

# Irenaeus's Engagement with Rhetorical Theory in his Exegesis of the Johannine Prologue in *Adversus Haereses* 1.8.5-1.9.3<sup>1</sup>

## ***Abstract:***

While scholars have long recognised Irenaeus's acquaintance with rhetorical theory, the role of rhetorical theory in Irenaeus's scriptural exegesis has only recently come to light. In the last few years, Lewis Ayres (2015) and Anthony Briggman (2015, 2016) have argued for the central importance of Greco-Roman literary and rhetorical theory to Irenaeus's approach to scripture. This paper will build on the work of Ayres and Briggman by exploring Irenaeus's engagement with rhetorical theory in his interpretation of the Johannine prologue in *AH* 1.8.5-9.3. In this paper, I will argue that Irenaeus's exegetical strategy in *AH* 1.8.4-9.3 is best understood in light of the question of authorial intent as formulated in rhetorical handbooks. Specifically, I will argue that Irenaeus presents his argument as a defence of the *scriptum* of the prologue, and so follows the conventions laid out in rhetorical handbooks for a dispute between *scriptum et voluntas*.

## ***Key Words:***

Irenaeus - rhetoric – rhetorical theory – literary theory – hermeneutics

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Scholars have long recognised Irenaeus's acquaintance with rhetorical theory. Bruno Reynders first identified Irenaeus's use of rhetorical theory in 1935, and was followed shortly by Robert Grant in 1949.<sup>2</sup> Since then a number of scholars have explored Irenaeus's acquaintance with rhetorical theory, including W.R. Schoedel, Robert Wilken, and T.C.K. Ferguson.<sup>3</sup> While each of these scholars recognised the presence of rhetorical theory in Irenaeus, they did not assign it a prominent place in Irenaeus's thought as a whole. This view is encapsulated in Schoedel's assessment that, while Irenaeus did have some knowledge of rhetoric, he failed to use it to "successfully refute and to support a position."<sup>4</sup>

Recent studies by Lewis Ayres and Anthony Briggman have sought to re-evaluate Irenaeus's rhetorical capabilities by focusing on his use of literary and rhetorical theory in his scriptural exegesis.<sup>5</sup> The work of Ayres and Briggman represents a shift from older accounts of

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<sup>2</sup> B. Reynders 'La Polémique de S. Irénée', *Recherches de Théologie Ancienne et Médiévale*, 7 (1935) 5-27; R. Grant 'Irenaeus and Hellenistic Culture' *The Harvard Theological Review*, 42.1 (1949) 41-51. See also Grant's discussion of rhetorical concepts in Irenaeus in his *Irenaeus of Lyons* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 46-53.

<sup>3</sup> W.R. Schoedel 'Philosophy and Rhetoric in the Adversus Haereses of Irenaeus', *Vigiliae Christianae*, 13.1 (1959) 22-23; R. L. Wilken 'The Homeric Cento in Irenaeus' *Adversus Haereses* I.9.4', *Vigiliae Christianae*, 21.1 (1967) 25-33; T.C.K. Ferguson 'The Rule of Truth and Irenaeus Rhetoric in Book 1 of Against Heresies' *Vigiliae Christianae*, 55.4 (2001) 356-375.

<sup>4</sup> W.R. Schoedel 'Philosophy and Rhetoric in the Adversus Haereses of Irenaeus', *Vigiliae Christianae*, 13.1 (1959) 22-23, 31.

<sup>5</sup> L. Ayres 'Irenaeus vs. the Valentinians: Toward a Rethinking of Patristic Exegetical Origins', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 23.2 (2015) 153-187; A. Briggman 'Literary and Rhetorical Theory in Irenaeus Part 1', *Vigiliae Christianae* 69 (2015) 500-527; 'Literary and Rhetorical Theory in Irenaeus Part 2' *Vigiliae Christianae* 70 (2016) 31-50. Wilken provides a brief discussion of Irenaeus's hermeneutics in his study of the Homeric cento in *AH* 1.9.4: R. L. Wilken 'The Homeric Cento in Irenaeus' *Adversus Haereses* I.9.4', *Vigiliae Christianae*, 21.1 (1967) 25-33, 33. While Wilken argues that the cento demonstrates Irenaeus's awareness of Greco-Roman rhetorical theory, he does not extend this observation to Irenaeus's scriptural hermeneutics, instead emphasising the normative role played by the rule of truth.

Irenaeus's scriptural exegesis, which emphasised the hermeneutical function played by the rule of faith in the interpretation of scripture.<sup>6</sup>

This paper will build on the studies of Ayres and Briggman by further exploring Irenaeus's engagement with literary and rhetorical theory through a close read of Irenaeus's interpretation of the Johannine prologue in *AH* 1.8.5-9.3. T.C.K. Ferguson identified this passage as the 'first extensive biblical exegesis' in *AH*.<sup>7</sup> Ayres and Briggman have both drawn attention to the presence of a number of literary and rhetorical themes in this passage. However, neither has identified the broader rhetorical context Irenaeus draws on when deploying these themes. This context, I argue, is provided by discussions of textual interpretation found in ancient rhetorical handbooks.<sup>8</sup> In this paper, I will argue that Irenaeus frames his argument in this

