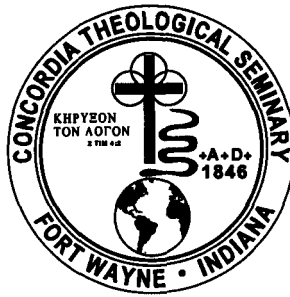


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# The Image of the Wheat Stalk and the Vine Twig in the *Adversus Haereses* of Irenaeus of Lyons

William C. Weinrich

At the end of Book III, Irenaeus asserts that the error of the Gnostics is their rejection of divine providence.<sup>1</sup> They refuse to believe that the God who creates our bodies and who nourishes us daily by means of the creation is the God of power who will also bestow the eternal goods of immortality and incorruptibility. Holding the Creator to be “of small account,” the Gnostics “dream of a non-existent being” above the Creator and believe him to be ‘the great god’ who holds no communication with the human race and administers no earthly things. The Gnostics, however, have merely discovered the *deus otiosus* of Epicurus, who does nothing beneficial either for himself or for others, that is, who exercises no providence at all (*AH*, 3.24.2).

However, some Gentiles, being slightly moved by God’s providence, do regard the Maker of this world to be the one God who exercises a providence over all things and arranges the affairs of this world. Such, for example, was Plato who thought the goodness of God was the cause of the world’s formation and did not attribute the earth’s existence to ignorance or to a defect (*AH*, 3.25.5). In this the church agrees with Plato, for it too proclaims that the Creator of the world is the one and only God who benevolently causes His sun to rise and His rain to fall upon the just and the unjust and who judges those who,

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<sup>1</sup>The English text of *Against Heresies* may be found in volume one of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans), as well as in *St. Irenaeus of Lyons Against the Heresies*, translated and annotated by Dominic J. Unber, with further revisions by John J. Dillon, Ancient Christian Writers volume 55 (New York: Paulist Press, 1992).

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perceiving the impartiality of God's goodness, yet live in wantonness and luxuriousness (*AH*, 3.25.4).

Moreover, the Creator of the world is the God of whom the entire Scriptures, both the Old Testament and the New Testament, testify. Known in the creation itself, the Creator spoke to Abraham, Moses, and the prophets, was proclaimed by the apostles, and is now confessed by the church. Indeed, the Word, through whom the Father created and now governs the world, was made man as Jesus of Nazareth. This Jesus also testified in the gospel books that there is no God and Father other than the Creator of the heavens and the earth.

Disparaging the creation and noting the differences between the Old Testament and New Testament, however, the Gnostics conclude that there are two gods, one the Creator of the world, who spoke through Moses and the prophets, and the other the God of the gospel and the Father of Jesus Christ.

In view of Gnostic deprecation of the Creator and of the Old Testament Irenaeus integrated the Old Testament history of Israel into the larger, more encompassing story of God's providential care of humankind from the creation of the world to its consummation in the Kingdom of God. Gnostic failure to recognize that the writings of Moses are the words of Christ made them like the rich man to whom Abraham said "if they do not believe Moses and the prophets, neither were one to rise from the dead and go to them will they believe him." To believe the testimony of Moses and the prophets that the one God is the Creator (one may see *AH*, 4.2.1,2) also implies also belief in Christ who rose from the dead and gives life to us (*AH*, 4.2.4). However, rejecting the Creator and the Old Testament witness to Him, the Gnostics fail to recognize the life-giving work of Christ and are like the self-same rich man who disregarded Lazarus but lived a luxurious life of pleasures and feastings, and forgot God (*AH*, 4.2.4).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Isaiah already had spoken about persons like the rich man who disregard the needy in the midst of their own luxury: "They drink wine with harps and drums, with psalters and flutes; but they do not regard the works of God nor do they consider the works of His hands" (*AH*, 4.2.4; Isaiah 5:12). Irenaeus no doubt understood Isaiah's words, "the works of His hands," to

