

QUAESTIO DISPUTATA: IRENAEUS ON THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

[Editor's note: Daniel Smith objected to Kilian McDonnell's statement that Irenaeus did not view Jesus as the Christ before his baptism. McDonnell here maintains that the intent behind that wording is correct. Nor does Irenaeus identify the Spirit simply with the Father's power; the Spirit and the Son are the two hands of the Father. Smith agrees below that before his baptism Jesus was not functionally the Christ, since his human nature was not divinely equipped. But Irenaeus's reflection on inner-trinitarian dynamics is subordinated to his conviction that such things are beyond human capacity to understand.]

A REJOINDER TO DANIEL A. SMITH

KILIAN McDONNELL, O.S.B.

I AM GRATEFUL to Daniel A. Smith for his fine contribution to Irenaeus research. In his article on "Irenaeus and the Baptism of Jesus" he objects to my formulation "Before the baptism Jesus is not the Christ. The baptism is a clear messianic boundary."¹ I agree with Smith that my formulation, which I share with Enrique Fabbri,² can be misleading, but the intent behind the formulation is, in my opinion, correct. The issue is function. Irenaeus clearly rejects the belief that "there was a pretended Christ who descended on Jesus; one cannot pretend that the Christ is one [being] and Jesus is another."³ I quote *Adversus haereses* where the Word of God becomes Jesus, who is the Christ, because his humanity has been anointed: "the Word of God, who is Savior of all and who rules the earth and the heaven, who is Jesus—as we have demonstrated—who has taken flesh and has been anointed of the Spirit by the Father, has been *made* Jesus-Christ."⁴ The anointing makes Jesus to be the Christ. Irenaeus may be borrowing the language

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¹ Daniel A. Smith, "Irenaeus and the Baptism of Jesus," *TS* 58 (1997) 618–42, at 625.

² "El bautismo de Jesús y la unción del Espíritu en la teología de Ireneo," *Ciencia y Fe* 12 (1956) 9.

³ 3.9.3; *Sources Chrétiennes* (=SC) 211.108.

⁴ *Ibid.* "The Word of God . . . has become Jesus Christ" is a translation of the Greek: *all'*

of Luke found in Acts 2:36: "God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."

Adelin Rousseau and Louis Doutreleau, the editors of the critical text sum up the meaning of the text from Irenaeus just cited above: "On the one hand, having assumed flesh, the eternal Word has become 'Jesus'; on the other hand, having been anointed by the Father by means of the Spirit, the incarnate Word or 'Jesus' has become the 'Christ' = the 'Anointed One.'"⁵

For Irenaeus, "the Logos of the Father and the Holy Spirit" bring about the Incarnation.⁶ Further, there is the anointing with the Spirit at the Jordan. So the Spirit belongs constitutively to the identity of Jesus Christ at two moments, Incarnation and baptism. But what is the purpose of the descent of the Spirit on Jesus at the Jordan? How does it function? Irenaeus answers, "It is the Spirit of God who has descended on him . . . so that, receiving from the plenitude of his unction, we might be saved. This is the witness of Matthew."⁷ In other words, the intent of the baptism of Jesus is that we might participate in the pouring out of the Spirit on the humanity of Jesus.⁸ "Jesus" is the very name of the Word. "Christ" is the name given to Jesus in virtue of his anointing by the Spirit, and this anointing supposes that the Word has assumed flesh. As Albert Houssiau concludes, "It is through the anointing of the Spirit that Jesus becomes Jesus Christ."⁹ This is the function of the baptism of Jesus to which I alluded. In Irenaeus Jesus Christ usually designates the incarnate Word anointed by the Spirit at his baptism.¹⁰ In no way is this in opposition to Irenaeus's conviction that Jesus is the Christ from his conception.¹¹ Jesus, who is the Word of God, eternally anointed, the Christ constitutively, begins at his baptism to function in a new way as the Christ because now we can share in the plenitude of the Spirit poured out on him without measure.

