

Review of Rolf Noormann, *Irenäus als Paulusinterpret*
Annette Yoshiko Reed (McMaster University)

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A reader of modern scholarship on Paul might, indeed, be forgiven for imagining that the Church was born from the very act of misreading “The Apostle.” If studies of the first century often privilege Paul as a sort of (second) founder of Christianity,¹ then studies of the second have tended to depict him as an object of misunderstanding and misrepresentation – like a site of contestation left muddled by the contest, a battleground left trampled by both sides. A number of contemporary studies, for instance, laud the apostle’s comments on gender as embodying the egalitarian potential of the faith, and they thus paint the second century as the age in which this potential was first squashed: the feminist Paul is said to have been relegated to “apocryphal” legends and “heretical” sects, as church leaders (and Pauline forgers) neutered the apostle’s radicalism for the sake of social order.² Likewise, one recent line of research attempts to recover from his writings more positive ideas about Israel and the Torah; as a result, however, the antinomianism traditionally associated with him must be explained away as the corrosive anti-Judaism of an increasingly Gentile church, which almost immediately misread the words of its “apostle to the Gentiles.”³

Whatever the validity of the individual arguments, it remains that the scholarly interest in Paul’s earliest reception has long been limited to the various ways in which he was misinterpreted and his message skewed, already in the second century and often by the very thinkers responsible for building the church. In stressing the disjunction between Paul and his proto-orthodox readers, such studies ground their plausibility in a traditional narrative, familiar from classic works such as Adolf Harnack’s *History of Dogma*, Wilhelm Boussett’s *Kyrios Christos*, and Hans von Campenhausen’s *Formation of the Christian Canon*.⁴ Here, Paul enters the second century just as in Tertullian’s famous joke: he is the “apostle of the heretics” (*hoereticorum apostolus*; Tertullian, *adv. Marc.* 3.5.4). He has been embraced by Marcionites and Valentinians, and his reputation has been sullied by the association. By the end of the century, Paul is well on his way to being (re)appropriated by the Great Church – thanks largely to the labors of Irenaeus. Nevertheless, according to this narrative, Irenaeus (and Tertullian after him) could only ransom back “The Apostle” at a very high price, twisting his dangerous ideas into domestication and abandoning some of his most characteristic *theologomena* to the “heretics.”⁵ What was the genius of Paul thus became a Paulinism wrought in the heat of debate, still bearing the scars of the battle with “heresy” from which “orthodoxy” first sprung.

It is this traditional construct – this appealing narrative about an apostle lost and found and misinterpreted – that Rolf Noormann revisits in his book *Irenäus als Paulsinterpret*, which

¹ To cite a recent example: Gerd Lüdemann, *Paul: The Founder of Christianity*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2002.

² Most notable is Dennis MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983). The simplifications necessary to support such a position, both in terms of second-century Christianity and in terms of the history of Pauline reception, are pointed out by David Rensberger in his 1985 *JBL* review.

³ See e.g. John G. Gager, *Reinventing Paul*, New York: Oxford UP, 2000.

⁴ See e.g. Hans von Campenhausen, *Formation of the Christian Canon*, trans. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), pp.154ff on Marcion and 177ff on the Valentinians, and for an extended argument, the final chapter of Wilhelm Boussett’s *Kyrios Christos*. Contrast the more nuanced approach to the issue in Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Paul: Gnostic Exegesis of the Pauline Letters* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

⁵ It is perhaps not coincidental that this scholarly narrative functions tacitly to lay the groundwork for the *correct* recovery/interpretation of the Apostle at a much later time – whether by Protestant Reformers or contemporary feminists.

counters past generalizations about Paul, Irenaeus, and so-called “Paulinism” with a comprehensive, methodical, and richly detailed analysis of the whole of the textual evidence.

