It seems that Irenaeus of Lyons had a two-sided view of the Roman Empire. On the one hand he recognized its beneficial sovereignty.\(^1\) It had a far-reaching rule which made the Emperor’s strength known everywhere and which provided the empire’s subjects with peace and security in journeys. On the other hand, he recognized the empire as merely one of a long line of temporal worldly kingdoms, which was ultimately doomed to destruction by God and would perhaps bring forth the one who blasphemes God.\(^2\)

In his mind, the Empire’s strength and benefits were great within his age and he gratefully and honestly recognized them. But, he believed other kingdoms had been great and would be great. Eventually they all would fall and God would accomplish even Rome’s fall. The Roman Empire is not the comprehensive, consummative empire. Although he and others benefited from its great government, a greater government was coming.

His view of the Empire was inextricably linked to his perspective of an earthly history and future managed by the one Father and Creator. God’s hand was in the Babylonian captivity, God’s hand was in the bringing forth of the Septuagint under the Macedonians, God’s hand was in the peace of the Romans. God’s hand would also be in the destruction of the Romans and the founding of the eternal kingdom. For the bishop, all this history of governments was sacred history although it played out upon the earth. They are all but temporal stages in God’s ordering of his one, grand economy. This conviction comes forth when in *Adversus haereses* 5.24.1, he sets forth through Scripture that the kingdoms

---


of the world are appointed by God for the benefit of the world’s nations. It also comes forth when in 4.36.6 he alludes to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman legions, the armies, of Titus. The bishop there refers to the armies of Titus as “his (God’s) armies” because “all people belong to God.”

In Irenaean polemic, then, the seemingly secular realm of the empire is actually the realm of the sacred. This is not surprising when we remember that Irenaeus is an early champion of the continuity between the Old and New Testaments, the celestial Father and the Creator-God, the Logos of the Father and the Son of Mary, and the humanity of the gnostic and the humanity of the non-gnostic. The bishop’s whole theology pivots around the transcendent God’s immediacy to creation and its progressive history. Against the dualistic thought of his opponents, he repeatedly presents a theology of unity and continuity. Because the one God who orders all things ultimately governs both Rome and heaven, there is unity between the secular and the sacred.

God intends to gradually educate humanity, by his Word and Spirit, throughout the various economies of history. He has therefore structured history strategically and governments have a role to play. Although God could have created humanity perfect from the beginning, he elected not to do so. A fragile creature required finesse. Humanity, in its weakness, was unable to bear perfection at first. It had to mature into it. Humanity was uneducated in perfection. The bishop of Lyons likens humanity’s state at creation to that of a newborn babe. Humanity needs to be trained, taught and perfected so that eventually it may see God. The patriarchs, law, prophets, Gospel and apostles, each in their own turn, are all orchestrated by God to accomplish the purpose of human development. So, too, are human governments.

Irenaeus does not compose an apologist’s address to the Romans or their Emperor. We do not find an ingratiating address, petition, or plea to the Emperor. There is no defense of Christianity before the non-Christian world, no argument that would assist Christians under trial in the courts. What is not

---

6 *Adv. haer.* 4.37.7.