Introduction: Reappraising Irenaeus

James Joyce once mentioned that it should take his readers as long to read *Finnegan's Wake* as it took him to write it. Much the same can be said of Irenaeus of Lyon's *Against Heresies*: given the scope and length of the work, combined with its author's manner of writing, it does not easily present itself for interpretation. *Against Heresies* is a text which requires close reading as well as strict attention to the larger structure of the work and intentions of its author in order to gain a deeper insight into Irenaeus's purposes and accomplishments. This article proposes to do exactly that: to reassess the place of Book 1 within the overall structure of *Against Heresies*, showing that rather than providing exposition, it functions as the beginning of Irenaeus's refutation of Gnosticism. Such an assessment of Book 1 will show that the Rule of Truth appearing in 1.10, the centerpiece of Irenaeus's entire argument against the Gnostics, is best understood in light of the construction of the systems of Gnostic thought outlined in 1.1-1.9.

It is this precision with which Irenaeus's work must be read which has been the cause of misinterpretation of the bishop's ability as a writer. In the flowering of Patristic studies at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, Irenaeus was faulted for not fitting into the mold of theologian as both Protestant and Catholic scholars imagined.  

1 Reflecting his own understanding of how a theologian should operate, Johannes Quasten wrote of *Against Heresies*: "The whole work suffers from a lack of clear arrangement and unity of thought. Prolonged and frequent repetition make its perusal wearisome... Evidently he [Irenaeus] did not have the ability to shape his materials into a homogeneous whole. The defects of form which offend the reader are a result of this lack of synthesis (Quasten, Patrology, Volume I: The Beginnings of Patristic Literature, 289; Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1950)." From the Protestant side, Adolf von Harnack also faults Irenaeus for not being a systematician: "As we have seen, Irenaeus... has no strictly systematized theology (Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, Volume II, 312; New York: Dover, 1961)."
This image of Irenaeus was critiqued by R.M. Grant, who, some fifty years ago, called for a reappraisal of Irenaeus's intelligence. In Grant's words, "Too often we are content with a picture of Irenaeus as orthodox but rather stupid." Irenaeus benefited from a great rehabilitation following Grant's article. No longer interpreted as a witness to the development of dogma or through confessional polemics, there has been a greater awareness, in the words of Irenaean scholar Mary Ann Donovan, that "The literary process structuring the unity of AH is not linear, nor is it logically deductive." The work of Philippe Bacq, among others, has shown that Irenaeus did indeed have a system, though it was unlike that of modernity, and presented his understanding of Irenaean method to show the unity of Book IV of Against Heresies. In addition, the work of William Schoedel has also shed substantial light on Irenaeus's overall method of composition.

As a result of this renewal in Irenaean studies, Book 1 is seen as the necessary presentation of Gnostic cosmology followed by refutation from both logic and Scripture in Books 2-5. Given the unique nature of Book 1 in comparison with the remaining books, it has been the subject of extensive form-critical study to determine which sections were of Irenaean origin, and which were taken over from various heresiological sources. Book 1 has also had an additional place within the history of scholarship; with its detailed descriptions of Gnostic groups and their teachings, for many years Irenaeus was an invaluable and sometimes sole source for understanding Gnosticism. With the discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts, Book 1 moved into the center of a debate concerning Irenaeus's accuracy as a source for Gnosticism and raised further questions concerning his overall...

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2 R.M. Grant, "Irenaeus and Hellenistic Culture, Harvard Theological Review 43 (1949), 51.
5 William R. Schoedel, "Philosophy and Rhetoric in the Adversus Haereses of Irenaeus," Vigiliae Christianae 13 (1959), 27-28. Building upon Grant's work, Schoedel has demonstrated how rhetorical methods undergird Irenaean construction. Schoedel, using methods of rhetorical disputation outlined by Cicero and prevalent in the ancient world, argued that Book 1 is concerned with "the facts of the case, the narratio." Books 2-5, in turn, serve as the conflatia, or refutation of the premises initially presented.
6 As best shown in the article by Pheme Perkins, "Irenaeus and the Gnostics: Rhetoric and Composition in Adversus Haereses Book One," Vigiliae Christianae 30 (1976), 193-200. Responding to the work of Frederik Wisse, Perkins takes into account oral and rhetorical modes of argumentation, arguing for greater Irenaean composition for Book 1 than previously considered, especially 1.29-30. In particular see Perkins, 199.