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<sup>6</sup> D. Van Den Eynde *Les Normes de l'Enseignement Chrétien dans la Littérature Patristique des Trois Premiers Siècles* (Paris: J. Gabalda et fils, 1933); A. Benoît, 'Écriture et Tradition chez Saint Irénée', *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuse*, 40 (1960) 32-44, esp. 40; P. Hefner 'Theological Methodology and St. Irenaeus' *The Journal of Religion*, 44.4 (1964) 294-309; R. L. Wilken 'The Homeric Cento in Irenaeus' *Adversus Haereses* 1.9.4', *Vigiliae Christianae*, 21.1 (1967) 25-33; F. Young *The Art of Performance: Towards a Theology of Holy Scripture* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1990), 46; M. Simonetti *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church: An Historical Introduction to Patristic Exegesis Reprint Edition* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 24; E. Pagels 'The Canon of Truth and the Gospel of John: Making a Difference Through Hermeneutics and Ritual' *Vigiliae Christianae* 56.4 (2002) 339-371, 351; A. Stewart 'The Rule of Faith...Which he Received Through Baptism' (*Haer.* 1.9.4): Catechesis, Ritual, and Exegesis in Irenaeus's Gaul' in *Irenaeus: Life, Scripture, Legacy* eds. S. Parvis and P. Foster (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 151-158, 158.

Paul Blowers, T.C.K. Ferguson, and Rusty Reno and John O'Keefe have challenged this read by arguing that the rule of faith is not an external framework imposed upon the text by the exegete, but rather is grounded in and derived from competent exegesis of the text itself. P. Blowers 'The Regula Fidei and the Narrative Character of Early Christian Faith' *Pro Ecclesia* 6 (1997): 199-228; T.C.K. Ferguson 'The Rule of Truth and Irenaeus Rhetoric in Book 1 of *Against Heresies*' *Vigiliae Christianae*, 55.4 (2001) 356-375; J.J. O'Keefe and R.R. Reno *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2005) 119-128.

<sup>7</sup> T.C.K. Ferguson 'The Rule of Truth and Irenaeus Rhetoric in Book 1 of *Against Heresies*' *Vigiliae Christianae*, 55.4 (2001) 356-375, 370.

<sup>8</sup> David Jorgensen has recently argued that Gregory makes use of the discussions of

passage along the lines laid out in rhetorical handbooks for a dispute between *scriptum et voluntas*. I will begin by outlining in brief this rhetorical background, before providing a close reading of Irenaeus's argument in *AH* 1.8.5-1.9.3.

### 1. The Rhetorical Tradition and *Interpretatio Scripti*

Kathy Eden has demonstrated the influence of the Greco-Roman rhetorical tradition, and in particular Cicero and Quintilian, on ancient hermeneutical practices.<sup>9</sup> The contribution of rhetoric to textual interpretation lies in the discussion in rhetorical handbooks of questions concerning *interpretatio scripti*: the interpretation of legal texts.<sup>10</sup> These handbooks approached the question of *interpretatio scripti* by first identifying the different controversies - *στάσεις* in Greek; *status*, *quaestio* or *controversia* in Latin - which may arise in the interpretation of a text, and then by offering different interpretive strategies for resolving these controversies.

The number and name of each ground of controversy varies between texts and authors. Cicero in his early work identifies five grounds for controversy which can occur regarding a legal text: ambiguity (*ambiguitas*), letter and intent (*scriptum et voluntas/sententia*), conflicting

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textual interpretation found in rhetorical handbooks in his scriptural exegesis. Specifically, Jorgensen argues that Irenaeus's statement in *AH* 2.27.1-3 that ambiguous scriptural passages should be interpreted in light of unambiguous passages draws on a Greco-Roman rhetorical hermeneutical principle; David W. Jorgensen 'Nor is One Ambiguity Resolved by Another Ambiguity: Irenaeus of Lyons and the Rhetoric of Interpretation' in *Beyond the Gnostic Gospels: Studies Building on the Work of Elaine Pagels* eds. Eduard Iricinschi, Lance Jenott, Nicola Denzey Lewis and Philippa Townsend (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013) 124-147; David W. Jorgensen *Treasure Hidden in a Field: Early Christian Reception of the Gospel of Matthew* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2016), 53-84. I am grateful to Jorgensen for drawing my attention to his work on this subject.

<sup>9</sup> K. Eden *Hermeneutics and the Rhetorical Tradition: Chapters in the Ancient Legacy and its Humanist Reception* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> K. Eden *Hermeneutics and the Rhetorical Tradition: Chapters in the Ancient Legacy and its Humanist Reception* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 7.

laws (*ex contrariis legibus*), analogy (*ex ratiocinatio*) and definition (*ex definitione*).<sup>11</sup> In his later writings, Cicero reduced the number of controversies to three: ambiguity, letter and intent, and conflicting laws.<sup>12</sup> Quintilian, on the other hand, identifies four grounds for controversy: letter vs. intent, contradiction, ambiguity and syllogism (similar to Cicero's analogy) and definition.<sup>13</sup>

