

A History of Christian Fact Finding

Valerius Maximus, purveyor of anecdotes and sayings from the Roman republic through his own day during the reign of Tiberius, recorded a curious incident in the history of Roman municipal planning. In the late third century BCE a certain Marcellus was serving his fifth term as consul and decided to consecrate a single new temple to the gods Honor and Virtue. Noticing an epistemic error underlying Marcellus's intended building project, the college of priests balked. The priests responded, "should some sign occur there [in the proposed temple], it would be impossible to distinguish to which of the two an expiatory ceremony should be performed."¹ If a single temple were dedicated to the two divinities, the priests argued, there would be no way to discover whether, say, a lightning bolt striking the temple precinct was a portent from Honor, or whether it was from Virtue.² Marcellus's error was made in good faith: he intended only to offer thanks to the gods with a gleaming new temple built in their honor. He erred, however, when he vowed a temple without having the precise scholarly knowledge which was the purview of the priestly college. In this instance we see a "Roman religion ... founded upon an empiricist epistemology," according to

¹ Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings* 1.1.8. Translations adapted from LCL 492.

² This concern appears limited to Romans, and perhaps to temples of gods served by the priestly colleges of Rome; we hear no such complaint concerning Pisistratus the Younger's Altar of the Twelve Gods at the Athenian Agora. It is not even clear to *which* twelve gods the sixth century BCE altar was erected, though presumably ancient worshippers had a keener understanding than do modern scholars.

Clifford Ando.³ It is difficult to draw a straight line from scholarly practices, such as those involved in augury, to the epistemology which underlie them – it is certainly the case here that what Ando means by “epistemology” is rather radically distinct from the way that the term is used in contemporary philosophical discourse. In all events, as historians, we never study ancient epistemic structures *themselves*, but rather their reflection in scholarly practices and intellectual expectations about what a good argument looks like and how it functions. While studies of ancient epistemology are possible, they consist in studies of practice. In this more limited sense Ando is certainly correct in his reading of Valerius Maximus, who shows us that at Rome priests expected that the content of religious knowledge was ascertained by way of rigorous spatial analysis, in order to determine the identity of the god who provided a sign. Whether this expectation is “epistemic” is a matter of reasonable debate, and I will not wade into it here. What is clear is that in this case an expectation about the proper production of scholastic knowledge – an argument over practices – translated into intentional interventions in the shape of the city’s institutions so that divine communication could be exactly identified.

According to Valerius Maximus the content of cultic knowledge is just one determining factor on the structuring of the built environment. Another factor, at least as determinative as the need to respond properly to portents, is knowledge of the scholarly basis upon which such interpretations are made. Marcellus’s fundamental misunderstanding when proposing an intervention into the architectural environment of Rome was not that he failed to acknowledge that signs from the gods require a response. Rather, he failed to understand the way that pontiffs go about the business of determining that response. Marcellus knew *what* could be true – that there could be a sign and that it would require a response – but he did not know *how* such scholarly knowledge was produced: the way in which a priest would make an argument about which god to propitiate. In this case the formal basis of scholarly knowledge structured the physical environment, with scholars trained in the science of “portents (*prodigii*)” acting as a check, on the basis of their specialized methodological knowledge.

This chapter explores Christian scholarly practice from the Antonine Age through the end of Severan dynasty. This book as a whole is

³ Ando, *The Matter of the Gods: Religion and the Roman Empire*, 13.

concerned with the ways in which scholastic shifts motivate changes in knowledge production in Roman scholarship of the fourth and fifth centuries. In the story of Marcellus's temple we see that already, 600 years prior, methodological concerns impacted not only the obscure scholarly literature of the college of priests but the space of the incipient Roman metropolis. In order to contextualize the seismic shifts caused by the rise of Christianity in the late fourth century, this chapter surveys the tradition of knowledge production within Christian scholarship in the centuries before Christians came to be a ruling elite. I hope to demonstrate that before the fourth century, these traditions of specialized knowledge evince little overlap in how they think a theological argument can be proved. The relative independence of earlier Christian ways of knowing contrasts starkly with the substantial convergence evident among fourth-century Christians adjudicating the Nicene controversy, and the peculiarly Christian scholastic methods underlying and motivating the great scholarly productions of the Theodosian Age. Subsequent chapters will show relative uniformity among Christian scholars concerning the proper way to make a theological argument; this chapter focuses on diversity.

I do not present a totalizing, teleological, or internally coherent account of Christian knowledge formation before the fourth century, however. To tell a coherent story that assimilated all of these writers to a trajectory would be an anachronism, and a historical failure. Such an attempt would presuppose the backward gaze of a fourth-century orthodoxy like Jerome's, whose *On Eminent Men* assimilates a bewildering variety of theological methods into a coherent tradition through the dual operations of assimilation and exclusion. Jerome assimilates the work of scholars like Tertullian and Irenaeus, for instance, who approached theological argumentation with fundamentally opposite methods, as I argue later. By placing these two early Christian thinkers together in apparent harmony, their methodological incompatibility elides into a teleological story of the development of Nicene Orthodoxy. Tertullian and Irenaeus might well have agreed with the pronouncements of the Council of Nicaea, had they lived long enough to see them. However, I argue that they would have adjudicated the question of the relationship between the Christian Father and Son in a fundamentally divergent manner. As told by Jerome, the development of Orthodoxy is a story weaving together the lives of great men who held to theological precepts with which the Palestinian theologian agreed. These men, however, often arrived at "proto-Orthodox" positions through radically different methods.

Different methods – and perhaps different epistemologies – often undergirded complimentary theological precepts.

In addition to assimilating antithetical methods, Jerome excluded traditions of Christian theological speculation that did not reach his preferred dogmatic conclusions. For instance, Marcion's work was an important and generative part of Christian theological history, though he appears in Jerome's catalogue only as a villain. The *Gospel of Truth*, too, is part of Christian theological history, whether Jerome considers it to be part of the patrimony or not. In this chapter I detail its radically anti-textual approach to truth as a way to focalize the textual fetishism of many late ancient Christian traditions.

EPISTEMIC AND PRECEPTUAL KNOWLEDGE IN ANTIQUITY

My analysis focuses on the scholarly method of ancient texts rather than trying to expound precepts which these texts hold to be true. Scholastic methodology – how one goes about the business of producing valid knowledge – can be displayed in any number of ways. One's method may be expressed in absolute terms through an excursus, as I performed in Chapter 1. Alternatively, method can be read from the structure of scholarly argumentation, investigating the underlying precepts of scholarly practice by watching the argument “in action,” as it were.

For the purposes of my discussion, “epistemic knowledge” refers to truth claims that are methodological or procedural: it defines the way that truth can be produced. “Preceptual knowledge,” on the other hand, refers to the results of epistemic knowledge: substantive knowledge or the-truths-themselves.⁴ I use both types of evidence here, but the distinction between “epistemic” and “preceptual knowledge” is not my own, nor an invention of modernity; we share the distinction with distinguished philosophical minds of antiquity. Plato posited a formal opposition between knowledge that is “preceptual (δοξαστικός)” and knowledge that is “epistemic (ἐπιστήμων),” and as I demonstrate later, Clement of Alexandria

⁴ The language of “preceptual knowledge” is taken from Seneca and repeated by Clement of Alexandria, as I show later. The term is precise at the expense of elegance, and while “conjunctural” is the more traditional translation of the Greek δοξαστικός, it seems to me that translating the Greek and Latin differently in English would obscure more than it enlightens. For his part, Seneca too insisted on using *praeceptio* to refer to substantive knowledge even though it sounded strange in Latin. To the charge that this term is useful but unwieldy, he responded “nothing stops me from using this term (*nihil enim nos hoc verbo uti prohibet!*)” I've taken his lead. Seneca, *Epistles* 95.65. Text L. D. Reynolds.

repeated the distinction.⁵ To study “preceptual” knowledge is to study doctrines. To study “epistemic” knowledge, on the other hand, is to study scholarly practices themselves. A distinction between knowledge of precepts and knowledge of philosophical method continues in Latin with the work of Seneca, the first-century Stoic philosopher and advisor to the emperor Nero. He urged Lucilius, the procurator of Sicily, not to forsake “epistemic” knowledge in order to focus entirely on precepts, as some mistakenly commend:

Some people have deemed only one part of philosophy legitimate – the part that, instead of instructing human beings in general, gives specific precepts (*propria . . . praecepta*) for each social role, such as advising a husband on how he should behave to his wife, a father on how to raise his children, or a master on how to regulate his slaves. They have rejected the other parts for straying beyond our actual needs. As if anyone could give advice about a part of life before having grasped life in its entirety!⁶

Seneca here expresses a typical tenet of Stoic thought: proper knowledge is foundationally coherent. He claims that the three classical divisions of Stoic philosophy – physics, ethics, and logic – are so interconnected that one might reasonably debate which topic to teach first. The Stoic system cannot be disaggregated and cashed out in terms of *either* preceptual *or* epistemic tenets.⁷ The Stoic teacher Aristo took it one step further, Seneca continues, arguing that preceptual knowledge was utterly useless, “being nothing but advice from old women. In his view, the greatest help comes from the actual doctrines of philosophy and the structure of the ultimate good. ‘Once someone has thoroughly understood and learned the structure of the ultimate good, he can prescribe to himself what should be done in each situation.’”⁸ The rest of Seneca’s substantial letter on philosophical method takes up Aristo’s points one by one, and the philosopher returns the topic of epistemic and preceptual knowledge in his next letter to Lucilius:

But let us connect them [precepts and doctrines]. Branches without roots are useless, and the roots themselves are assisted by what they have produced. No one can fail to know how useful our hands are; their service is obvious, but the doctrines of philosophy are hidden. Just as the more sacred elements of a religion are known only to initiates, so in philosophy the inmost parts (*arcana*) are revealed only to

⁵ Plato, *Theaetetus* 207c. Text LCL 123.

