scholar has written,

\[\text{L’économie est alors passage de l’imperfection à la perfection, de l’inachèvement à l’achèvement, passage d’un commencement à une fin. Ce passage commande toute la compréhension irrévérent de l’économie et, en particulier, la place du péché au sein de cette économie.}\]

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\(^2\) Wingren noted early on that talk of pre- and post-fall ‘states’ is a concept foreign to Irenaean anthropology (Wingren, \textit{Man and the Incarnation} 28–29). But is there so complete an absence of this notion in Irenaeus as Wingren suggests? This shall be the subject of our treatment below, p. 167.

\(^3\) Fantino, ‘Passage’, 418.
This being true, the misdirection of the divine economy is nonetheless a departure from the pathway on which Adam and Eve were originally set, and there is in this departure a genuine loss of the possessions held there. Such is the message put forward in Genesis’ proclamation of the transgression, which, given the centrality of a perception of sin to the nature of salvation encountered in a redeemer, Irenaeus takes up in great detail. But, in a methodological approach that should by now not surprise the reader, Irenaeus does not turn to these texts so much to learn the nature of sin, but to read them Christologically, and by means of the revelation of sin and redemption found in Christ to demonstrate the consistent recapitulative work of God for the human creature.

The tree and the prohibition

The nature of the prohibition: protection from knowledge misused

Before the advent of the transgression proper, the context of the transgression is established. Between creation and sin stands a prohibition. In a reading of the Genesis narrative, the opening verses describe paradise and humanity’s placement therein, including the various details of the garden; while the contents of 2.16–17 represent the first words, the first commands, given by God since his pronouncement of a blessing upon the completed six days’ work (cf. Gen 2.3). ‘And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”’

Irenaeus extrapolates, from the insertion of this prohibition into the very heart of the creation saga in its anthropogonic element, that the commandment itself forms part of the formative work of the creator upon his creation. The prohibition is an active manoeuvre of God in fashioning his human formation, even as were the drawing up from the dust and the breathing of the divine breath. It is not merely a negative proscription, but a positive affirmation of the proper limits of human knowing in its present stage of development. It is in this sense that Irenaeus utilises the text of the prohibition at Epideixis 15, where it is placed at the end of his long treatment of the creation saga, in some sense completing all that has gone before:

But, in order that the man should not entertain thoughts of grandeur nor be exalted, as if he had no Lord, and, because of the authority given to the man and the boldness towards God his creator, sin, passing beyond his