A controversy regarding the letter and the intent of a law occurs when there is alleged to be a discrepancy between the words of the text and the intent of its author. This may arise from a discrepancy between the original context within which the text was written, and the context to which it is now being applied.<sup>14</sup> Alternatively, it may result from some obscurity (*obscuritas*) in the text, so that what the text appears to say is at odds with what its author intended.<sup>15</sup> In these cases, the interpreter has two options. Either one must argue that it is necessary to depart from a strict reading of the text in order to uphold the author's intent, or one must argue that a strict reading of the text best preserves the intention of the lawgiver. Cicero refers to the former interpretive move as advocating *voluntas* or *sententia* and the latter as advocating *scriptum*, whereas Quintilian refers to the former as an argument *contra scriptum* and the latter as an argument *contra voluntas*.<sup>16</sup>

The argument for *scriptum*, or *contra voluntas* closely resembles Irenaeus's exegetical method in *AH* 1.8.5-1.9.3. This paper highlights three features of Irenaeus's argument in *AH* 1.8.5-1.9.3 which point to his engagement with rhetorical discussions of *interpretatio scripti*.

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<sup>11</sup> Cicero, *De Inventione* 2.40.116.

<sup>12</sup> Cicero, *De Oratore* 1.32.140; *Topica* 95-6.

<sup>13</sup> Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 8, pref.10-11.

<sup>14</sup> Cicero *De Inventione* 2.40.122-3; Quintilian *Institutio Oratore* 7.9.5-9.

<sup>15</sup> Quintilian *Institutio Oratore* 7.9.2-4.

<sup>16</sup> K. Eden *Hermeneutics and the Rhetorical Tradition: Chapters in the Ancient Legacy and its Humanist Reception* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 8-9.

First, Irenaeus presents his argument in terms of a dispute regarding the intent of the prologue's author, John. Second, the form of Irenaeus's argument corresponds to the form of argument recommended by Cicero for an advocate of *scriptum*. Finally, Irenaeus deploys a particular strategy recommended by Cicero for discerning authorial intent from the written text. To these three features we now turn.

## 2. A Dispute Regarding Authorial Intent

Irenaeus frames his discussion of the Johannine prologue in *AH* 1.8.5-1.9.3 in terms of authorial intent. That is, Irenaeus presents the different interpretations forwarded by himself and the Valentinians in terms of opposing claims regarding John's intent as the author of the prologue. We see this first in Irenaeus's presentation of the Valentinian<sup>17</sup> interpretation of the Johannine prologue in *AH* 1.8.5. Irenaeus frames the Valentinian interpretation as a claim about John's intent in composing the prologue:

Furthermore, they teach that John, the disciple of the Lord, indicated the first Ogdoad, saying in these words: John, the disciple of the Lord, wishing (*βουλόμενος*) to relate the genesis of all things – according to which the Father emitted all things – postulates a certain First-Principle, which was the first begotten by God. What is more, (John) calls this one Son and Only-Begotten God, in whom Father emitted all things in a seminal manner. By this one, (John) says, Word was emitted and in him the whole substance of the Aeons, which Word himself afterwards formed.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Specifically, this interpretation of the Johannine prologue seems to originate from Ptolemaic circles. See Einar Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the Valentinians* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 9-22, 213-218.

<sup>18</sup> Irenaeus *AH* 1.8.5. Greek quotations of Irenaeus are taken from Irénée de Lyon, *Contre Les Hérésies* vol.1 (Sources Chrétiennes; eds. A. Rousseau and L. Doutreleau; Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1979). Translations of *AH* are those of A. Briggman in *The Cambridge Edition of Early Christian Writings Volume 3: Christ*, ed. M. DelCogliano (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

*Βούλομαι* – and its accompanying noun form *βουλή* – is one of a range of terms used in ancient literary theory to denote authorial intent. For instance, Plato uses the term *βούλη* to refer to authorial intent when discussing the poetry of Simonides in his *Protagoras*:

There are many points in the various expressions of the poem which might be instanced to show its fine composition, for it is a work of very elegant and elaborate art; but it would take too long to detail all its beauties. However, let us go over its general outline and intention [*βούλησιν*], which is assuredly to refute Pittacus' saying, throughout the ode.<sup>19</sup>

This is the sense in which Irenaeus uses the verb *Βούλομαι* in *AH* 1.8.5. The Valentinians interpret the Johannine prologue as recounting the emanation of the aeons because they believe this to be John's intent: John wished (*βουλόμενος*) 'to relate the genesis of all things'.

Having identified John's intention in composing the prologue, the Valentinians then proceed to use this claim about John's intent to govern their reading of the text:

Since then (John) speaks about the first genesis, he rightly commences his teaching from the First-Principle, that is Son, and from Word. Thus he says: 'In the First-Principle was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God; he was in the First-Principle with God.' Having distinguished from the first (these) three – God and First-Principle and Word – he then unites them so that he may explain the emission of each of them – of both Son and Word – and at the same time (their) unity with one another and with Father. For First-Principle is in Father and of Father, but Word is in First-Principle and of First-Principle.<sup>20</sup>

In this passage, the Valentinians use their claim about the overall intent of the prologue to make claims about the meaning of particular portions of the prologue. Specifically, they argue that John 1.1-2 relates the emanation of the first three aeons of the Ogdoad: 'God'/'Father',

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<sup>19</sup> Plato, *Protagoras* (344B). (Loeb 165; trans. W. R. M. Lamb; ed. Jeffrey Henderson; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924). For further examples of the use of *βουλή* and its cognates to denote authorial intent, see Demosthenes 18.3; Aristotle *Poetics* 16 and *Rhetoric* 2.3.