I’ve chosen to begin with the bigger picture – not only because this is the picture with which Noorman himself begins and against which he (very self-consciously) frames his study – but also because I fear that the significance of this inquiry might otherwise be overlooked. The book is a revision of the author’s 1993 dissertation at Kirchliche Hochschule Berlin, and it fits many of the usual North American stereotypes about German dissertations. It is comprehensive and careful; methodically structured and argued even at the expense of some repetitiveness; and painstakingly detailed in its analysis. At the heart of the book, for instance, we find over 300 pages [pp. 70-375] dedicated to a sequential analysis of every single reference and allusion to Pauline, deuterio-Pauline, and Pastoral Epistles in *Adversus Haeresus*, with references from the *Epideixis* treated in course.⁶

At first sight, then, the book looks like a study of relevance primarily for specialists and, moreover, like a book that one *uses* and *consults* rather than *reading per se*.⁷ This is somewhat unfortunate, since – as Noorman himself makes clear at the outset – his study has the potential to contribute to multiple discussions and debates, shedding light on the development of Christian doctrine and the history of biblical interpretation no less than on Irenaeus, his theology, and his influential approach to those texts that would come to comprise the New Testament.

The last comprehensive investigation of Irenaeus’ reception of Paul was probably Johannes Werner’s *Der Paulinismus des Irenaeus*, penned over a century ago [1889].⁸ Consistent with the then-popular trope of the Patristic distortion of Paul, Irenaeus is there dismissed as a reluctant, polemically-motivated, and clumsy Paulinist. By contrast, Noorman approaches the issue from the opposite direction, investigating the use, interpretation, and impact of Pauline literature on Irenaeus, understood on his own terms and for his own sake.

In this, he builds on the work of scholars such as Andreas Lindemann, Ernst Dassmann, and David Rensberger who, in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, revisited the question of Paul’s *pre-Irenaeus* reception.⁹ Going back to the primary sources, these studies tested the first part of the traditional narrative about Paul’s second-century fate; they asked whether the proto-orthodox church had, in fact, abandoned Paul prior to Irenaeus and basically answered in the negative.¹⁰

⁶ For his precise reasoning for this choice, see p. 27

⁷ Notably, Noorman’s book does not seem to have been very widely reviewed, at least as far as I can tell; a search on ATLA yields only three reviews: PHEME PERKINS in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 58 [1996] 762-764; BERNARD SESBOÜÉ in *Recherches de science religieuse* 85 [1997] 629-630; ERIC OSBORN in *Australian Biblical Review* 47 [1999] 93. Moreover, the book seems not to have reached the broader audience that it perhaps should have, even though some Irenaeus studies have engaged Noorman’s conclusions in the decade since its publication (note esp. ERIC OSBORN, *Irenaeus of Lyon* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001], 189ff).

⁸ J. WERNER, *Der Paulinismus des Irenaeus* (Leipzig, 1889).

⁹ ANDREAS LINDEMANN, *Paulus im ältesten Christentum: Das Bild des Apostels und die Rezeption der paulinischen Theologie in der frühchristlichen Literatur bis Marcion* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1979); ERNST DASSMANN, *Der Stachel im Fleisch: Paulus in der frühchristlichen Literatur bis Irenäus* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1979); DAVID RENSBERGER, “As the Apostle Teaches: The Development of the Use of Paul’s Letters in Second-Century Christianity,” Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1981; note also RENSBERGER’s *JBL* review of Lindemann.

¹⁰ Consistent with older views of Irenaeus as the proto-orthodox thinker who succeeded in wresting Paul from Marcionites and Valentinians alike, Dassmann’s scope is explicitly “bis Irenäus” (although see *Der Stachel im Fleisch*, 305-7); likewise, Lindemann’s study examined only “die vorirenäische Epoche” (*Paulus im ältesten Christentum*, 6; although he does include “heterodox” sources dated afterwards), whereas Rensberger’s study concludes with Irenaeus, albeit with a scant 15 pages (“As the Apostle Teaches,” 316-19).

Noorman's book serves as a sort of sequel – a challenge to the second half of the narrative.¹¹ Of course, if we accept the findings of Lindemann and the others, then Irenaeus can no longer be read in simple terms as the pivotal thinker who retook Paul from the “heretics.” Nevertheless, as Noormann stresses, his writings still provide our earliest extant and extensive evidence of an early Christian interpretation of Pauline literature [p. 517].