⁶ Seneca, *Epistles* 94.1. Translations adapted from Margaret Graver and A. A. Long.

⁷ Lehoux, *What Did the Romans Know? An Inquiry into Science and Worldmaking*, 58–59.

⁸ Seneca, *Epistles* 94.2. The last sentence is very likely a quotation from Aristo. I have punctuated accordingly.

those who have been fully admitted and received into its mysteries. But precepts and the like (*praecepta et alia*) are shared also with outsiders. (95.64)

Epistemic and preceptual knowledge, in other words, are separable in concept but not in practice. Clement of Alexandria likewise espouses an intellectually and morally relevant distinction between preceptual and epistemic knowledge, or put differently, between doctrines and the method through which doctrines are properly contrived. It is likely that Clement came to this position through the direct influence of Stoic tradition – perhaps from Seneca himself, or perhaps through the mediation of Musonius Rufus.⁹ In any event, the point is not unique to Stoic thought. Clement writes forcefully in his *Patchworks* (*Stromateis*) that scripture itself has a will which imposes itself on a reader, and bids her toward “the highest form of study, the supreme revelation, the foundational episteme that becomes irrefutable through reason”.¹⁰

And so, while the knowledge of those who think themselves wise (Greek philosophers or foreign heretics) is, in words of the Apostle, “a knowledge which puffs up,” there is nevertheless a trustworthy form of knowledge (πιστή δὲ ἡ γνῶσις ἥτις); one might call it an epistemic demonstration (ἐπιστημονικὴ ἀπόδειξις) of the traditions of true philosophy. We might say that it is a rational approach to providing, on the basis of accepted truths, an account in which we can put our faith in relation to matters in dispute. Credibility is of two kinds; one epistemic, the other preceptual (τῆς μὲν ἐπιστημονικῆς, τῆς δὲ δοξαστικῆς). Nothing prevents us from calling demonstration twofold; the one epistemic and the other preceptual, since we actually use two separate terms – both “knowledge” and “foreknowledge” (καὶ ἡ γνῶσις καὶ ἡ πρόγνωσις) – one enjoying its own nature in its full and precise measure, the other incompletely.¹¹

Clement here describes the difference between epistemic and preceptual knowledge, which are conceptually distinct but nevertheless combine to undergird the credibility of theological arguments. The language is playful, and exploits the lexical flexibility in which the roots πιστός and πίστις can describe both the “faith” of a person and the credibility of their argument. Clement is nevertheless clear that *epistemic* knowledge guides the production of truth, and is ultimately foundational:

Preceptual demonstration (ἡ δὲ δοξαστικὴ ἀπόδειξις) is a human matter; it is the product of rhetorical argument or even dialectical syllogisms. The

⁹ Quasten, *Patrology*, Vol. 2, *The Ante-Nicene Literature After Irenaeus*, 12.

¹⁰ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 2.47.4. Text GCS 52. Translations are adapted from John Ferguson.

¹¹ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 2.48.1–3. The final quotation is from Paul, 1 *Thessalonians* 4:9.

higher demonstration, which we have suggested is epistemic (ἦν ἡνιξάμεθα ἐπιστημονικῆν), instills faith/credibility (πίστιν ἐντίθησι) by presenting the scriptures and opening them up to the souls who are eager to learn, and this could hardly be other than knowledge. In fact, if the arguments brought to a problem are accepted as true, on the grounds that they are derived from God and prophecy, then I imagine that it is clear that the conclusion derived from them will be true in consequence. (2.49.2–4)

We are lucky to have extant from antiquity not only traditions of preceptual teaching but also dedicated, philosophical discussions of proper, rigorous scholarly practice. Clement is probably the most eloquent writer and sophisticated theorist that I discuss in this book. But his concerns about the production of knowledge, and the conceptual categories that he uses as tools to instruct and to edify, are not his alone. His question, “how should one go about the business of finding truth,” is shared by Ignatius, by the author of the *Gospel of Truth*, by Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Constantine, Athanasius, Hilary, and by others. There are accordances between Christian scholastic thinkers of the second through fourth century, but there is no story to be told of unity or progression. These questions were live, foundational, and boisterously disputed.

CHRISTIAN SCHOLASTIC PRACTICES

Before the fourth century, Christian scholars took a bewilderingly broad range of approaches to authorizing their claims. Of course, diversity is to be expected; the ground rules of orthodox theological discourse were very much in contention during the second and third centuries, and the locus of Nicene Christian authority under Theodosius – creeds – arose in this capacity relatively late in the tradition. The spectrum of scholarly practice was as diverse as the theological spectrum of early Christianity; for hundreds of years followers of Jesus were as divided over the content of theological propositions (“preceptual knowledge”) as they were over the manner in which a theological proposition could possibly be justified (“epistemic knowledge”). A spectrum is visible from Marcion, perhaps the first Christian scholar to define a New Testament canon as intertextually coherent and theologically binding, to the *Gospel of Truth*, which offers a vision of Christianity wholly removed from exegetical concerns.¹² Between these positions we find Ignatius of Antioch, whose interest in Septuagint material is significant, but who explicitly rejects the authority

¹² On Marcion see Lieu, “Marcion’s Gospel and the New Testament: Catalyst or Consequence?” 333.

of purely textual arguments in favor of inspired speech. Some early Christians, such as Irenaeus of Lyon and the author of *First Clement*, considered Septuagintal texts to be central *loci* of authority. Others such as Tertullian rejected the idea that truth could be read out of a text whatsoever, even if the text in question was undeniably scripture. Even among Jesus followers interested in scriptural interpretation as a method of accessing truth we find significant disputes over what “scripture” is and how it might be deployed.

The idea that scriptural interpretation can produce theological truth is not obvious, and it should not be taken for granted that “Christianity” in the second and third centuries was at any point coterminous with reliance on textualized forms of authority.¹³ Christians were not always “people of the book,” and even those in the second and third centuries who were interested in textual interpretation vary drastically in what they think scripture is and for what it is properly used. Thus, studies of Christian scholarly methodology should not be constrained to studying explicit citational practices – doing so would occlude a vast swath of early Christian material whose producers found little reason to base their arguments in texts at all. The proto-Orthodox movement of the third and fourth centuries (often in response to the work of Irenaeus) homed in on scriptural interpretation as centrally authoritative, but even that status did not last.¹⁴ The late fourth century witnessed a move to what Mark Vessey has called “patristic commentary (*retractatio patrum*),” in which scripture no longer held center stage. Rather, scriptural texts were sublimated to creeds and statements of doctrine that had been distilled from scripture, but that were worded by councils and the great doctors of the church: Athanasius, Basil, Gregory, Jerome, Cyril.¹⁵

¹³ Jason BeDuhn has made a compelling case to localize this particular innovation to Marcionite Christians. BeDuhn, “Marcion’s Gospel and the New Testament: Catalyst or Consequence?” 327.

¹⁴ A note on my use of the term “proto-Orthodox”: fourth and fifth century scholars, who considered themselves to be “Orthodox” and called themselves as such, did so in light of a literary-scholastic tradition that self-consciously included the likes of Irenaeus and Tertullian, and that was constructed precisely in opposition to other scholastic voices such as those of Marcion and Valentinus. My invocation of the term “proto-Orthodox” is not intended as a statement of ontology. Rather, it is meant to provide a way of distinguishing the tradition claimed by my fourth- and fifth-century sources from the tradition that they explicitly disclaim. I might well use the term “the-tradition-of-scholarship-claimed-by-late-fourth-century-defenders-of-the-Nicene-creed,” but proto-Orthodox is less cumbersome.

¹⁵ Vessey, “The Forging of Orthodoxy.”