The story of Lazarus and the rich man allows Irenaeus to introduce a major point. Gnostic refusal to recognize in the law of Moses and the preaching of the prophets a witness to the Christ who was to come in the flesh, to die in the flesh, and to rise incorruptible in the flesh goes hand in hand with their refusal to recognize that the Creator's providential giving and sustaining of life through created things is a typological foreshadowing of the final bestowal of incorruptibility upon the flesh through the Holy Spirit. The economy of God is one. It has one beginning, the creation of all things, and it has one end, the giving of eternal life and immortality to humankind. What God creates, whether the things of creation or the institutions and ordinances of the Old Testament, He creates in order to serve that final *telos*. For, says Irenaeus, "God is one and the same, . . . who made the things of time for man in order that, maturing in them, man might produce the fruit of immortality" (*AH*, 4.5.1).<sup>3</sup>

When, therefore, in Book IV Irenaeus begins his demonstration that the Old Testament precepts had an organic unity with the precepts of the gospel because they were "prophecies of future things," he selects the image of the wheat stalk and the vine twig, which illustrates both the organic unity between the old and new covenants and the extension and increase that characterizes the movement from the old covenantal law to the gospel realities. However, the image of the wheat stalk and the vine twig, drawn as it is from the realm of providence, is suitable also to indicate the organic unity and increase of God's work of creation from its beginning until its

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refer to "man," who was created by God's "hands," the Son and the Holy Spirit (*AH*, 4. pref. 4). Irenaeus' discussion of Lazarus and the rich man renews the theme of *AH*, 3.25.4 and prepares for the discussion of the Eucharist in *AH*, 4.17.1-4.

<sup>3</sup>*AH* 4.5.1: *Unus igitur et idem Deus: qui plicat caelum quemadmodum librum, et renovat faciem terrae; qui temporalia fecit propter hominem, ut maturescens in eis fructificet immortalitatem* (SC 100.424). Concerning the precepts of the Old Testament, Irenaeus writes similarly. God was calling Israel *per ea quae erant secunda ad prima, hoc est per typica ad vera et per temporalia ad aeterna et per carnalia ad spiritalia et per terrena ad caelestia* (*AH* 4.14.3; SC 100.546).

consummation in the gift of eternal life and incorruptibility. The image integrally connects the life on earth, which the Creator sustains through food and drink, both with the life of the church nourished by the body and blood of Christ given in and with the bread and wine (*AH*, 4.18.5-6; 5.2.2-3) and with the millennial Kingdom of the Son in which the Father Himself will serve table at the feasting of the righteous who are being accustomed to partake of the glory of God the Father (see *AH*, 4. 1& 1; 5.33.2; 5.34.2 [Luke 12:37 and following.]; 5.34.3).

Commenting upon Jesus' words, "Swear not by heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is God's footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king" (Matthew 5:34), the Gnostics argued that if heaven and earth are to pass away, then the God who sits above similarly must pass away. Likewise, they maintained, if Jerusalem were in fact "the city of the great king," then it would not have been deserted. However, Irenaeus rejoins, such conclusions are like saying that if a stalk of wheat were the creation of God, it would never be separated from the mature grains of wheat, or that if a vine twig were made by God, it would never be cut away from the ripe clusters of grapes (*AH*, 4.4.1). The wheat stalk and the vine twig were not made for their own sakes but for the sake of the fruit growing upon them. Once the wheat and the grape are mature and ripe, they are harvested, and the stalk and the twig, having served their purpose, cease to have further significance. Such is the case with Jerusalem. It had its beginning with David and served the pedagogy of Israel until the "fruit of liberty" (namely, Christ) should come. That "fruit of liberty" having now come with the revelation of the New Testament, Jerusalem has fulfilled its own times and was "rightly forsaken" when the apostles were scattered throughout all the world (*AH*, 4.4.1). This fate of Jerusalem was foreseen already by Isaiah who prophesied that "the daughter of Zion shall be left as a cottage in a vineyard, and as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers" (Isaiah 1:8). And when, asks Irenaeus, shall these things be left behind? Is it not, he answers, when the fruit is taken away, and the leaves alone are left which have no power to produce fruit (*AH*, 4.4.2)?

However, it is not only Jerusalem that has fulfilled the time of its usefulness and no longer serves the final purpose of God's salvific economy. "The fashion of the whole world must also pass away when the time of its own passing comes, in order that the fruit may be gathered into the barn and the chaff left behind consumed by fire" (*AH*, 4.4.3).