Smith suggests that Ysabel de Andia and I are not justified in regarding a formulation of Irenaeus in *Adversus haereses* 3.18.3 as trinitarian because "Irenaeus did not appear to conceive of the Spirit as a distinct person" (624). This means that Irenaeus did not have a true trinitarian doctrine. In support he cites Antonio Orbe. I take it for granted that Smith is not judging second-century Irenaeus by the standards of the fourth-century Cappadocian settlement.

These early texts are groping, and therefore there is ground for differences among scholars. But Smith does not cite Harry A. Wolfson,

ho Logos tou Theou . . . Iesus Christos egeneto. The Latin reads: *Verbum Dei . . . Iesus Christus factus est.*

⁵ SC 210.267.

⁶ *Adv. haer.* 5.1.3; SC 153.26.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Albert Houssiau, *La Christologie de Saint Irénée* (Louvain: Publications Universitaires, 1955) 180–81.

⁹ *Ibid.* 174.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 174–75.

¹¹ *Adv. haer.* 3.16.2; SC 211.294.

Wolf-Dieter Hauschild, Adelin Rousseau, or Hans-Jocken Jaschke. Wolfson made a study of the early authors who do differentiate between Spirit and Logos, and those who do not. He places Irenaeus among those who differentiate.¹² Hauschild concludes that Irenaeus has a true trinitarian doctrine, as does Adelin Rousseau.¹³ Jaschke has written the most extensive monograph on Irenaeus's doctrine of the Holy Spirit. He vigorously and repeatedly rejects an identification between the Spirit and the Logos.¹⁴ Nor does Irenaeus identify the Spirit simply with the power of the Father.¹⁵ The Spirit and the Son are the two hands of the Father. If the Son is distinct from the Father, so is the Spirit. Irenaeus's interest is soteriological and economic.

¹² *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1964) 238.

¹³ *Gottes Geist und der Mensch: Studien zur frühchristlichen Pneumatologie* (Munich: Kaiser, 1972) 220; see Adelin Rousseau in SC 406.302.

¹⁴ *Der Heilige Geist im Bekenntnis der Kirche* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1976) 222–26, 229, 240.

¹⁵ See *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 5; SC 406.90; see also *Adv. haer.* 2.30.9; SC 294.320.

A RESPONSE TO KILIAN McDONNELL

DANIEL A. SMITH

IN HIS REJOINER to my article "Irenaeus and the Baptism of Jesus," Kilian McDonnell raises two issues. The first is whether, for Irenaeus, Jesus became the Christ at the baptism. Here I do not believe McDonnell and I are in substantial disagreement. According to *Adversus haereses* 3.9.3, the baptism made Jesus the Christ since the Spirit-anointing equipped him, by a gift of divine attributes, for the messianic ministry.¹ McDonnell is right to point out that before the baptism Jesus was not functionally the Christ, since the human nature was not divinely equipped. The main focus of my article is to explore the implications of this functional equipment. But Irenaeus also called Jesus the Christ before the baptism, insisting "that we should not imagine that Jesus was one, and Christ another, but should know them to be one and the same" (*Adv. haer.* 3.16.2). McDonnell is also correct to raise Irenaeus's concept of the precosmic anointing of the Word (*Dem-*

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¹ In addition to the texts McDonnell cites, I would add *Adv. haer.* 3.12.7: "[The apostle Peter] witnessed that Jesus was himself the Son of God, who also, having been anointed with the Holy Spirit, is called Jesus Christ."

onstration of the Apostolic Preaching 53) in this connection, since by virtue of this anointing even the pre-incarnate Word is called Christ.²

The second issue, whether Irenaeus had a "trinitarian" understanding of the Spirit, is rather more complex. My suggestion that the formulation in *Adv. haer.* 3.18.3 should not be seen as "trinitarian" is based on two considerations. The first concerns how Irenaeus understood "Spirit" in the baptism of Jesus, since the passage in question refers to that context. Irenaeus believed that the baptism was the occasion of an empowering gift of divine attributes, an anointing "by the Father with the Spirit" (*Adv. haer.* 3.9.3); therefore, it seems best to follow Orbe, who says that "the chrism is the dynamic *Pneuma* that comes from the substance of the Father (that is, the power of the Father)."³ The second consideration is the ambiguity I perceive elsewhere in Irenaeus concerning the Spirit's role in the conception and Incarnation. Following Luke 1:35, Irenaeus affirmed consistently that the conception was the work of the Spirit (see, for example, *Demo.* 59). In *Adv. haer.* 5.1.3, however, Irenaeus seems to equate the Spirit that came upon Mary with the power of the Most High, writing that the Father effected the Incarnation; *Demo.* 51 and 53 display a similar view. In other places he appears to suggest that the conception is the work of the Word, and to identify the Word with the Spirit (*Adv. haer.* 3.10.2; *Demo.* 71). In light of this ambiguity, I would hesitate to conclude that Irenaeus consistently distinguished the Spirit from both the Father and the Word.