There is a sense in which the Nicene controversy was the last scriptural controversy, in which the proper interpretation of New Testament texts was the crux of the issue. Chapter 3 turns to the controversy itself, where I argue that the dispute played a significant role in the promotion of credal statements over biblical texts when asking questions of doctrinal orthodoxy. I intend to show that no trajectory or story of development is visible in the productions of Christian scholars from in the second, third, and fourth centuries. Rather, each waypoint offers a glimpse at distinct book cultures and epistemic frames within which early Christians moved and breathed. Chapter 4 culminates with the definition of “Orthodoxy” in the Theodosian Age as adherence to a tightly policed statement of faith that was intended to distill a proper reading of scripture within a framework of traditional authority and undergirded by a form of Christian encyclopedism. By the ascension of Theodosius I in 379 CE, the Orthodox movement no longer looked primarily even to scripture in order to adjudicate questions of doctrine. Rather, they looked to an authorized, universal statement of truth. I argue that the “code” form that became ubiquitous in the Theodosian Age resulted from a Christian scholastic worldview that considered a particular theological method to be coterminous with Orthodoxy. Chapters 3 and 4 trace the development of that method, using brief examples to show the variety of Christian scholastic methods. My aim is not just to show that variety of method preceded the coalescence of scholarly practice at Nicaea, and the overhaul thereof in its aftermath. Rather, I want to denaturalize the idea that Christians, in antiquity, were always and singularly interested in text, and that there is any central coherence even among proto-Orthodox thinkers regarding what texts were and how they were to be used. Christians on both sides of the Nicene controversy were textual fetishists, and by the late fourth century their particular and ultimately *peculiar* approach to books came to define scholarly practice far removed from the theological domain. It is hard to understand just how radical the scholastic revolution of the Theodosian Age was without a background upon which to see its contours. I turn to that background now.

IGNATIUS

Ignatius was bishop to a community of Jesus followers in Antioch around the turn of the second century, and he knew that he was going to die.¹⁶

¹⁶ Ignatius, *Romans* 2.2. Text and translations throughout adapted from *LCL* 24. See also Origen *Homilies in Luke* 6 and Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 3.22.36.

A collection of his letters survives in three recensions of varying lengths and coherence, portraying the bishop making one final publicity tour through Asia Minor on his way to execution in Rome: stopping to visit with communities along the way and dispensing advice as an official representative of Jesus, inspired by the Holy Spirit.¹⁷

Of chief importance for Ignatius was that parishioners obey their (single) bishop and the hierarchical structure of elders underneath him in the same way that they would follow apostles, and, in his words, in the same way that they would accede to the “council of God and the league of apostles.” In fact, he contends that “without these [officials of various ranks], a group cannot be called a church!”¹⁸ Ignatius’s concept of authority is institutional and prophetic – he finds dispositive authorization only in inspired speech, and his strong conviction is that divinely inspired speech is found only in a few places: in the words of the prophets as recorded in the Septuagint, in the traditions authentically spoken and handed down by apostles, and in the words of a duly chosen bishop.¹⁹ According to Ignatius the words of a bishop are precisely the voice of God. He scolds the Philadelphians, “I cried out among you, speaking in a great voice – the voice of God: ‘Pay attention to the bishop and the presbytery and the deacons!’”²⁰ Ignatius claims that he had no previous knowledge of divisions among the Philadelphian community, but that he writes and speaks under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who told him directly to instruct them, “Do nothing apart from the bishop!”²¹ Of particular note here is that Ignatius, who occasionally quotes from the Septuagint²² and has demonstrable knowledge of a corpus of Pauline letters, nevertheless witnesses a form of argumentation wholly removed from exegetical concerns.²³ Paul’s own letter to the Romans stands

¹⁷ An overview of the textual tradition is available in Given, “How Coherent Is the Ignatian Middle Recension: The View from the Coptic Versions of the Letters of Ignatius.”

¹⁸ Ignatius, *Trallians* 3.1.

¹⁹ For Irenaeus, some bishops are chosen completely *de novo*, by God and without any human intermediary, as was the case for the bishop of Philadelphia. Ignatius, *Philadelphians* 1.1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.1. ²¹ *Ibid.*, 7.2.

²² Three quotations are clear in the corpus: *Ephesians* 5:3 quotes *Proverbs* 3:34, *Magnesians* 12 quotes *Proverbs* 18:17, and *Trallians* 8.2 quotes *Isaiah* 52:5.

²³ William R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch*, 9. There is a long history of argumentation over whether Ignatius is dependent on written or oral sources for even the scant Jesus traditions that he knows. I am persuaded by Köster that the “Matthean” material in, for instance, *Smyrneans* 1.1, is more likely evidence that Ignatius knows “Matthean” oral traditions than that he has a copy of the Gospel according to Matthew as known today. Köster, “Synoptische

transparently in the background of Ignatius's as a stylistic exemplar, and while he shows some interest in prophetic writings in so far as their messages "anticipated the good news,"²⁴ he explicitly rejects the notion that "ancient records" such as these hold any authority of their own. Attempting to skewer his opponents, Irenaeus exclaims: "For I have heard some saying, 'If I do not find it in the ancient records (τὰ ἀρχεῖα), I do not believe in the good news.'"²⁵

While the identity and theological method of Ignatius's opponents remains unclear, they were apparently interested in textual interpretation, and in investigation of "the ancient records." When Ignatius offers the standard citational formula that he uses elsewhere in the corpus to introduce Septuagintal texts ("as it is written," ὅτι γέγραπται), his opponents respond cryptically with "that is the question at hand (ὅτι πρόκειται)." Ignatius continues "But for me, Jesus Christ is the ancient records. (Ἐμοὶ δὲ ἀρχεῖά ἐστιν Ἰησοῦς Χριστός) The inviolable ancient records are his cross and death, and his resurrection, and the trust that comes through him."²⁶ Here Ignatius states explicitly what remained implicit in his other letters: while scriptures may be interesting and valuable in so far as they foreshadow Christ, they are not interesting in and of themselves, and they cannot be mined for reliable, or even relevant, theological truth. For Ignatius a theological argument can be true only when offered by an inspired interpreter, and proof of inspiration is found atop an institutional structure. The only "archives" that are relevant are nontextual, and access to them is available at the foot of a duly chosen bishop. I turn now to Justin Martyr, whose interest in authoritative text was provisional, at best.

Überlieferung bei den apostolischen Vätern," 25–28. For an opposing view, see Massaux, *The Influence of the Gospel of Saint Matthew on Christian Literature before Saint Irenaeus*, 85ff., which proposes hundreds of intertexts and reminiscences of the Gospel according to Matthew in Ignatius's letters, the sum total of which are a testament to Massaux's indefatigable attempt to find a textualized Christianity in Irenaeus which, to my mind, is illusory, even if Köster's absolutist position requires moderation. Köster has been credibly accused of sexual assault by a then graduate student. Pagels, *Why Religion? A Personal Story*, 25–26.

²⁴ Ignatius, *Philadelphians* 5.2.

²⁵ ἐὰν μὴ ἐν τοῖς ἀρχείοις εὔρω, ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ οὐ πιστεύω. Ignatius, *Philadelphians* 8.2. As Köster and others have noted repeatedly, it is extremely unlikely that "ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ" refers to a textual source. "Synoptische Überlieferung," 25. This passage is widely discussed. An overview of the scholarship is in Schoedel, "Ignatius and the Archives."

²⁶ Ignatius, *Philadelphians* 8.2.

JUSTIN MARTYR

Justin Martyr's method varied with his audience. He believed in a singular truth, and that sound philosophy would lead a person to god even though they may take a bewildering variety of paths to get there.²⁷ Justin's extant writings are filled with this idea, that the λόγος suffused the world with knowledge of itself, and ultimately of a singular god.²⁸ This epistemic conviction allowed Justin to produce bespoke knowledge: arguments tailored to his audience, and intended to persuade by any means necessary. In contexts where his interlocutor found tradition or text to be valid sources of truth, Justin engaged him on those textual or traditional grounds. But Justin did not believe that truth is so impotent as to require human intervention, and he refused to grant that a tradition or a text could act as anything more than witnesses to a truth that is pre-textual, and unable to be bound by a single mode of discovery or path of attainment. Regarding texts, Justin found interpretation a sometimes-useful method, not an aim in and of itself, and certainly not a guaranteed avenue of enlightenment.

Justin lays out his approach to truth at the beginning of his two most famous works: the *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* and the *First Apology*. Two main threads are visible in his prefaces. First, the terminus of true philosophy is knowledge of the deity, though paths to that knowledge vary. Second, Justin holds a negotiated view of traditional authorities, whether traditions of the Jewish prophets or traditions of Platonic philosophy. Such texts point to an original genius and may well inspire awe in their readers, but truth itself is not bound within them.

The most significant meditation on method in Justin Martyr's body of work comes in the opening chapters of his *Dialogue*. He claims to be a philosopher, and that "the work of philosophers is to scrutinize things relating to the deity."²⁹ Justin recounts learning this method from an old man while he was still on his philosophical journey to Christian

²⁷ Justin's recounts his own journey in *Dialogue with Trypho* 2–7.

²⁸ This notion is even more prominently displayed in the works of Justin's later interpreters like Clement and Origen. Justin's concept of the λόγος σπερματικός has become a traditional category of analysis. I will not rehearse here what is already covered well by Holte, "Logos Spermatikos, Christianity and Ancient Philosophy According to St. Justin's Apologies"; Edwards, "Justin's Logos and the Word of God"; and Löhr, "The Theft of the Greeks: Christian Self Definition in the Age of the Schools."

²⁹ This is phrased as a question in the text. *Dialogue* 1.3. Translations made with reference to Thomas B. Falls and NPNF. Text Edgar Johnson Goodspeed.

