Book Review

Jackson Lashier


Some years ago, in another review for this journal, I noted that considerable interest existed in the second century bishop Irenaeus of Lyons. That interest, I observed, was driven by the growing perception that previous scholarly models failed to accurately describe Irenaeus’ theology. *Irenaeus on the Trinity* is the latest study to have this belief as its starting point. Jackson Lashier argues that previous approaches have resulted in the widely held but misguided belief that Irenaeus’ Trinitarian theology is wholly economic in nature. Lashier challenges that belief and offers a persuasive new reading that identifies the manner in which Irenaeus founds the economic activity of the Trinity upon his understanding of the immanent relations of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Of the previous scholarly approaches that concern Lashier two stand out. The first is the commonly accepted position that Irenaeus refuses to engage in theological speculation and, therefore, has no interest in the Trinitarian relations. The second is the tendency of scholars—especially of a generation or two ago—to evaluate Irenaeus’ thought in light of later, fourth-century accounts. In response to the first Lashier contends that Irenaeus’ polemical arguments in *Against Heresies* 2 offer insight into his conception of the divine being and the Trinitarian relations. In so saying, Lashier rightly challenges the habit of regarding *AH* 2 as wholly polemical in nature. I could only wish that he had taken the additional step of challenging the narrative at the root of the first position, that Irenaeus opposes causal speculation—a narrative, which, it seems to me, does not do justice to his thought. Such a challenge would have further justified his study. In response to the second approach Lashier works to ensure a historically sensitive reading of Irenaeus by considering his thought in light of his polemic against his Gnostic opponents as well as the theological accounts offered by several Apologists who preceded him. Indeed, each of the chapters begins by examining the theology of Justin Martyr, Theophilus...
of Antioch, and Athenagoras of Athens in order to establish a sense of the theological development immediately prior to Irenaeus’ own construct.

Of the five chapters that constitute the study, the first is dedicated to a consideration of the different historical settings of the writings of the three apologists and Irenaeus. Socio-cultural matters, the influence of philosophical and theological traditions, as well as polemical circumstances are all introduced and then further considered throughout the study. Somewhat untended is the influence of different Jewish traditions on these writers, though Lashier does on occasion discuss them later in the book. I question, however, the strict contrast he draws between the use of philosophy by the Apologists and Irenaeus (p. 53). To say that the Apologists displayed ‘the commonalities between Greek philosophy and Christian doctrine’ but Irenaeus relegated ‘the language of Greek philosophy . . . to the side of his opponents’ overlooks the constructive use Irenaeus makes of philosophical concepts as well as the philosophical influences they have in common.

The second chapter contrasts the conceptions of God the Father articulated by the Apologists with that offered by Irenaeus. Lashier reads the Apologists’ depiction of God the Father as thoroughly influenced by the Middle Platonic conception of God as a transcendent being removed from material creation. The similarities between this depiction and that of the Valentinian Gnostics leads, Lashier argues, Irenaeus to depart from the accounts of the Apologists in order to respond to his gnostic opponents. Thus for Irenaeus the title ‘Father’ refers not to the creative activity of God but the relationship between the Father and Son. And, moreover, Irenaeus advances a notion of absolute divine transcendence over-against relative transcendence based on notions of spatiality. The result is an account of a transcendent God able to interact with material creation.

The general lines of this contrast are well argued and accurate. Certain points, however, bear questioning; I shall highlight just one. Lashier states that the ‘containing/not contained’ formula is a ‘traditional and metaphorical way of expressing the closeness between God and humanity’ (p. 89). But W.R. Schoedel has established that the formula was first articulated by Philo as part of a system designed to keep God at a remove from the material order (see: ‘“Topological” Theology and Some Monistic Tendencies in Gnosticism’ [1972], and ‘Enclosing, not Enclosed: The Early Christian Doctrine of God’ [1979]). Moreover, the characterization of God as ‘not contained’ (drawing on περιέχειν) that seems to originate with Philo occurs as ‘not enclosed’ (drawing on χωρεῖν) in, amongst others, Justin (Dial. 127.2), Theophilus (Autol. 2.3), and Athenagoras (Leg. 10.1). This last observation goes toward my previous point that Irenaeus makes use of certain philosophical concepts and even shares