<sup>20</sup> Irenaeus *AH* 1.8.5.

‘First-Principle’/‘Son’ and ‘Word’. Irenaeus’s presentation of the Valentinian interpretation thus suggests that their claim about John’s intent is the guiding principle of their exegesis.

Irenaeus responds in kind. Beginning in *AH* 1.9.1, Irenaeus designs an argument to show that the Valentinians fail to correctly discern John’s intent. He gives a close reading of the text of the prologue to show that John did not intend to compose an account of the emanation of the aeons:

You see then, my friend, the method they are using, (that) by which they deceive themselves, abusing the scriptures by attempting to establish their fiction from them. On account of this I have reported their very words, so that you might learn from them the treachery of their methods and the wickedness of their digression. For, in the first place, if John intended to disclose the Ogdoad on high (*προεκειτο Ἰωάννη τὴν ἄνω Ὀγδοάδα μηνῦσαι*) he would have preserved the order of its emission. He would have placed the first tetrad - being the most venerable, as they say - among the first names, and he would have added the second in the same way, so that the order of the Ogdoad would be displayed by the order of names, and not after so long an interval in the text, as if it were completely forgotten and then, after it was remembered, he mentioned the first tetrad last. In the next place, if he intended (*θελῶν*) to indicate the conjugal couples he would not have omitted the name Church, or else with respect to the rest of the conjugal couples he would have been content with mentioning the masculine aeons, since the female aeons would be implied, so that he might have preserved a uniformity across all of them. Or, if he enumerated the consorts of the rest (of the aeons), he also would have disclosed the consort of Man, and would not have left us to find out her name by divination. Therefore, the fabrication of this exegesis is manifest (*Φανερά οὖν ἡ τῆς ἐξηγήσεως <αὐτῶν> παραποίησις*).<sup>21</sup>

Irenaeus refutes the claims that John ‘intended (*προεκειτο*) to disclose the Ogdoad on high’ and ‘intended (*θελῶν*) to indicate the conjugal couples’. *Θελῶ*, like *βουλή*, is one of a range of Greek terms used to refer to semantic intent.<sup>22</sup> Irenaeus’s use of *προκειμαι*, the passive form

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<sup>21</sup> Irenaeus *AH*. 1.9.1-2.

<sup>22</sup> See H. Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric: A Foundation for Literary Study*, (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 1998) §838.1. For this use of *Θελῶ*, see Cassius Dio 43.15.2; Phoebammon *Figuris* 3. Indeed, although distinct from each other in classical and archaic Greek,



of *προτίθημι* (to put forward), together with the infinitive *μηνύσειν* (to disclose/reveal/make known) is most straightforwardly understood as referring to authorial intent. *Προτίθημι* when used with an infinitive, denotes intended action, as in: ‘x proposed to do y’.<sup>23</sup> Since *μηνύσειν* here refers to John’s activity in writing the prologue – John is revealing the Ogdoad on high – the intention denoted by *προκειμαι* here is best understood as referring to John’s literary intent in writing the prologue.

By framing his exegetical argument as a dispute regarding authorial intent, Irenaeus is following the general conventions of rhetorical hermeneutics, which locates textual meaning in the intent of the author.<sup>24</sup> While each ground of controversy listed in rhetorical handbooks is in some sense concerned with discerning authorial intent, the question of authorial intent receives particular attention in discussions of a controversy regarding the *scriptum* and *voluntas* of a text. These discussions, I argue, form the immediate context of Irenaeus’s argument in *AH* 1.8.5-1.9.3. In the next section of this paper, I will demonstrate this by showing that the form of Irenaeus’s argument in *AH*.1.9.1-3 corresponds to that prescribed by rhetorical handbooks for an advocate of *scriptum*.

### 3. The Form of Irenaeus’s Argument

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*θελω* and *βούλομαι* came to be treated as synonymous over the course of the Hellenistic and Roman period. See A. Dihle, *The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), ‘Appendix 1’, 145-149.

<sup>23</sup> For instance, Thucydides *The Peloponnesian War* 3.38.1; Herodotus *Histories* 9.27.1. The *ANF* translation, Unger, and Briggman all translate the passive form *προκειμαι* in this passage in terms of intention.

<sup>24</sup> K. Eden *Hermeneutics and the Rhetorical Tradition: Chapters in the Ancient Legacy and its Humanist Reception* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 7-19. Discussions of authorial intent in the rhetorical tradition are closely tied to the concept of equity, exemplified in Aristotle’s myth of the ‘resurrected lawgiver’; see Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 5.10.5; Cicero *De Inventione* 2.42.122-123.