Platonism. “I don’t care . . . if Plato or Pythagoras or anyone else had such teachings. What I have is the truth; here is how you may learn it (τὸ γὰρ ἀληθὲς οὕτως ἔχει· μάθοις δ’ ἂν ἐντεῦθεν).”³⁰ Justin learned from this old man that there are ancient writings of Jewish prophets which have the same sort of status as the writings of Plato: they are original works of truth telling. “In their writings they make no dispositive arguments (οὐ γὰρ μετὰ ἀποδείξεως πεποίηται) at the time of their statements, for, as reliable witnesses to the truth (ὄντες ἀξιόπιστοι μάρτυρες τῆς ἀληθείας), they are superior to argumentation (ἄτε ἀνωτέρω πάσης ἀποδείξεως).”³¹ The old man argues that these texts should be believed because they accurately foretold the future (7.2), and because of the miracles that the prophets were able to perform (7.3). He asserts that these texts are divinely inspired, but even so, for him and Justin both, textual interpretation is not a reliable scholastic tool; even divinely inspired text does not necessarily succumb to interpretation, and thereby offer up reliable insights on the deity. Texts like the records of the Hebrew prophets or the writings of Plato are relevant to Justin not because the arguments of either are wholly dispositive nor because the texts contain the truth in its entirety. Scripture is relevant because it speaks to a singular truth – the same truth that can be found in the writings and doctrines of Plato. Both traditions act as a gateway to Justin’s new life as a philosopher.

Justin’s *Dialogue* is replete with quotations from the Septuagint, as he argues with a Jewish interlocutor over the possibility of truth, the error of philosophical schools, the relationship of gentiles to Mosaic law and later biblical prophecy, and a variety of other topics covered in the course of 142 chapters. Justin’s interaction with “Christian scripture” has obscured, however, his negotiated relationship with biblical material as a source of truth. The very fact of Justin’s engagement with scripture has been confused with his reliance on scripture as an ultimate source of truth, and interpretation as the singular relevant scholastic method. Irenaeus and the author of the *Gospel According to Luke*, for instance, certainly thought that as a method, proper exegesis of authoritative texts could lead to reliable truth. This concept is nowhere to be found in the Justin Martyr’s extant writings. Justin *used* biblical material, but that fact should not lead us to presume that he held a similar understanding of biblical material as his predecessors or contemporaries. Justin’s use of scriptural texts in the *Dialogue* is, by his own admission, only one method

³⁰ *Dialogue* 6.1. ³¹ *Dialogue* 7.2. The last two clauses are inverted in the Greek.

of argumentation among many. He takes a very different tack in the *First Apology*, which I discuss later. Justin's seemingly shifting methodology between the *Dialogue* and the two apologies has led many to suggest that Justin Martyr was two people, or at least that he evidences a fundamental epistemic change between his *Dialogue* and the rest of his extant works.³² This intuition will not stand; Justin is only inconsistent if readers fail to take seriously his own discussions of epistemic methodology that accompany each of his works.

In the *Dialogue*, Justin engages overwhelmingly with extracts from prophetic texts, claiming explicitly that the "law of Moses" is incumbent only upon Jews – both conceptually and textually – and that the Christ event rendered it wholly obsolete (11.1–2). Rather, Justin's method mirrors that of his interlocutor, an imaginary Jew.³³ When making arguments, prophetic texts are superior to the narrative or legal parts of the Hebrew Bible because they witness to truth and they offer a firm starting point for anyone wishing to live a philosophical life: a life that leads to happiness.

"So, should any one consult a teacher?" I said, "Or where can anyone find help, if even they [the philosophers] don't have truth?" "A long time ago," [the old man] replied, "long before the time of those so-called philosophers there lived blessed men who were just and loved by God, men who spoke through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and predicted events that would take place in the future, which events are now taking place. We call these men the prophets. They alone knew the truth and communicated it to men, whom they neither deferred to nor feared. With no desire for personal glory, they reiterated only what they heard and saw when inspired by a holy spirit. Their writings are still extant, and whoever reads them with the proper faith will profit greatly in his knowledge of the origin and end of things, and of any other matter that a philosopher should know."³⁴

³² See the discussion in Edwards, "Justin's Logos," 261–267.

³³ From this type of engagement it is clear that Trypho in this text does not represent a historical person, certainly not a Jew, but rather that he acts as a literary device. The *Dialogue with Trypho* cannot have been particularly compelling to Jews, but then again it is not clear that Jews are the intended audience. There are a couple of clever arguments, for instance, that circumcision cannot be "justifying" because it is not offered to women, who can be "justified" as well (23.5). The fact that he is using a Pauline definition of "justification" that would be foreign to a second-century Jewish interpreter suggests, again, that his aim is not to convert Jews, but that this use of scripture on his part is meant primarily for internal, Christian consumption. Andrew S. Jacobs explores Justin's notion of the relationship between Christians and Jews, and the paradoxical position of Jesus between the two in *Christ Circumcised: A Study in Early Christian History and Difference*, 44–50.

³⁴ *Dialogue* 7.1–2. It is often noted that Justin appears to be working from a *testimonium* of prophetic passages. In fact, the *Dialogue* itself reads as an annotated *testimonium*, aimed

To Justin, the prophets spoke truth, but they were not its fountainhead or its sole source. They are older than the Greek philosophers, but they and Plato spoke of the same singular truth. The prophets are credible “because of the miracles which they performed,” and because their writings inspire awe and spoke to the singular truth long before the advent of the Greek philosophical tradition (7.3). Under inspiration of the Holy Spirit prophets grasped the truth themselves, and point to it in their writings. The only way for Justin, or anyone else, to reach the *telos* of philosophy is through a similar gift of inspiration from the deity. “No one can perceive or understand these truths unless he has been allowed to understand by God and his Christ” (7.3). As Ellen Muehlberger argues, “In the *Dialogue*, Justin did not persuade his character Trypho to read different texts, but to read the same texts differently.”³⁵ Justin speaks in the *First Apology* of the “enlightenment (φωτισμός)” which comes to a person as a by-product of baptism,³⁶ and he invokes this framework again in the *Dialogue*, asserting that the unbaptized person reads scriptures in vain, able to grasp the words but not their spirit (29.2).

Justin finds great power and solace in the “sayings of the savior,”³⁷ just as he does in the words of the prophets. There is power in Jesus’s words, which have an uncanny capacity to transform lives. He wishes that others would follow his lead, and “never fall away from the sayings of the savior (μη ἀφίστασθαι τῶν τοῦ σωτῆρος λόγων). For they have in themselves something awesome (δέος γάρ τι ἔχουσιν ἐν ἑαυτοῖς), and they can instill fear into those who have wandered from the correct path” (8.2). But for Justin, “the sayings of the savior” are not textual – he does not refer to books.³⁸ In other instances where he speaks explicitly of textualized Jesus material, he doesn’t use the term “λόγοι,” but rather

not at possible Jewish converts but rather at followers of Jesus who engage with Jews. For the relationship between happiness and philosophy see *Dialogue* 3.

³⁵ Muehlberger, *Angels in Late Ancient Christianity*, 59. While I agree with Muehlberger that Justin’s appeal to Trypho is fundamentally hermeneutic, I have argued here that Justin does not exhibit a single “style of reading” throughout the corpus.

³⁶ See especially Justin, *First Apology* 61.12 and 65.1. Text Denis Minns and Paul M. Parvis.

³⁷ Justin explicitly says that the teachings of his savior (τὰ ὑπ’ ἐκείνου τοῦ σωτῆρος ἡμῶν διδασκόμενα) are to be understood alongside those of the prophets – as a witness, and not as truth in themselves (18.1). In chapter 20, he rejects the type of authoritative proof-texting offered by Trypho for Jewish abstinence from certain foods. Such foods should be avoided not due to the authority of the text that prohibits them, but because they “are bitter, or poisonous, or thorny” (20.3).

³⁸ Larsen and Letteney, “Christians and the Codex,” 404–405.

“ἀπομνημονεύματα” – “memoirs” called “gospels.”³⁹ Even if Justin did have textualized Jesus material in mind here (“gospel/s”), neither his argumentation in the *Dialogue* nor his sustained reflections on philosophical method find ultimate authority in scripture or epistemic value in thoroughgoing exegetical engagement. Justin has no concept of a written, authoritative gospel, whether scriptural or otherwise. Scriptures are useful because of what they point to, and because they can transform the lives of those who come into contact with them. But these textual sources are to be trusted solely because they have proven to be a reliable historical record.

This approach to textual authority leaves Justin open to the charge of incomplete engagement with the text – with “cherry-picking” those passages of the Septuagint that appear to foretell things that had come to pass.⁴⁰ In chapter 27 of the *Dialogue* he responds just such an accusation by Trypho: “Why do you quote only those passages from the prophets which prove your point, and omit those quotations which clearly order the observance of the Sabbath?” (27.1). Justin’s response demonstrates further his ambiguous relationship with textual interpretation as a reliable method. His claim is that parts of the biblical prophetic texts, as well as the Mosaic law as recorded, have been abrogated (27.2). In other words, scripture is not a repository for preceptual knowledge and textual interpretation is not a sufficient or even necessary epistemic operation. Truth, for Justin, is pre-textual. Even the bible teems with error and outdated dogma.