In pursuing his analysis of this evidence, Noormann chooses to focus on the textual data, mapping the influence of the epistles associated with Paul, while carefully distinguishing this issue from that of the influence of Paul himself as authority or paradigm. Consequently, he also situates his study within the context of scholarship on Irenaeus' use and conception of Scripture, building on the work of John Lawson,¹² as well as Peretto's 1971 study of Irenaeus' reading of Romans 1-8 and an important pair of articles on Irenaeus' use of Paul by Richard Norris and David Balás in the early 1990's.¹³

Inasmuch as Noormann's 1994 book fits the trends of the time, it is interesting that he engages foremost with much earlier research. The reasons for this become clear in his summary of the History of Research [pp. 4-21] – which is a fascinating read in its own right. Noormann here surveys more specialized studies, but he simultaneously shows how, within the full range of more synthetic books and handbooks (beginning already with Baur), Irenaeus' relationship to Paul has been treated as emblematic of the ambivalent relationship between the early church and its apostolic heritage, and how his contribution to the development of Christian doctrine has been abstractified and schematized to fit within broader rubrics like the conflict between Petrine and Pauline parties, the construct of “Paulinism,” and the contrast between “orthodoxy” and “heresy.”

In Noormann's view, the diversity of scholarly opinions about Irenaeus' “Paulinism” points to the inadequacy of thematic and selective approaches, and the need for a systematic and comprehensive analysis of the textual data [see esp. p. 23]. This is the aim of the first part of this book. Although his focus is not on the “idea” of Paul, he begins with a self-standing chapter considering the comments about the status of the apostle and his work [pp. 38-69] – quite rightly addressing, right at the outset, issues pertaining to the degree and nature of the authority granted to these writings.¹⁴

Then, Noormann turns to analyze the literary evidence for Irenaeus' use of Pauline literature, going through *Adversus Haereses* book-by-book (and nearly passage-by-passage). He does not limit himself to direct quotations, but also treats paraphrases, allusions, echoes, and even key themes [p. 26], and he tries systematically to ask the same questions of each relevant passage.

¹¹ Like Lindemann, Noormann is interested both in Paul's reception and in the influence of Pauline theology on the early church; like Renseberger, he separates the topic of the “image” of Paul from the topic of the reception, interpretation, and exegesis of letters associated with him.

¹² Noormann credits John Lawson's *The Biblical Theology of Saint Irenaeus* (London: Epworth Press, 1948) with initiating this interest in Irenaeus as exegete.

¹³ Richard A. Norris, Jr., “Irenaeus' use of Paul in his polemic against the Gnostics,” in *Paul and the Legacies of Paul*, ed. W. S. Babcock (Dallas: Southern Methodist UP, 1990), 79-98; David L. Balás, “The Use and Interpretation of Paul in Irenaeus' Five Books *Adversus Haereses*,” *Second Century* 9 (1992), 27-40 – both of which, incidentally, sprung from a conference on “Paul and the Legacies of Paul” that was itself geared towards recovering the apostle's earliest *Nachleben* from the stereotyped generalizations of earlier Protestant historiography on the period.

¹⁴ Specifically, Noorman concludes that Irenaeus seems to have a collection of Pauline letters, but these are nowhere referred to as a corpus paulinum; questions about the inspiration of Pauline writings (as distinct from the inspiration of Paul himself) cannot be answered on the basis of Irenaeus' writings; even despite the use of similar quotation formulae in some cases, the authority of Pauline writings is not yet equal to the OT inasmuch as it remains dependant on the authority of Paul himself.

As a result, this portion of the book is very helpful to use as a reference, especially since his comments are buttressed on all sides with footnotes that cover a variety of related topics.¹⁵

In the course of this cautious and variegated analysis, we get a feel for the broad range of aims and themes for which Pauline writings prove helpful to Irenaeus (as polemical proof-text, theological intertext, and more). We also get glimpses of the so-called “heretical” side of the conversation, even though Noormann stresses that he does not deal with this topic independent of its relevance for Irenaeus.¹⁶ Furthermore, even as the focus falls squarely on the reading of Paul, his analysis demonstrates the importance of other texts, such as the Gospels and Acts, in shaping his understanding and interpretation of Paul.¹⁷

In the second part of this book, Noormann attempts some synthesis, focusing on the place of Pauline ideas and writings within Irenaeus’ theology. Here too, he is insistent on the need for a new formulation, free from the confessionalism and anachronism of previous inquiries, which (in his view) tended to judge Irenaeus against the standards of either Lutheran theology or modern scholarly exegesis. Just as the first section follows the structure of *Adversus Haereses* itself, so the second is framed around three topics which Noormann deems as central to Irenaeus’ thought and which, in his view, serve as the major points of contention between him and his opponents, namely, salvation-history, Christology, and anthropology.