In *AH* 1.91.-1.9.3, Irenaeus provides a close reading of the text of the Johannine prologue in order to refute Valentinian claims about John's intent. In doing so, Irenaeus follows the central interpretive strategy recommended in rhetorical handbooks for the advocate of *scriptum*. Cicero outlines the form such an argument should take in *De Inventione* 2.44.128:

If the writer is alleged to have meant one thing and written another, the advocate who follows the letter will say: it is not right for us to argue about the intent (*voluntate*) of one who has left us a clear indication of his intent (*indiciū nobis relinquerit suae voluntatis*) in order that we might not be able to dispute it...therefore if the object is to carry out the wish (*voluntas*) of the writer, counsel will urge that it is he rather than his opponents who adhere to a writer's wishes (*voluntate*); for one gets much closer to a writer's intent (*scriptoris voluntatem*) if one interprets it from the writer's own words (*qui ex ipsis eam litteris interpretetur*) than one who does not learn the writer's intention (*sententiam scriptoris*) from his own written document (*non ex scripto*) which he has left as a picture, one might say, of his own desires (*quod ille suae voluntatis quasi imaginem relinquerit*), but makes one's own inferences (*domesticis suspicionibus*).<sup>25</sup>

Three movements constitute this form of argument. First, the advocate of *scriptum* argues that the written text clearly indicates intent. Second, following from the first movement, the advocate of *scriptum* claims made that the writer's intent is best learnt from the writers own words (*ex ipsis eam litteris interpretetur*) since these provide a 'picture' (*imaginem*) of the writer's intent (*voluntatis*). This is joined, finally, by an attack on the opposing interpretation: it is not based on what is written (*non ex scripto*), but rather on the personal inferences (*suspiciones*) of the interpreter.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Cicero *De Inventione* 2.44.128. Text and translation of Cicero's *De Inventione* throughout this paper come from Cicero *De Inventione; De Optimo Genere Oratorum; Topica* (Loeb 386; trans. H.M. Hubbell; ed. E.H. Warmington; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).

<sup>26</sup> This claim may lie behind Irenaeus's statement in *AH* 1.8.1 that the Valentinians derive their system 'from that which is not written (ἐξ ἀγράφου)'. The *ANF* translation, Unger and Briggman all interpret this phrase as referring to non-scriptural sources. However, given how

The form of Irenaeus's argument in *AH* 1.9.1-1.9.3 corresponds to these three movements. Irenaeus's argument in *AH* 1.9.1 conforms to the third movement, resting on the same dichotomy between the written text on the one hand, and personal inferences on the other. Irenaeus begins by showing that the Valentinian interpretation of the Johannine prologue is not based on the written text of the prologue. As proof, Irenaeus gives two examples of where the Valentinian interpretation diverges from what is written in the text. First, the order of the emanation of the aeons does not follow the order in which their names appear in the prologue. Second, the name of one of the female aeons (Church – the consort of 'man') is not in the text, but the others are.

Irenaeus then moves to argue that these divergences between the written word of the prologue and the Valentinian interpretation show that the Valentinian exegesis is a 'fabrication' (*παραποιήσις*).<sup>27</sup> An investigation of the literary background of this term reinforces the suggestion that Irenaeus is modelling his argument in this passage on the third movement of the form of argument recommended for an advocate of *scriptum*. As Briggman has shown, Irenaeus's use of the term *παραποιήσις* here reflects literary discussions of fiction (*πλάσμα*) and myth (*μῦθος*) and, in particular, Plutarch's account of fiction in his *Isis and Osiris* and *How to Study Poetry*.<sup>28</sup> According to Plutarch, poets and writers produce fictions (*πλάσμασιν*) "from themselves, from themselves (*ἀφ' ἐαυτῶν*), after the manner of spiders, interweaving and extending their unestablished first thoughts (*ἀπαρχὰς ἀνυποθέτους ὑφαίνουσι καὶ*

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Irenaeus subsequently frames his exegetical argument with the Valentinians, it is possible that here he is influenced by Cicero's suggestion that the advocate of *scriptum* accuse his opponent of trying to discern the author's intention from what is not written (*ex non scriptum*).

<sup>27</sup> Irenaeus *AH* 1.9.2: *Φανερά οὖν ἢ τῆς ἐξηγήσεως <αὐτῶν> παραποιήσις*. The use of the particle *οὖν* indicates that Irenaeus sees this statement as following from the preceding argument.

<sup>28</sup> Briggman 'Literary and Rhetorical Theory in Irenaeus Part 1', *Vigiliae Christianae* 69 (2015) 500-527, 523-526. C.f. Plutarch *Moralia* 16B-C; 358F-359A.

ἀποτείνουσιν)”.<sup>29</sup> This understanding of fiction as derived from the ‘unestablished first thoughts’ of its author fits Irenaeus’s argument in this passage. The Valentinian interpretation is not grounded in the text and therefore must be a ‘fabrication’ derived from their own ‘unestablished first thoughts’. Irenaeus’s use of the term *παραποίησις* thus corresponds to the third movement’s claim that the opposing interpretation is derived from the personal inferences of the interpreter. While Irenaeus’s argument in *AH* 1.9.1 conforms principally to the third movement, Irenaeus’s claim at the start of *AH* 1.9.2 that the ‘fabrication’ of the Valentinian exegesis is ‘manifest (*Φανερά*)’ also functions as a negative corollary of the first movement. Just as the written order of the text gives a clear indication of the author’s intent, so it also provides a clear indication of false claims concerning authorial intent.