This leads to a more fundamental concern that animates Justin’s approach to the search for truth: he is skeptical of tradition. The opening of his *Dialogue* (2.1) explains that philosophy has become so “fractured (πολύκρανός – lit. many headed)” because of the failures of traditional authority. Justin does not distrust processes of handing down knowledge from previous authorities because of failures of the knowledge handed down; it is not that Plato’s students did not know what he taught or that Plato’s teachings were not valid. Rather, Justin claims that any philosophy based solely on tradition is destined to fail. In time, the earnest learning of “holy men” necessarily becomes reified as dogma and handed down from teacher to student in the name of the source rather than in service of the truth:

³⁹ 1 *Apology* 66.3.

⁴⁰ See, for instance, *Dialogue* 52–53, where Justin reads *Genesis* 49.8–12 to indicate a future suffering messiah who will ride into Jerusalem on an ass.

I want to explain why it has grown so fractured. They who first embraced it [philosophy] (and, as a result, were deemed “illustrious”) were succeeded by people who gave no time to the investigation of truth. Rather, being amazed at the endurance and self-control of them [their teachers], as well as with the novelty of their teachings, believed to be the truth what each had learned from their own teacher. They transmitted to their successors such opinions in turn, and others like them, and so they became known by the name of him who was considered the father of the teaching (ὅπερ ἐκαλεῖτο ὁ πατὴρ τοῦ λόγου). (2.2)

Philosophy became fractious because philosophical schools embraced their founding philosopher rather than the doctrines that he taught. Justin repeats this attack on the authority of tradition in his *First Apology*, which was addressed to the emperor Antoninus Pius. In fact, the beginning of his address calls on the emperor to forsake “the teachings of the ancients (δόξαι παλαιῶν)” when they are of no value and to follow instead the council of “sound reason (ὁ σώφρων λόγος)” (2.1). Only if the emperor is willing to do this are his subjects correct in counting him among the “pious and philosophers and guardians of justice and lovers of learning” (2.2). At the beginning of his plea to the emperor, Justin reiterates his contention that tradition cannot vouchsafe truth, even when the tradition in question has been passed down without error (2.1). Rather, there is one truth that can be accessed through many different means: sometimes by searching the scriptures to find what they point to, sometimes through the guidance of “sound reason,” and sometimes through the tradition of philosophical investigation. For Justin, the audience and their preexisting methodological commitments determine the relevant path.

To suggest that Justin’s approach to the authority of scriptural traditions is anything like an exegetical concern is a failure to read his own rationale for proceeding in the way that he does in these two different contexts. Even when debating an imaginary Jew, Justin’s locus of truth is not scripture. Biblical material proves the antiquity of his claims but not their veracity. Similarly, in the *First Apology* he uses Septuagint and New Testament material to prove sociological points about how Christians act, not theological points about what they should believe.⁴¹ This structure of knowledge, in which a teacher is a fountainhead of true knowledge but not its guarantor, is confirmed both by Justin’s citations of scriptural texts and his citation of philosophical predecessors. Justin discusses the capacity of philosophers to gain knowledge of the deity in chapter 3 of the

⁴¹ See especially *First Apology* 6–12.

Dialogue. He cites Plato to constrain even his *own* ability to teach truth, or to bring the mind of a student to perceive god.

“Then, how,” [the old man] reasoned, “can the philosophers speculate correctly or speak truly of God, when they have no knowledge of him – having neither seen or heard?” “But father,” I rejoined, “the deity cannot be seen by the same eyes as other living beings are. He is to be perceived by the mind alone, as Plato affirms, and I agree with him.” (3.7)

Justin is committed to the idea that truth is singular even though a wide range of sources witness to it. The commitment allows him to practice a sensitivity to the methodological commitments of his interlocutors and to tailor arguments to their approach. When speaking to a Jew he says: “Since I base my arguments and suggestions on the writings and on examples (ἀπό τε τῶν γραφῶν καὶ τῶν πραγμάτων) you should not hesitate to believe me, despite the fact that I am uncircumcised” (28.2). Justin “bases his suggestions on the writings and on examples” because, by his own admission, he knows that scriptural proofs are useful in the context of debate with Jews. But scriptural interpretation is not a bedrock principle; it is a method. By contrast, biblical material is hardly ever cited in the *First Apology*. When Justin does cite biblical or New Testament texts, he uses them not to prove a theological point but almost always to prove a sociological one: he first mentions what Christians do and the rationale for it and then brings a citation, usually from the sayings of Jesus, to show that Christian tradition prescribes their actions. These are “citations” in a very different sense from what we see in the *Dialogue with Trypho* – Justin uses texts simply to show that there is an external source for the teaching which he claims is common among Christians; his citation of New Testament texts does not suppose that the teaching is authoritative.

Justin’s method is context specific: he switches codes depending on his audience. Sometimes texts constitute an authoritative witness to truth while sometimes they are, at best, a sort of secondary documentation that back up claims that Justin makes on philosophical grounds or on the basis of his own personal authority. I argue that this is the fatal flaw in analyses that focus on Justin first and foremost as an interpreter of scripture.⁴² Neither his own statements about method, nor an analysis

⁴² See Wendel, *Scriptural Interpretation and Community Self-definition in Luke-Acts and the Writings of Justin Martyr*, 87–89, 97–102; as well as Bobichon, *Justin Martyr: Dialogue avec Tryphon, Edition Critique, Traduction, Commentaire*, 1:126–127.

of his work, reveals him to be interested in scriptural interpretation as anything other than a proximate method.

IRENAEUS

Irenaeus wrote in Greek during the last two decades of the second century, and he was the first major Christian polemicist to receive widespread and enduring acclaim.⁴³ His intellectual project is centrally focused on fabricating a new Christian epistemology able to withstand the arguments of his “gnostic” opponents: Christians who claim to have found truth, but whose *gnōsis* is “falsely so-called.” According to Eric Osborn, “Irenaeus follows Justin but with wider vision, for he is the first writer to have a Christian bible before him.”⁴⁴ He thus serves as a fitting place to continue my investigation of the varied scholastic methods that early Christian scholars employed. While Justin and Ignatius found the central node of authority not in scriptural texts but in institutional structures and in philosophical reasoning (respectively), Irenaeus is the first significant proto-Orthodox voice to consider exegesis to be at least notionally dispositive as a method. At its core, Irenaeus’s opposition to heresy was a project of methodological construction. I argue that he was able to “overthrow” heretical doctrines only by articulating for the first time a structure of knowledge, and a process for knowledge creation, that was immune to the subversions of his “gnostic” opponents.

Josef Hoh argued that there is a central aesthetic quality to Irenaeus’s citational practices that is best described with the rule “it is fitting, it is possible, therefore it is.”⁴⁵ In this sense, Irenaeus’s method is not

⁴³ His major treatise, *Against the Heresies*, was composed in Greek but survives intact only in a Theodosian Age Latin translation witnessed in three medieval manuscripts, along with extensive Greek quotations in Eusebius’s *Ecclesiastical History* and Epiphanius’s *Medicine Chest against Heresies* (“*Panarion*”). Its early circulation is confirmed by two papyri (P. Oxy 3.405 [TM 61317]: an early third-century Greek roll fragment containing a quotation from 3.9, and a roll fragment at Universität Jena [TM 61318] from the third/fourth century) as well as the work’s extensive use by Clement in Alexandria, Hippolytus in Rome, and Tertullian in Carthage. Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* 4.18.8) mentions a number of other works, all of which are now lost except for Irenaeus’s *The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, which survives in a sixth century Armenian version.

⁴⁴ Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, xi.

⁴⁵ “Decet – fieri potest – ergo est.” This “Schlußformel” was devised initially by Hoh, *Die Lehre des Hl. Irenäus über das Neue Testament*, 112, and is repeated in Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 18.

fundamentally dissimilar from that of Marcion, who apparently believed that the plan of salvation can be discerned from the structure of salvation; both men agree that when approaching textual sources the central aim is to understand god's intention based on god's actions in the world.⁴⁶ For Irenaeus, there was a singular universal plan for salvation that was simultaneously indicated in scripture and passed down from Jesus to the apostles, and ultimately to their followers. In this way, Irenaeus's hermeneutic allows for no variation, no expansion or evolution, and certainly no contradiction. In fact, as will become clear, Irenaeus claims that allowing the *possibility* of contradiction among sources is the animating methodological error among gnostic Christians.