Irenaeus’ view of salvation-history is presented as a further growth of the seeds sown by Paul, albeit joined with a new understanding of time that further stresses elements of continuity, consistent with his polemical emphasis on the unity of the Creator, the God of the Old Testament, and the Father of Christ. Likewise, Noormann’s comments on Christology and soteriology pivot on Irenaeus’ development of the Pauline typology of Adam and Christ, which he is shown to push further, with a more positive view of human potential prior to the Incarnation (consistent with his stress on continuity in salvation-history) and with a stress on the Incarnation as opening the way for human restoration into immortality and perfection. In considering Irenaeus’ anthropology, Noormann focuses in on the redeployment of 1 Corinthians 15 and resultant understanding of flesh and spirit, as framed against Valentinian ideas about ontologically different classes of people and stressing free will in response, even as he allows for Pauline views of grace.

Noormann’s concluding chapter includes some additional comments, based in his observations about the distribution of Pauline citations and allusions in Irenaeus’ work. Most notably, he stresses the lack of evidence for Harnack’s view that the Pauline letters were only rendered palatable for the early church by their deutero-Pauline counterparts [pp. 521-22]. From the traditional scholarly narrative, we might indeed expect for Irenaeus to embrace the domesticated Paul of the Pastorals – not least because 1 Timothy is both echoed in the full title of *Adversus haereses* [i.e., 6:20] and quoted as the words of “the apostle” at the very beginning of this work [i.e., 1:14; in AH I *praef.*]. Yet, most cited and influential are 1 Corinthians, Romans,

¹⁵ For instance, Noormann here touches on some points at which Irenaeus’ interpretation departs in interesting ways from Paul’s probable meaning, thus bringing in some modern scholarship on Paul (as, for instance, when discussing Paul and the Torah); Noormann, however, takes pains to stress that this is neither judgmental in aim nor central to his broader project, which is historical rather than prescriptive.

¹⁶ Although Noormann does not give separate consideration of the “gnostic” reception of Paul, he does make note of the places where Irenaeus gives clear “snapshots” of Gnostic use of Paul and there considers how Irenaeus’ own views relate to them, with an eye to the broader issue of the impact of Gnostic Pauline exegesis on Irenaeus and the proto-orthodox church.

¹⁷ A reader might wish for a bit more synthesis in this part, and it is easy, at times, to become frustrated with the comprehensiveness of the analysis. At the risk of seeming to flatter one of the organizers of the session, I might cite, in comparison, Jeffrey Bingham’s book on *Irenaeus’ Use of Matthew’s Gospel* – which similarly goes through cases of Matthaean citation and influence book-by-book, while still being thoughtfully synthetic in its argumentation, approach, and conclusions throughout. Although Noormann’s summary is somewhat unwieldy by comparison, it remains that this section is extremely rich, rewarding the efforts of the patient reader.

Ephesians, and Galatians (in that order). Here again the traditional view of Paul's second-century reception is shown to fall short as a model for reading Irenaeus.

Both in terms of its content and in terms of the groundwork that it lays for further research, there is much of value in this rich and careful study. It is in the first section (in my view at least) that Noormann really fulfills his promises, conveying the complexity of Irenaeus' encounter with Pauline writings and ideas – a complexity that any simple synthesis could only collapse and that any externally-imposed rubric or dichotomy could only skew. Although somewhat unwieldy, the cumulative effect is to demonstrate the great diversity of concerns and approaches that inform Irenaeus' appeal to Pauline writings. We here see Irenaeus as polemicist and heresiologist and exegete and theologian and, in each role, as traditionalist and innovator alike. By virtue of his choice to follow the structure of *Adversus Haeresus*, Pauline prooftexts and citations are not abstractified from their controversial, rhetorical, and argumentative contexts. Yet, at the same time, Noormann argues that it is relatively rare for his readings of Paul to be shaped wholly by views of his enemies. In other words, his appeal to Paul cannot be dismissed as solely reactive, framed only in response to Valentinian or Marcionite alternatives – or even as solely traditional, echoing or synthesizing earlier views, even as he also does this; rather, Pauline prooftexts and theologoumena are also building-blocks for Irenaeus' own theology as articulated overagainst alternatives but no less cohesive for it.