Irenaeus continues to follow this form of argument in *AH* 1.9.2. There, Irenaeus builds on his argument in *AH* 1.9.1 by proposing an alternative interpretation of the prologue. According to Irenaeus, John did not intend to indicate multiple aeons but rather speaks of the Word of God who became incarnate as Jesus Christ, and who is the sole subject of the narrative in the prologue:

For John, when he proclaims one God Almighty and one Only-Begotten Christ Jesus through whom all things were made (John 1.3), says this one is the Word of God (John 1.1) the Only-Begotten (John 1.18) the Maker of all things, the true Light who enlightens every man (John 1.9) the Maker of the World (John 1.10), the one who came to his own (John 1.11), he that became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1.14).<sup>30</sup>

This interpretation contrasts with that of the Valentinians, who argue this passage refers to several different subjects: “They maintain there is one Only-Begotten by emission, whom

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<sup>29</sup> Plutarch *Moralia* 16B-C (Loeb 197; trans. C. Babbitt; ed. William Heinemann; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927/repr. 1986).

<sup>30</sup> Irenaeus *AH* 1.9.2.

they call Beginning, but they maintain another became Savior, another Word, the son of the Only-Begotten, and another Christ who was emitted for the restoration of the Fullness.”<sup>31</sup>

Having laid out his interpretation, Irenaeus proceeds to demonstrate it, quoting John 1.14 as proof:

Moreover, the apostle [John] made it clear [*φανερὸν*] that he spoke not about their conjugal couples but about our Lord Jesus Christ, whom he knew to be the Word of God. For recapitulating the thing he said earlier concerning the beginning, he further declares: 'And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.' But according to their hypothesis (*ὑπόθεσιν*)<sup>32</sup> Word did not become flesh, he never even went outside of the Fullness, but rather Savior, who was made out of all of them and was born later than Word.<sup>33</sup>

Irenaeus's argument here corresponds to the first and second movements of an argument in defence of *scriptum*. First he states that John's intent is clearly discernable from the written text. He then produces an interpretation of the text which reveals John's intent from John's own words. Irenaeus quotes John 1.14 as proof that John did not distinguish between 'Word' and 'Savior' but rather indicated that the one who was 'in the beginning' and the one 'became flesh' are one and the same. By bringing in John's own words from later in the prologue, Irenaeus

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<sup>31</sup> Irenaeus *AH* 1.9.2.

<sup>32</sup> Here, as elsewhere, Irenaeus is using a literary term *ὑπόθεσις* (denoting the 'plot', 'narrative', or 'argument' of a text) to refer to the Valentinian interpretation of scripture. The central role played by the notion of the 'hypothesis of scripture', and its background in literary and rhetorical theory has been well documented by various scholars, including Robert Grant, Richard Norris, Paul Blowers and Anthony Briggman; R. Grant *Irenaeus of Lyons* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 47-9; R.A. Norris 'Theology and Language in Irenaeus of Lyons' *Anglican Theological Review*, 76.3 (1994) 285-295, 280-91; P. Blowers 'The Regula Fidei and the Narrative Character of Early Christian Faith' *Pro Ecclesia* 6 (1997): 199-228, 211-2; A. Briggman 'Literary and Rhetorical Theory in Irenaeus Part 1', *Vigiliae Christianae* 69 (2015) 500-527, 502-516. For further discussion of the literary background of this term, see W. Trimpi, 'The Ancient Hypothesis of Fiction: An Essay on the Origins of Literary Theory,' *Traditio* 2 (1971) 1-78.

<sup>33</sup> Irenaeus *AH* 1.9.2.

conforms to Cicero's advice that 'one gets much closer to a writer's intent (*scriptoris voluntatem*) if one interprets it from the writer's own words (*qui ex ipsis cam litteris interpretetur*)'.<sup>34</sup>

#### 4. Irenaeus's Strategy:

While the previous sections demonstrate Irenaeus's engagement with rhetorical discussions of *interpretatio scripti*, this engagement is most clearly seen in his strategy of using of counterfactuals to discern authorial intent. In *AH* 1.9.1 Irenaeus makes a series of counterfactual claims to show how John would have written the prologue if he had intended to relate the emanation of the aeons: 'If [*εἰ*] John intended to disclose the Ogdoad on high, he would have preserved [*ἂν τετηρήκει*] the order of its emission'; he 'would have placed [*ἂν τετηρήκει*] the first tetrad... among the first names'; and 'if he intended (*θελων*) to indicate the conjugal couples he would not have omitted (*οὐκ ἂν παρέλιπεν*) the name Church' and 'he also would have disclosed (*ἂν μεμηνύκει*) the consort of Man, and would not (*ἂν ἀφῆκεν*) have left us to find out her name by divination'. The function of these counterfactuals is to show that the Valentinian claim about John's intent is not supported by the written text of the prologue.

Irenaeus uses counterfactuals in a similar manner in *AH* 1.9.3. There, Irenaeus builds on his argument in *AH* 1.9.2, using John 1.14 once again to argue that the Word is the sole subject of the Johannine prologue in *AH* 1.9.3:

Learn then, you fools, that Jesus who suffered for us, who dwelt among us, is himself the Word of God. For if any one of the other aeons became flesh for our salvation, it would be reasonable for the apostle to have spoken about one of them. But if the Word of the Father is he who descended and ascended, the Only-Begotten Son of the one God, made flesh for human beings according to the good pleasure of the Father, not about any other, nor about the

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<sup>34</sup> Cicero in *De Inventione* 2.44.128

Ogdoad, has John written this account, but about the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>35</sup>

According to the Valentinian myth of the emanation of the aeons, Word does not become incarnate, but rather Savior who is composed out of all the other aeons. So, if John had intended to recount the emanation of the aeons, Irenaeus argues, he would have spoken of Savior becoming flesh, not Word. However, John says that ‘the Word became flesh’. Therefore John cannot have intended to refer to the emanation of the aeons.