Irenaeus's *Against the Heresies* claims a dual intention: it is both an "uncovering" (*detectio/ἔλεγχος*) and an "overthrowing" (*eversio/ἀνατροπή*) of heretical doctrines.⁴⁷ Surprisingly, in book one Irenaeus hardly relies on textual interpretation at all. This circumstance is curious because elsewhere, Irenaeus leans heavily on scripture as a central locus of authority. In this case, the relative dearth of citations appears to be the result of the opponent that Irenaeus thinks he is arguing against in book one: "gnostics." His aim in book one is to "uncover" rather than to "overthrow." Irenaeus saw scripture as a repository from which one could read doctrine, but his opponents found only glimmers of truth in text; doctrine was part of the story but did not encapsulate its entirety. (Rather like Justin's method, it turns out.) In so far as the aim of book one is an "uncovering" of heretical doctrines and a destruction of "evil interpreters," Irenaeus apparently thought that scripture was not a particularly potent ally.⁴⁸ Beginning in book two, however, and especially in book three, Irenaeus changes tack, using two distinct but intertwined categories as tools to "overthrow" gnostic doctrines: scripture and tradition. Irenaeus defines scriptural texts as "that which was once oral and was handed down by the apostles," and thus according to his method,

⁴⁶ For Irenaeus, Osborn gathers this notion under the concept of "Economy." Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 21.

⁴⁷ *Against Heresies* 2.pr.2. The Greek title of the work appears to have been Ἐλεγχος καὶ ἀνατροπή τῆς ψευδωνύμου γνώσεως. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.7.1. See Löhr, "The Orthodox Transmission of Heresy," 161–163. Text of *Against Heresies* throughout is taken from SC vols. 100, 152, 153, 210, 211, 263, 264, 293, 294. Translations are adapted from Dominic J. Unger.

⁴⁸ Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.pref.1.

scripture and tradition are opposite sides of the same coin.⁴⁹ “We received the knowledge of the plan of our salvation through no others than those through whom the gospel (*euangelium*) was handed down to us. This gospel they first preached orally, but later, by god’s will, they handed it down to us in the writings (*in scripturis nobis tradiderunt*⁵⁰) so that it would be the foundation and pillar of our faith.”⁵¹ Scripture is relevant only because it is guaranteed by, and guarantees, a certain apostolic succession; Irenaeus places tradition and text together in order to find truth at their intersection. This is possible, he claims, because the scriptures are in harmony with the teaching of the apostles and because each of the apostles unequivocally taught the same thing:

And so, all who wish to see the truth can view in the whole Church the things handed down by the apostles (*traditionem apostolorum*), which have been disclosed in the whole world. We are also able to enumerate the bishops who were established in the churches by the apostles and their successions even down to ourselves . . . Since, however, in a work of this kind it would be too long to list the successions of all the churches, we will address here the tradition of the greatest and most ancient church, known to all, founded and built up at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul: the tradition received from the apostles, as well as the faith proclaimed to people, which has come down even to us through the succession of bishops . . . On account of her greater authority it is necessary that every church (that is, the faithful who are everywhere) should agree with this church, because in her the apostolic tradition has always been safeguarded by those who are everywhere. (3.1.1–2)

Biblical material is an ally for Irenaeus in “overthrowing” his heretical opponents because it is consistent. This is the central tenet of Irenaeus’s hermeneutical approach: the apostles taught one message among themselves, and that message is repeated as a single, coherent message in scriptures as well. His opponents, for their part, apparently did not assent to the premise. Irenaeus commands that:

⁴⁹ See also *Against Heresies* 1.8.1, where Irenaeus offers a critique of his opponents on these grounds.

⁵⁰ This is typically translated “handed down in the scriptures.” Irenaeus’s original, needless to say, did not read *in scripturis nobis tradiderunt* – this phrasing comes from the Theodosian Age translation of the Greek original, and throughout the translation uses language that was significantly more technical and theologically laden in the late fourth century than it was in the late second, at this text’s time of composition. Rousseau and Doutreleau’s Greek translation in *SC 211* is almost certainly the correct rendering of the original: ἐν γραφαῖς παρέδωκαν ἡμῖν. When reading (and especially when translating) Irenaeus’s text, it is of paramount importance to remember the subtle distortions of language brought about by Orthodox Latin translators of the Theodosian Age.

⁵¹ *Against Heresies* 3.1.1.

We are not permitted to say that they preached before they had received “perfect knowledge,” as some dare to state, boasting that they are the correctors of the apostles. For, after our Lord had risen from the dead and they were clothed with power from on high when the holy spirit came upon them, they had full assurance concerning all things and had perfect knowledge. Only then did they go forth to the ends of the earth, bringing us the good news about the blessings that were sent from God to us and announcing heavenly peace to men, inasmuch as they collectively, and each of them individually, equally possessed the gospel of god. (3.1.1)

Through this hermeneutic Irenaeus was able to build a scholastic method capable of “overthrowing” what he considers to be perverted uses of scripture. Scripture speaks from the position of the apostles, and the apostles’ teaching did not vary according to their audience.⁵²

So far as surviving material attests, Irenaeus was the first Christian scholar to suggest that Jesus’s message was fully intact only in four distinct “pillars” called gospels, the first to suggest a name, date, and place for “publication” of the gospels,⁵³ the first to offer a thoroughgoing analysis of biblical material based on the premise of scriptural coherence, and the first to connect definitively the interpretation of scripture with the patrimony of apostolic teaching as a check on reading and the production of valid knowledge. According to Hansjürgen Verweyen, *this* is the true, lasting impact of Irenaeus’s intellectual project.⁵⁴ He is certainly correct: Irenaeus’s hermeneutical methodology came to define the boundaries of Orthodox reading and the production of Orthodox truth in a way that no previous method had. But Irenaeus’s method did not appear *de novo*. It was articulated in the context of an opposing position, and arose as an antidote to a “gnostic” threat. As Elaine Pagels demonstrates, Irenaeus was not concerned simply to root out heretical doctrines. Rather, “what Irenaeus identified as ‘heresy’ among Valentinian Christians was *hermeneutical teaching communicated in ritual* – and specifically any form of initiation that could constitute distinct groups within Christian congregations.”⁵⁵ Irenaeus defined a method for the proper production of knowledge in response to, and as a foil for, opposing (“gnostic”)

⁵² It is worth noting that as a descriptive matter, Irenaeus is wrong. In chapter 2 of his *First Letter to the Corinthians*, Paul explicitly claims to preach different messages to people based on their own spiritual maturity.

⁵³ Larsen, “Correcting the Gospel: Putting the Titles of the Gospels in Historical Context,” 89–94.

⁵⁴ Verweyen, “Frühchristliche Theologie in der Herausforderung durch die antike Welt,” 396.

⁵⁵ Pagels, “Irenaeus, the ‘Canon of Truth,’ and the ‘Gospel of John’: ‘Making a Difference’ through Hermeneutics and Ritual,” 349.

approaches to truth production. His opponents claimed that the apostolic teaching which appears in written texts stems from the period before the apostles had received “perfect knowledge.”⁵⁶ For Irenaeus’s (perhaps real, and perhaps imagined) opponents, proper theological method required a knowledge not only of the scripture but also of the keys to unlock scripture’s true meaning, which were passed down orally.⁵⁷ Irenaeus agrees with his opponents in part: both hold that scripture is insufficient without tradition. He adds, however, that it is *impossible* for scripture and tradition to diverge; they work together, with one as a check on the other:⁵⁸

Since there are, then, such great proofs, it does not behove to seek further among others for the truth, which can be obtained easily from the Church; for the apostles most abundantly placed in it, as in a rich receptacle, everything that belongs to the truth (*omnia quae sint veritatis*) so that everyone who desires can take from it the drink of life. For it is the entrance to life: all others are thieves and robbers. For this reason we ought to avoid them. On the other hand, we ought to love with the greatest diligence whatever pertains to the Church, and to lay hold of the tradition of the truth (*veritatis traditionem*). (3.4.1)

Methodological error precedes and animates heresy, for Irenaeus. Fortunately, errors of this type are not particularly hard to uncover – a believer can identify it through the preceptual truths that it produces by comparing the results of faulty exegesis with the “rule of truth” that they received at baptism. In book one of *Against Heresies* he takes aim at Valentinian exegetes who behave like Homerocentones: splicing and dicing bits of text to make them say whatever the reader has already decided them to mean:

However, if [an interpreter] takes them and puts each one back into its own book, he will make their fabricated system disappear. Thus, whoever keeps within himself – without wavering – the rule of truth that he received through baptism (ὁ τὸν κανόνα τῆς ἀληθείας . . . ὄν διὰ τοῦ βαπτίσματος εἴληφεν), recognizes the names and sayings and parables from the scriptures, but he won’t recognize this blasphemous system of theirs.⁵⁹

For Irenaeus, theological speculation is perfectly acceptable, as is some degree of disagreement within the orthodox community.⁶⁰ There are,

⁵⁶ *Against Heresies* 3.1.1, cited earlier. ⁵⁷ *Against Heresies* 3.2.1.

⁵⁸ See especially *Against Heresies* 3.3–4.

⁵⁹ *Against Heresies* 1.9.4. The Greek is extant due to Epiphanius’s quotation of Eusebius in the *Panarion*.

⁶⁰ Pagels, “Irenaeus, the ‘Canon of Truth,’ and the ‘Gospel of John,’” 347–348.

however, a set of precepts and scholarly methods that are nonnegotiable. The most important of these is the notion that scripture and tradition cannot diverge and that scripture is incapable of contradicting itself.

