JOHN AND HIS GOSPEL IN THE MIRROR OF IRENAEUS OF LYONS: PERSPECTIVES OF RECENT RESEARCH

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In Memory of Birgit Michaela Rettich-Mutschler (1967–2008), my beloved wife, mother of our three children

The last fifteen years have seen the development of a new interest in the relationship between the Gallic bishop, Irenaeus of Lyons, and some of the main New Testament authors he frequently quotes.1 In the case of the Gospel of John, however, monographic contributions have been rare.2 In this summary, I would like to present some aspects of how the recent research has seen John and his gospel in the mirror of Irenaeus of Lyons. Subdivided into three parts, this essay presents (1) a historical perspective, (2) a literary perspective, and (3) a theological perspective.

1. What Irenaeus Reveals about John—A Historical Perspective3

After collecting the information Irenaeus gives about John (1.1), we will ask from which sources these details were derived, and whether they are trustworthy or not (1.2).

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1 See Noormann 1994 (Corpus Paulinum); Bingham 1998 (Gospel of Matthew); and Mutschler 2004a (Corpus Johanneum). Research on Irenaeus and Luke-Acts, especially the Gospel of Luke, is still wanting. It would also be desirable to see an investigation into the reception of 1 Peter and the figure of the disciple Peter, and, of course, a study on Irenaeus and the Gospel of Mark, which has been nearly completely neglected in this regard.

2 For a lucid and prominent treatment, see Lewis 1908; Loewenich 1932; and Ciani 1955. A short history of modern research is found in Mutschler 2004a, 4–8.

3 For a brief summary, see Mutschler 2006, 501–503.
1.1. Irenaeus about John

It was observed already long ago that the church father of the second century knows more details about the fourth evangelist than he does about the other three. To show this concretely, Irenaeus mentions Matthew 16 times by name, Mark 7 times, and Luke 31 times (altogether 54), while he mentions John alone about 60 times. Peter is mentioned almost as often (46 times), and among the New Testament authors only Paul, naturally, is named more often than John by Irenaeus (approximately 120 times). For Irenaeus, John is the discipulus Domini par excellence, the disciple of the Lord. All combinations of Dominus and discipulus are, in fact, exclusively reserved for John!

Certain other remarkable observations can be made, too. The most common form of the formula, “disciple of the Lord,” in Greek is, Ἰωάννης ὁ τοῦ Κυρίου μαθητής and in many cases Irenaeus continues with φησί (or inquit, ait, meminerit, dicens, dixisset, εἰρήκει). Eleven explicit quotations from the Fourth Gospel, 2 John and Revelation, are thus similarly, although not stereotypically, introduced. However, the formula discipulus Domini was not invented by Irenaeus; he probably took it over from his traditions in Asia Minor or—in the case of Adv. haer. 3.1.1—Rome.

The formula, ὁ τοῦ Κυρίου μαθητής, is not, in fact, found in the Fourth Gospel (nor in other parts of the New Testament). (Irenaeus, for his part, does not use the Johannine expression, “disciple whom Jesus loved,” which appears five times in the Fourth Gospel.) It is, however, fairly easy to see how the formula was developed out of the

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5 Hoh 1919, 33: “vom vierten Evangelisten ungleich mehr und spezifischer weiß als von den übrigen drei.”
8 Irenaeus, Adv. haer. 1.8.5 (twice); 1.16.3; 2.2.5; 2.22.3; 2.22.5; 3.1.1; 3.3.4; 3.11.1 (twice); 3.11.3; 3.16.5; 3.16.8 (eius instead of Domini); 3.22.2 (αὐτοῦ instead of τοῦ Κυρίου); 4.20.11; 4.30.4; 5.18.2; 5.26.1; 5.33.3; 5.35.2; Ep. Vict. (Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 5.24.16). See the critical edition of Rousseau, Doutreleau et al. 1965–1982.
9 For a comparison chart, see Mutschler 2004a, 163; and in detail ibid., 154–172.
10 Mutschler 2004a, 164–166.
11 Either presbyters as in Irenaeus, Adv. haer. 2.22.5; 4.30.4; 5.33.3; or Polycarp and his listeners, as in Adv. haer. 3.3.4.