Whether then Irenaeus has the Old Testament pedagogy of Israel or the more encompassing pedagogy of the providential order in view, the image of the wheat stalk and the vine twig serves to illustrate the organic extension and increase that God gives to His economy for the salvation of humankind. It serves to illustrate a fundamental point of Irenaeus. The distinguishing difference between God and man is that "God creates, but man is created" and that everything God creates has a beginning, a middle, an addition, and a maturity (*AH*, 4.11.2).<sup>4</sup> And, introduced as it is by Irenaeus at the beginning of his argument in Book IV, it may be regarded as the chief hermeneutical image for the argument of Book IV that the precepts of the Creator given in the Old Testament possess an inherent unity with the gospel but have in the gospel received their fulfillment by extension and augmentation.

However, the image of the wheat stalk and the vine twig is not merely illustrative. It clearly intimates both the Eucharist of the church and the fecundity of the millennial kingdom, which in their own way are extensions and fulfillments of Old Testament promises and precepts, and which also are occasions in which the Creator, through means of His providential care,

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<sup>4</sup>*AH*, 4.11.2: *Et hoc Deus ab homine differt, quoniam Deus quidem facit, homo autem fit. Et quidem qui facit semper idem est, quod autem fit et initium et medietatem et adjectionem et augmentum accipere debet* (SC 100.500). Adelin Rousseau is undoubtedly correct in arguing that *augmentum* renders the Greek word ἀκμή and therefore should be translated "maturity" (SC 100.228). One may also see Philippe Bacq, *De l'ancienne à la nouvelle Alliance selon S. Irénée* (Paris: Editions Lethielleux, 1978), 96 n.2, who refers to Quintillian as a contemporary witness to the view that growth possessed three stages: *exordium, incrementum, summa* (ἀκμή). One may compare *AH*, 3.25.5, which quotes Plato to the same effect: God as "ancient Word" possesses the beginning (*initium*), the end (*finem*) and the middle stages (*medietates*) of all existing things.

intimates and presages the goal of His creating work, namely, the giving of eternal life and incorruptibility to the flesh.

Irenaeus discusses the Eucharist of the church at considerable length. The Eucharist is the "new oblation of the new covenant" and the "pure sacrifice" which God through the prophets had enjoined upon Israel when He noticed the people "neglecting righteousness . . . and imagining that God was to be satisfied by sacrifices and other figurative observances" (*AH*, 4.17.1; 4.17.5). Through the repeated exhortations of the prophets that the people should "desire mercy more than sacrifice and the knowledge of God more than burnt-offerings" (Hosea 6:6; *AH*, 4.17.4), God was both teaching them what He desires and prophesying the new covenant that was to come (*AH*, 4.17.1). With the arrival of the new oblation of the Eucharist, Malachi's prophecy is fulfilled: "the former people shall cease to make offerings to God, but that in every place sacrifice shall be offered to Him, and that a pure one" (*AH*, 4.17.5).

But the Eucharist of bread and wine is also a communion with the body and blood of Christ, and therefore a means by which the Creator prepares our bodies for the reception of eternal life. It is this that the Gnostics cannot accept, for they do not believe that He who creates the bread and the wine and providentially nourishes our bodies with them is the Father of Him who offered the bread and wine and gave thanks over them (*AH*, 4.18.4). By doubting the capacity of the flesh to receive incorruption the Gnostics "despise the entire dispensation of God" and call into question our redemption through Christ's body and blood and our communion with them in the eucharistic bread and cup (*AH*, 5.2.2). However, says Irenaeus, "our opinion is in accordance with the Eucharist, and the Eucharist in turn confirms our opinion" (*AH*, 4.18.5). The Eucharist is testimony that the Creator is also the One who shall give incorruptibility and eternal life to the flesh, for the bread and wine of the Eucharist, which nourishes and gives growth to our bodies, is the body and blood of Christ who is risen from the dead and has received the incorruptibility of the Holy Spirit. The Eucharist, when it receives the invocation of God, is no longer "common bread" but consists of two realities, an earthly



one and a heavenly one; "so also our bodies, when they receive the Eucharist, are no longer corruptible but have the hope of the resurrection" (*AH*, 4.18.5; also 5.2.3). How then, asks Irenaeus, can the Gnostics say that the flesh is incapable of receiving life eternal when it is nourished from the body and blood of the Lord and is a member of Him? (*AH*, 5.2.3).