Irenaeus's scholastic methodology became the dominant approach to theology among subsequent proto-Orthodox thinkers. In fact, the very definition that contemporary scholars use to delineate the "proto-Orthodox" tradition is indebted to this scholarly system: those who held to Irenaeus's methodology carry on the "proto-Orthodox" patrimony.⁶¹ It is immaterial whether this particular approach to scripture and tradition preceded Irenaeus's engagement with gnostic heretics; subsequent theologians encountered and appropriated Irenaeus's method through his here-seological account, not through his direct teaching. The theological method that defined boundaries of Orthodoxy in antiquity was founded on, and perpetually reinscribes, the idea that heresy *can* be substantive, but that it fundamentally proceeds from methodological error.

Irenaeus's intellectual project was as much epistemic as it was preceptual, and certainly his effect on later Christian theological scholarship was overwhelmingly epistemic. The outsized importance of Irenaeus's methodological contribution to the patrimony of fourth-century Orthodoxy is underscored by the fact that, from book three, only these statements on proper theological method, as well as records of the tradition's "chain of custody," were quoted and thus remain extant in Greek. Irenaeus's specific arguments against "heresies" faded into the domain of historical knowledge as the specific groups at whom they were aimed were no longer considered a threat. But his method of producing knowledge lived on remarkably intact in the work of subsequent Christian theological thinkers at least through the fourth century, when "apostolic tradition" was refigured around credal statements rather than networks of intellectual patrimony.

Irenaeus focused his critical aim and intellectual energies on refuting opponents who approach scripture illegitimately. These people, "having been refuted by the scriptures, turn around and accuse the same scriptures as if they were neither correct nor authoritative, and assert that they are inconsistent (*varie*) and that those who do not know the tradition are not able to find truth in them" (3.2.1). Irenaeus's heretics assert that the truth "was not handed down through written texts (*litteras*) ... but through the living voice."⁶² When he wrote this, perhaps Irenaeus had

⁶¹ Tertullian is the one exception to this; I discuss his case next.

⁶² *Non enim per litteras traditam ... sed per vivam vocem. Against Heresies* 3.2.1.

the long-departed Valentinus in mind, or was taking aim at members of the Valentinian “school.” But one opposing voice who believed that “those who do not know the tradition are not able to find truth” in the scriptures was assimilated into the same canon of proto-Orthodox thinkers as Irenaeus – the voice was Tertullian’s. I turn now to Irenaeus’s younger contemporary, who espoused a fundamentally opposite methodology. It was his preceptual commitments, rather than his scholastic method, that earned Tertullian space under the umbrella of “proto-Orthodoxy,” in antiquity as well as today.

TERTULLIAN

All of Tertullian’s extant writing is occasional and polemical; extended discourses on method are few and far between. The first Christian literary figure of the Latin West spent the majority of his writing career battling down heresies rather than constructing a systematic theological program.⁶³ The question of the relationship between scripture, tradition, and heresy, however, gave Tertullian occasion to articulate a theological method on positive terms. His position is found most clearly in *Concerning Exemptions against Heretics* (*De praescriptionibus adversus haereticos*). For Tertullian, heresy is the name that one gives to an epistemic failure, not a preceptual position. He argues that texts are at least notionally capable of expressing truth, but that the text of scripture is underdetermined and authoritative exposition of scripture requires a pre-textual knowledge of truth to which scripture is, at best, a faulty witness. Heretics are precisely those who look to scripture, or anywhere else, in order to discover truths beyond the “rule of faith (*regula fidei*)” received through the apostolic tradition; the act of theological speculation itself is heresy, not the form of the questions or the content of the answers. Tertullian argues, therefore, that heretics should not be engaged on the basis of scripture. They are the recipients of a *praescriptio*, an exemption.

Around the time of Tertullian’s birth the jurist Gaius defined the legal term *praescriptio* as a clause or document that precedes a legal formulary. It constrains the authority of the judge and the validity of the proceedings

⁶³ The extent to which Tertullian speaks for any wider “Christian community” beyond his own “world of literary and antiquarian fascination” (3) has been called into question recently by Daniel-Hughes and Kotrosits, “Tertullian of Carthage and the Fantasy Life of Power: On Martyrs, Christians, and Other Attachments to Juridical Scenes,” 22.

to a particular aspect of a case, for instance the validity of a contract.⁶⁴ Whatever Tertullian means by *praescriptio*, it is not precisely the legal use of the term from Roman formulary procedure.⁶⁵ Rather, Tertullian's own use of the term should be understood as a *praescriptio*, a discussion before one gets to interpretative questions regarding scripture with heretics. The point of the argument is nicely summed up in its appellation: truth itself is *prae-scriptio* – it is to be grasped before one accedes to, or even approaches, text. In a very real sense, truth is “pre-scriptural.” It cannot be found in books, and thus there is no use in debating interpretive method with heretics who do not come to scripture having already assented to a set of preceptual commitments. Tertullian does not offer such an absolutist position as we will see in the *Gospel of Truth*, which denies the capacity of text to contain or express truth in any useful sense. For Tertullian, the text of scripture serves as an exemplar of behavior but it is not a depository of truth. Scriptural texts *could* clearly state answers to metaphysical and Christological questions answered (wrongly) by heretics, but they do not. Tertullian is the earliest extant writer to espouse this position regarding the relationship between textuality and truth. By the advent of the Theodosian Age this position was dominant and coterminous with Orthodoxy – at least with the Orthodoxy of which Athanasius is an exemplar.

Tertullian's conception of heresy is, at base, etymological: it is a “choice,” derived as it is from the Greek word αἵρεσις.⁶⁶ The existence of heresies was foretold⁶⁷ both by “the sayings of the Lord and . . . the

⁶⁴ Gaius, *Institutes* 4.130–137.

⁶⁵ André Sergène shows that Tertullian is at least inconsistent in his use of *praescriptio* and its cognates. Sergène, “Tertullien *De praesc. haer.* XXXVII, 4 et la *longi temporis praescriptio*,” especially pages 607–608. There has long been a debate as to whether this *Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus* of Carthage is the same as the jurist *Tertullianus* who wrote a book *De peculio castrensi*, cited in *CI* 5.70.7.1. The identification is not impossible, but neither is it likely. See Rankin, “Was Tertullian a Jurist?”; Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study*, 22–29; and Martini, “Tertulliano giurista e Tertulliano padre della Chiesa.” As shown by Wolfgang Kunkel, the cognomen *Tertullianus* was not common in the third century, but neither was it uncommon. Epigraphic evidence demonstrates that the cognomen was used throughout the empire, and there were at least two senators in the third century who had the cognomen but were not related to each other, the jurist, or to the theologian. Kunkel, *Herkunft und soziale Stellung der römischen Juristen*, 236–240.

⁶⁶ *Concerning Exemptions against Heretics* 6. Text *PL* 2.9a–74a. Translations adapted from ANF.

⁶⁷ *Concerning Exemptions against Heretics* 1, compare Tertullian, *Against Valentinians* 5.

letters of the apostles” (4), but true Christians are not permitted to make theological choices in any capacity:

To be clear: we are not permitted to cherish any object after our own will, nor to choose anything that another has suggested by his own judgment. We have our authority in Lord’s apostles, and even they did not choose to suggest anything from their own judgment. Rather, they faithfully delivered to the nations the knowledge which they received from Christ (*sed acceptam a Christo disciplinam fideliter nationibus assignaverunt*). Therefore, even if an angel from heaven should preach any other gospel, he would be called accursed by us. (6)

Wherever there is dissension among Christians heresy has arisen, and it has arisen out of vain and ill-considered speculation beyond the bounds of “the rule of faith (*regula fidei*).” Tertullian argues that the “rule of faith” comprises preceptual knowledge and not epistemic method. While his position appears to be quite a bit more absolutist than Paul’s, here Tertullian echoes and extends the apostle’s own admonition to the Galatians that any message which deviates from his own, original teaching – whether from him or even an angel – should be disregarded and the messenger accursed.⁶⁸ In Tertullian’s estimation, the truths that have been revealed are the only truths to which Christians are privy, and they comprise those truths which were spoken by Christ to the apostles and passed from the apostles onward. This knowledge should be considered an end in and of itself, and not a stepping stone for progressive revelation or ever more fine-grained theological analysis. His position is clear: theological speculation itself is heresy:

Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition – we want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after enjoying the gospel! (*nec inquisitione, post evangelium*) With our faith, we desire no further belief. (*Cum credimus, nihil desideramus ultra credere*) For this is our primary faith, that there is nothing which we ought to believe besides! (7)

The most surprising piece of Tertullian’s excursus on methodology in *Concerning Exemptions against Heretics* is his use of scriptural texts to discount the validity of textual interpretation as an epistemically valid maneuver. It is the heretics, Tertullian stresses, who quote Matthew 7:7, which says: “Seek and you shall find.” But this message was preached by Jesus at the *beginning* of his ministry and was aimed at Jews. It does not apply to gentiles, who are Tertullian’s audience, and constitutes only an

⁶⁸ Paul, *Galatians* 1:8.