Irenaeus’s method in each of these passages reflects a particular argumentative strategy recommended by Cicero in *De Inventione* 2.41. In this passage, Cicero is discussing methods for interpreting ambiguous texts. Cicero recommends that, in cases where the law is ambiguous, one may attack one’s opponent’s interpretation by showing ‘how he [the lawgiver] would have written (*scripsisset*) if he had wished (*voluisset*) the opponent’s interpretation to be carried out or adopted’.<sup>36</sup> This is done through the use of counterfactual claims about how the text would have been written, if the interpretation of an opponent were correct:

‘Therefore in such cases it will be necessary to make use of this kind of argument: ‘He would have written it in this way’, ‘he would not have used that word’, ‘he would not have put that word in that place’ [*Hoc modo scripsisset, isto verbo usus non esset, non isto loco verbum istud collocasset*] For these considerations particularly reveal the intention of the writer [*sententia scriptoris*].’<sup>37</sup>

In this passage, Cicero specifically identifies word choice and word order as two possible subjects of these counterfactual questions. These two features of the text are precisely the subject of Irenaeus’s use of counterfactuals in *AH* 1.9.1 and in *AH* 1.9.3. In *AH* 1.9.1 Irenaeus argues that had John intended to indicate the emanation of the aeons, he would have either arranged the

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<sup>35</sup> Irenaeus *AH* 1.9.3.

<sup>36</sup> Cicero *De Inventione* 2.41.120.

<sup>37</sup> Cicero *De Inventione* 2.41.121.

names of the conjugal couples in the order of their emanation and that he would have used the name Church or, alternatively, would have omitted the names of the female aeons. In *AH* 1.9.3 he again argues along the lines of word choice, arguing that John would not have said the Word was made flesh, but rather would have named one of the other aeons. Counterfactuals regarding word choice and word order undergird the arguments of both passages. Irenaeus's arguments in these passages thus corresponds closely to the strategy recommended by Cicero.

Although Cicero recommends the use of counterfactual questions in cases of ambiguity rather than of *scriptum et voluntas*, the strategy he recommends applies to both since it is concerned with discerning the intent of the writer (*sententia scriptoris*). Indeed, Eden has shown that both Cicero and Quintilian maintain that the different grounds for controversy were distinct, but each also presents the questions of ambiguity and of letter and intent as closely related and requiring similar interpretive strategies.<sup>38</sup> Quintilian even attests to some *rheto*rs who argued that all the different grounds of controversy could be reduced to the basis concerning letter and intent: “some writers have asserted that all these bases may be resolved into those concerned with the letter and intention, while others hold that in all cases where the letter and the intention of a document have to be considered, it is ambiguity that gives rise to the question at issue”.<sup>39</sup> Although Quintilian proceeds to state his disagreement with this view, both he and Cicero

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<sup>38</sup> K. Eden *Hermeneutics and the Rhetorical Tradition: Chapters in the Ancient Legacy and its Humanist Reception* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 8-10.

<sup>39</sup> Quintilian *Institutio Oratore* 7.10.2; c.f. K. Eden *Hermeneutics and the Rhetorical Tradition: Chapters in the Ancient Legacy and its Humanist Reception* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 9-10.



recommend similar argumentative strategies for each *status*, and even recommend switching from one *status* to another in order to establish one's interpretation of a text.<sup>40</sup>

The interrelatedness of these two grounds of controversy provides the context for understanding Irenaeus's argument in *AH* 1.9.1 and 1.9.3. Irenaeus uses the very approach set out by Cicero for discerning authorial intent in cases of ambiguity as part of a broader argument in defence of the *scriptum* of the Johannine prologue. Thus, Irenaeus's argument conforms to arguments recommended in rhetorical handbooks at the level of particular strategy, as well as in its overall form.

### Conclusion

My analysis of Irenaeus's exegetical argument in *AH* 1.8.5-1.9.3 has shown that Irenaeus's argument is dependent on hermeneutical principles and methods found in the discussions of textual interpretation in rhetorical handbooks. In particular, the form of Irenaeus's argument and the exegetical strategies he uses correspond closely to Cicero's recommendations for the advocate of *scriptum*. Irenaeus argues that the written text of the prologue provides a

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<sup>40</sup> Cicero, for instance, notes that the advocate of *voluntas* should proceed by arguing that the text by itself is ambiguous (*De Inv.*2.48.142). Quintilian likewise states that when a question arises concerning the letter and intent of a legal text the issue may arise from ambiguity (*Inst.Orat.*7.5.6). Conversely, Cicero states that the advocate of *scriptum* should argue that there is no ambiguity, and rather author's intent is in fact clearly set out in the text (*De Inv.* 44.128). Cicero suggests the same approach is recommended in cases of ambiguity, stating that one may either deny the ambiguity altogether, or else state that the ambiguous passage is rendered clear when considered in the context of the whole text (*De Inv.*40.116-117). If neither of these options is available, one may adduce historical facts about the life and character of the author, since 'it is easy to estimate what it is likely that the writer intended from the complete context and character of the writer' (*De Inv.*40.117). Cicero similarly states that one should use historical facts in order to determine authorial intent in cases where the controversy is one of letter and intent (*De Inv.*2.46.137).

clear guide to the intent of its author, while using counterfactuals to show the dissimilarities between the Valentinian interpretation and the text of the prologue.