Admittedly, there are difficulties with this position. There are numerous passages where it appears that Irenaeus is beginning to have a clearer understanding of the distinction of the Spirit from the Father and the Word than is suggested by the texts I have just cited. Though he nowhere used the term "trinity," Irenaeus referred to Father, Son, and Spirit as the three "articles" of the faith (*Demo.* 6), echoing the baptismal words of Matthew 28:19 (*Demo.* 3, 7). Other significant texts seem to be of two types: those which attribute to the Spirit an economic function distinct from that of the Father or the Word,⁴ and those which depict the Son and Spirit as the two "hands" of God active in creation.⁵

² See McDonnell, *The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan: The Trinitarian and Cosmic Order of Salvation* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1996) 58.

³ Antonio Orbe, *Introducción a la teología de los siglos II y III*, 2 vols., *Analecta Gregoriana* 248 (Rome: Gregorian University, 1987) 2.677.

⁴ See, e.g., *Adv. haer.* 4.20.6: in the economy of salvation, "the Spirit [was] working, and the Son ministering, while the Father was approving." References could be multiplied.

⁵ McDonnell refers to *Demo.* 5 and *Adv. haer.* 2.30.9; see also Ysabel de Andia, *Homo vivens: Incorruptibilité et divinisation de l'homme selon Irénée de Lyon* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1986) 64-67, who collates several important texts and argues that Irenaeus "attributes to each Person of the Trinity a different function in the common work of creation" (*ibid.* 65).

However, Manlio Simonetti⁶ has pointed out that whereas in some passages the Spirit (or Wisdom) appears in threefold descriptions of salvation or creation, in other similar contexts the Spirit does not appear.⁷ Simonetti suggested that in some instances Word and Wisdom appear to be only operative faculties of the one God, and concluded that this pattern of reflection would lead to monarchianism.⁸ More to the point, I believe, is Mary Ann Donovan's recent comment: "While the association of the Father with his 'Hands' may suggest an internal relationship between them (and so, in the language of a later theological development, the 'immanent trinity'), that association is more explicitly external and for the economy (and so, in that same later language, suggests the 'economic trinity')."⁹ The interest of Irenaeus is, as McDonnell points out, "soteriological and economic." His reflection on inner-trinitarian dynamics is subordinated first of all to his conviction, against his Gnostic opponents, that such things are beyond human capacity to understand, and secondly to his insistence on the unity of God's plan and activity in creation and in the salvation of humanity.¹⁰

I wish to thank Kilian McDonnell for providing me with the opportunity to discuss these important points further.

⁶ Manlio Simonetti, "Il problema dell'unità di Dio da Giustino a Ireneo," *Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa* 22 (1986) 210-240, esp. 229-37.

⁷ *Ibid.* 230-34. Compare, for instance, *Adv. haer.* 4.20.1 and 5.6.1 (where Irenaeus identified the hands of God with Word and Wisdom, Son and Spirit) with *Adv. haer.* 5.12.6, 5.15.2-4 and 5.18.3 (where the Word alone is mentioned as the fashioner of humanity).

⁸ *Ibid.* 235, 239-40.

⁹ Mary Ann Donovan, *One Right Reading? A Guide to Irenaeus* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1997) 104.

¹⁰ See Joseph Wolinski's comments in Bernard Sesboté and Joseph Wolinski, *Le Dieu du salut: La tradition, la règle de foi et les symboles, l'économie du salut, le développement des dogmes trinitaire et christologique. Histoire des dogmes, tome 1* (Paris: Desclée, 1994) 160-64.