The main shortcomings of this book root from the fact that its structure is built, not around a single argument *per se*, but around a claim to comprehensiveness presented as corrective to past research. This claim to comprehensiveness invites a host of questions about his choices of exclusion and inclusion,¹⁸ particularly with regard to the topics chosen for synthetic comment in the second section. For instance, as PHEME PERKINS notes in her review of this book, the theme of millennialism is oddly absent from the synthesis, even despite its prominence within the analytic summary.

Moreover, it sometimes seems that the primary objects of Noormann's critique are scholars of the distant past (as clear from his engagement with Werner in particular). Notably, this choice is more warranted than first may seem. If some modern studies of Paul remain quite content to accept that his proto-orthodox reception was marked by extreme disjunction and distortion, Noormann admirably allows for a complex web of both continuity and discontinuity linking Irenaeus and the apostolic past to which he so fervently lays claim and from which he so creatively draws in both theology and polemic. Nevertheless, his study may remain too much within the framework of what he's critiquing, and one wishes that he did more to integrate Irenaeus into a new framework, freed from the abstract simplicity of the traditional dichotomies and the usual trajectories.

Ironically, the very success of Noormann's critique of the traditional paradigm of Irenaeian "Paulinism" also undermines the justification for his own narrow focus on Irenaeus and Paul. This is perhaps not surprising, since one of the main points of *Adversus Haeresus* is to show the true unity in the apparently diverse scriptural witness, both within and between the Old Testament and the New. Noormann's analysis aptly demonstrates what is lost in considering Irenaeian theology to be only Pauline, rather than Johannine as well, and read through the Synoptics and Acts – and all, moreover, filtered through the Rule of Truth. In the second section, one thus wishes for more explanation of why Pauline *theologoumena* should be so privileged in an analysis of the central ideas in Irenaeian thought. This is confirmed by his largely negative conclusions, which are surely sound but no more satisfying for it. Even though Pauline literature provides catalysts and even structural pillars, Noormann himself concludes that "Paul is not fundamental to Irenaeus'

¹⁸ In light of his systematic approach to *Adversus Haeresus*, for instance, one could ask whether his conclusions might have differed if he had chosen to examine the *Epideixis* independently (as recently done for one case by Susan Graham).

theology” [p. 531]. As such, this study points forward to the need to examine more closely the interaction of different scriptural interpretants and prooftexts, and the various ways in which Irenaeus intertextuality constructs a univocality of scriptural witness against so-called “heresy.”

Just as his study explicitly counters a (largely Protestant) narrative about Irenaeus’ part in the routinization of apostolic charisma, so his method embodies a corrective to older (also largely Protestant) approaches that quest after origins at the expense of understanding the meaning and mechanics of subsequent tradition. Recent reactions to this approach have rippled across the entire spectrum of the study of the ancient world, as clear from the growing interest in the history of biblical interpretation and the emergence of Reception Studies in the field of Classics. When seen from this broader perspective, Noormann’s book stands out as an admirably focused and text-based addition to a growing body of studies on the reception-histories of ancient texts, which stand to contribute to our understanding of dynamics of scripturalization, canonization, hermeneutics, and textual transmission. At the same time, this and similar studies on the reception of NT literature, in particular, promise to deepen our knowledge of the formation of Christianity, by helping us to move beyond schematizations of religious history as devolution, dichotomy, or progress. Noormann’s fine study of Irenaeus thus points to the concrete and complex ways in which connections with the past were forged by individual tradents, who struggled with the legacies of older texts and figures no less than with the opponents of their own times.