In light of this, it is time to reconsider the importance of rhetorical theory for Irenaeus's scriptural hermeneutics as a whole. Elaine Pagels has argued that the introduction of the rule of truth in *AH* 1.9.4 indicates Irenaeus's implicit recognition that his preceding exegetical argument was inconclusive.<sup>41</sup> While Pagels does not comment on Irenaeus's engagement with rhetorical theory throughout *AH* 1.8.5-1.9.3, her judgement tallies with Schoedel's assessment that Irenaeus fails to use rhetoric to "successfully refute and to support a position".<sup>42</sup>

However, such a judgment fails to take into account Irenaeus's own assessment of the success of his argument. Irenaeus's own concluding remarks at the end of *AH* 1.9.3 show that Irenaeus conceived of the argument of *AH* 1.8.5-1.9.3 as having both successfully refuted the Valentinian hypothesis, and proven his own interpretation of the prologue. He states:

And (thus) their primary and fundamental Ogdoad has been dismantled. For, since the Word, Only-Begotten, Life, Light, Savior, Christ, Son of God, have been proven (*δεικνυμένον*) to be one and the same, and that very one became flesh for us, (then) the framework of their Ogdoad has been dismantled. And having been dismantled, their whole hypothesis (*ὑπόθεσις*) has crumbled into pieces, that which they falsely ejaculated and that for which they ravage the scriptures.<sup>43</sup>

According to Irenaeus's own assessment of his argument, he has successfully 'proven' (*δείκνυμι*) that the 'Word', 'Only Begotten', 'Life', 'Light', 'Saviour', 'Christ' and 'Son of God' are 'one and the same. By so doing, Irenaeus claims, he has refuted the Valentinian hypothesis. The implications are clear: Irenaeus views the rhetorical hermeneutical principles on display in

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<sup>41</sup> E. Pagels 'The Canon of Truth and the Gospel of John: Making a Difference Through Hermeneutics and Ritual' *Vigiliae Christianae* 56.4 (2002) 339-371, 351.

<sup>42</sup> W.R. Schoedel 'Philosophy and Rhetoric in the *Adversus Haereses* of Irenaeus', *Vigiliae Christianae*, 13.1 (1959) 22-23, 31.

<sup>43</sup> Irenaeus *AH* 1.9.3.

this passage as sufficient for the purpose of refuting the Valentinian hypothesis while simultaneously advancing and defending his own interpretation of the prologue.

Irenaeus's exegetical method in *AH* 1.8.5-1.9.3, therefore, reveals the importance of rhetorical hermeneutical principles to his own scriptural hermeneutic. These principles are not subsidiary to the rule of truth, nor do they fall short of successfully refuting or defending a reading of a text. Rather, they are integral to Irenaeus's exegetical method. This observation adds further weight to the on-going re-orientation and re-evaluation of Irenaeus's scriptural hermeneutics.<sup>44</sup> As a result of this re-evaluation, a new picture is beginning to emerge of Irenaeus as an intelligent reader of scripture, whose exegetical approach is marked by the able use of rhetorical hermeneutical principles.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> This re-evaluation is made in L. Ayres 'Irenaeus vs. the Valentinians: Toward a Rethinking of Patristic Exegetical Origins', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 23.2 (2015) 153-187; A. Briggman 'Literary and Rhetorical Theory in Irenaeus Part 1', *Vigiliae Christianae* 69 (2015) 500-527; 'Literary and Rhetorical Theory in Irenaeus Part 2' *Vigiliae Christianae* 70 (2016) 31-50. In light of the studies of Briggman and Ayres, as well as this present study, the hermeneutical function of the role Rule of Faith is worthy of re-consideration. While the Rule of Faith does play an important role in Irenaeus's hermeneutics, these studies, suggest it is best seen as one of multiple complementary tactics in Irenaeus's exegetical arsenal.

<sup>45</sup> This re-evaluation of Irenaeus's scriptural hermeneutics accompanies a broader re-evaluation of his capability and sophistication as a theological thinker. This re-evaluation has involved a movement away from characterisations of Irenaeus's theology as purely 'economic', along with growing awareness of the extent of his knowledge and use of contemporary philosophy. See J. Lashier *Irenaeus on the Trinity* (Leiden: Brill, 2014) and A. Briggman 'Irenaeus's Christology of Mixture' *Journal of Theological Studies* 64.2 (2013) 516-555; 'Re-visiting Irenaeus's Philosophical Acumen' *Vigiliae Christianae* 65.2 (2011) 115-124 and 'Irenaeus on Natural Knowledge' *Church History and Religious Culture* 95.2-3 (2015) 133-154.