Irenaeus completes his discussion of the Eucharist by introducing again the figure of the wheat and the vine. In doing so he explicitly relates God's providential care of humankind to the Eucharist and to His final bestowal of immortality:

Just as a cutting from the vine planted in the ground fructifies in its season, or as a grain of wheat falling into the earth and decomposing rises with much increase by the Spirit of God, who contains all things, and then through the Wisdom of God serves for the use of men, and having received the Word of God becomes the Eucharist, which is the body and blood of Christ; so also our bodies, being nourished by it and deposited in the earth and decomposing there, shall rise at their appointed time, the Word of God granting them resurrection to the glory of God, even the Father, who freely gives immortality to that which is mortal and incorruptibility to that which is corruptible (*AH*, 5.2.3; one may compare 2.28.1).

The Eucharist itself is prophetic of the millennial kingdom and its joyous feasting. Giving thanks over the cup and offering it to His disciples, Christ had indicated that He would not again drink of the fruit of the vine until "that day when I will drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom" (Matthew 26:27). In saying this Christ indicated both the inheritance of the earth in which the new fruit of the vine shall be drunk and the resurrection of the flesh, for the flesh which rises again is the same which received the new cup (*AH*, 5.33.1). The millennial kingdom of the Son is the "true Sabbath" when the righteous shall have no earthly work but shall "have a table prepared for them by God which offers them for food all kinds of dishes" (*AH*, 5.33.2; one may also see 4.16.1; 5.34.2, 3).

This regal banquet served by God Himself was indicated already when Isaac blessed Jacob and prayed that God give to him "of the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, plenty of wheat and wine" (Genesis 27:28-29; *AH*, 5.33.3). However, Jacob had never in this life received much wheat and wine but had rather been required to go to Egypt because of famine in the land. The promised blessing, therefore, argues Irenaeus, refers to the "times of the kingdom" when "the creation has been renewed and set free and gives forth an abundance of every kind of food" (*AH*, 5.33.3). As additional witness to this hope Irenaeus adduces the famous words of the elders that a tradition arising from the Lord teaches that a time shall come when vines shall grow, each having ten thousand branches, each branch having ten thousand twigs, each twig having ten thousand shoots, each shoot ten thousand clusters, and every cluster ten thousand grapes each of which will be capable of providing twenty-five metretes of wine. Similarly, each grain of wheat will produce ten thousand ears, each ear ten thousand grains, and every grain will make ten pounds of clear, pure flour (*AH*, 5.33.3).

Here again the image of the wheat stalk and the vine twig, this time mediated through the tradition of the presbyters, serves to demonstrate the unity between the prophetic Old Testament and the words of Christ and the New Testament. For the Kingdom of the Son, when "the whole creation shall, according to [God's] will, receive increase and augmentation," is both the fulfillment of the promise to Jacob that God will "feed you with the inheritance of Jacob your father" (Isaiah 58:14) and the realization of Christ's words in the gospel of Luke that God will "gird Himself and make [the righteous] to sit down, and will come and serve them" (Luke 12:37-38; *AH*, 5.34.2). However, the image of the wheat stalk and the vine twig indicates in addition the argument of Irenaeus against the Gnostics that the Creator who cares providentially for us through the daily giving of food and drink is none other than the Father of Christ who will give eternal life to the body. For while the Kingdom of the Son is the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy that redeemed Jacob shall come into "a land of wheat and wine, and fruits and animals and sheep; . . . and they shall hunger no more" (Jeremiah

31:10 and following), it is also "the commencement of incorruption" in which those who are worthy "are accustomed gradually to partake of God" (*AH*, 5.32.1).

At the beginning of Book IV Irenaeus states that all the arguments of the Gnostic heretics finally result in this, that they blaspheme our Creator and Sustainer and disparage the salvation of humankind (*AH*, 4, pref., 4). The image of the wheat stalk and of the vine twig helps Irenaeus to advance his more unified vision. It portrays the organic development needed to counter the disjunctive hermeneutics of Gnostic interpretation and indicates the unity of Him who gives us our daily food for the sustenance and growth of the body and Him who in the Eucharist provides food unto eternal life and in the Kingdom of the Son a banquet for the righteous who have been raised from the dead.