“example (*exemplum*)” (8). The *apostles* were told to seek and find. Tertullian argues that they sought, they found, and importantly, there is no longer a need for anyone to continue the process of seeking. Truth has already appeared in the world, it is the “rule of faith” that can be laid out in the space of 116 words, the final sentence of which reads: “This rule was instituted by Christ. It raises no questions among us other than those than those which heresies introduce and which make people into heretics.”⁶⁹ Textual interpretation, as an epistemic method, was relevant only *before* the advent of truth, brought by Jesus. In the wake of the Christ event searching the scriptures for truth became nonsensical because the texts are not a depository for the preceptual truths to which all Christians must properly accede. Theological seeking beyond the revealed rule of faith is like trying to fit letters into the black blocks of a crossword puzzle after the answer key has been published. A clever person might be able to squeeze some characters in here or there, but doing so contravenes the design of the game and serves only to move them further away from the correct solution.

For Tertullian, true faith is preceptual and tightly bound. But this is not to say that it comprises the extent of *possible* preceptual knowledge – knowledge beyond the “rule of faith” is at least notionally possible. The act of seeking anything beyond that which was received in faith, however, is a rejection of that faith. *Seeking* is epistemic heresy, no matter the preceptual outcome. Tertullian is explicit in claiming that Jesus’s admonition to “seek” is categorically disallowed to anyone who would call themselves a Christian (11). Tertullian repeatedly points to scriptural stories as a way of stressing that scripture is not a repository for truth and that the act of searching for answers beyond the “rule of faith” is itself heresy (11). Tertullian’s method, then, is to deny access to the scriptures for anyone who will not come to the scriptures already agreeing to the rule of faith. When heretics “use” the scriptures they mutilate them by way of their very interaction, because any attempt at theological speculation beyond the “rule of faith” is itself heretical, no matter what the outcome.⁷⁰ For Tertullian, there is no such thing as Christian theological speculation.

⁶⁹ *Hanc regulam a Christo institutam nullas apud nos habere quaestiones, nisi quas haereses inferunt, et quae haereticos faciunt.* Irenaeus, *Concerning Exemptions against Heretics* 13–14. *PL* 2.26b.

⁷⁰ Dunn, “Tertullian’s Scriptural Exegesis in *de Praescriptione Haereticorum*,” 147–151.

This is the fundamental distinction between Tertullian's "rule of faith (*regula fidei*)" and Irenaeus's "rule of truth (κανὼν τῆς ἀληθείας)" or "doctrine of faith (πίστωσιν ὑπόθεσις)." Both Irenaeus and Tertullian would assent to the preceptual positions set forth in Tertullian's *regula fidei*. Irenaeus, however, is willing to wrestle with heretics. For instance, he will take on heretics over the resurrection of the body, as he does in *Against Heresies* 5.31, attempting to convince "evil exegetes" that their position is wrong because it is falsifiable within the framework of scripture. Tertullian, on the other hand, will not. Unless someone is willing to assent to the "rule of faith" that already answers the question of whether or not Christians are resurrected in bodily form, then wrestling with them over the interpretation of scripture is not just futile, it renders *both* parties heretics. Paraphrasing an apocryphal saying of Mark Twain, Tertullian might offer, "never argue with a heretic. They will drag you down to their level and beat you with experience."

For Irenaeus, on the other hand, truth is fractal: it can be continually refined, further and further into the minutiae, and even so it remains precisely the same:

Even when they are exceedingly eloquent, no one presiding over the churches will say anything different – "for no one is greater than the teacher."⁷¹ Nor will a poor speaker subtract from the tradition. Because the faith is fundamentally one and the same: neither can the one speaking at length add to it, nor can he, by saying little, subtract from it. The fact that some understand more and some less on the basis of their skill does not occur because they change the doctrine itself.⁷²

For Irenaeus, the true message remains the same even when messengers possess different levels of rhetorical ability and theological skill, and proper theological method allows further cosmic truths to be uncovered. In one sense Tertullian agrees: one *could* speculate more into the nature of the cosmos and the divine, but the act of doing so is contradictory because it is predicated on a rejection of revealed truth. According to Irenaeus, there are scholarly methods which allow practitioners to delve deeper than Tertullian's *regula fidei*. Though these methods can lead to the *appearance* of divergent messages, it is sometimes the case that the appearance is merely the same message presented in greater or lesser detail. Different presentations of doctrine are not the result of a mutable truth but of scholarship: some undertake properly guided theological

⁷¹ This is a reference to the *Gospel according to Matthew* 10:24.

⁷² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 10.3–4.

speculation and arrive at new truths even beyond the bare reading of scripture, and beyond the “doctrine of faith” that they received at baptism:⁷³

[Different expressions of the message] come about, however, by bringing out more fully the things said in parables, and reconciling it to the doctrine of faith. And by detailing the activity and governance of god, which he established for the sake of human kind. And by making clear that god was long-suffering in regard to the angels who transgressed by rebellion, and in regard to the disobedience of men.

All of the verbs that Irenaeus uses are verbs of extrapolation: προσπεργάζομαι, ἐκδιηγέομαι, σαφηνίζω. His list continues, detailing theological propositions that proper epistemic method, rooted in a novel hermeneutic, can successfully adjudicate. The “doctrine of faith” allows one to “search out (ἐξερευνᾶν)” the answer to “why ‘God consigned all things to disobedience, in order that he may have mercy on all (διὰ τί συνέκλεισε πάντα εἰς ἀπειθειαν ὁ Θεός, ἵνα τοὺς πάντας ἐλέησῃ),’” as Paul says in *Romans* 11:32. Some things will remain a mystery, but many answers are available, even as the fundamental truth stays the same.

It was Irenaeus’s notion of epistemic possibility that lived on, and not Tertullian’s. Irenaeus’s method motivated disputants at the Council of Nicaea some 100 years later; everyone in attendance believed that the proper scholastic methods, applied to the right set of texts, could yield an abundance of theological truth beyond that which is stated plainly in scripture. While all disputants would accept the content of Tertullian’s “rule of faith,” neither faction would agree with his method. Put differently: Tertullian would be aghast to see the type of theological speculation engaged by Alexander, Arius, and their partisans in the beginning of the fourth century. He would call the whole lot “heretics” because they were asking questions beyond that which was revealed and looking to scriptural interpretation to adjudicate their preceptual differences.⁷⁴ Truth is not fractal, says Tertullian; a pox on both their houses. They were heretics the moment they stepped foot in the door.

Irenaeus argued that even when the truth is expounded, it is not changed. I turn now to the *Gospel of Truth*, which points to a secret teaching beyond the message preserved in scripture.⁷⁵ It is an oral

⁷³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 10.4.

⁷⁴ Tertullian mistrusted a number of his period’s common hermeneutical methods, as shown by Hanson, “Notes on Tertullian’s Interpretation of Scripture,” 273–275.

⁷⁵ As Elaine Pagels argues in “How the Gospel of Truth Depicts Paul’s Secret Teaching: A Study in Second-Century Reception History,” the “secret teaching” underlying the

teaching passed down from the apostles and constitutes the “true gospel.” Importantly, this gospel is fundamentally a-textual. The *Gospel of Truth* witnesses no exegetical concerns whatsoever, and its author apparently conceived of a Christianity wholly removed from authoritative text.

THE GOSPEL OF TRUTH

The *Gospel of Truth* may seem to be the odd-source-out in my discussion of early Christian theological method. It seems that way because it is. Of the seven traditions of Christian truth-making surveyed in this chapter, the *Gospel of Truth* is the only one for which no author is known or claimed.⁷⁶ If we did know the author, they would certainly not have made the cut for Jerome’s famous catalogue *On Eminent Men*, which is as good an indicator as any of the intellectual lineage claimed by Nicene Christian scholars of the Theodosian Age, even when the examples were negative. The *Gospel of Truth* presents a conceptual counterpoint to Christian scholastic tradition claimed by the likes of Athanasius, Arius, or Constantine. It speaks to an ancient conception of Christianity wholly devoid of exegetical concerns. While the other case studies in this chapter index a variety of approaches to truth and its proper construction by early Christian scholars, each example nevertheless defines its own authority with reference to, and often by direct invocation of, textual sources. But these are only instances of one kind of Christianity: a Christianity predicated on the ability of text to possess authority. They speak to threads visible in the Christian scholastic methodology that “won out,” so to speak, but the imperial court’s eventual embrace of Catholic orthodoxy was not historically necessary, nor is it obvious that a text *could* be imbued with meaning. One can easily imagine a nontextual Christianity spreading in the second and third centuries in the same way that an exegetically minded set of communities did. The *Gospel of Truth* reminds us that the decision to cite scripture is just that – a decision – and it

Gospel of Truth may be, or claim to be, the “secret teaching” that Paul alluded to in *1 Corinthians* 2:1–8.

⁷⁶ W. C. van Unnik is confident in his hypothesis that “[t]he author of the Gospel of Truth was Valentinus himself.” “The ‘Gospel of Truth’ and the New Testament,” 99, emphasis original. But that was 1955. The best that one can say today is that the text *may* come from “Valentinian” Christian circles, a position defended by Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the “Valentinians,”* 146–165; and Thomassen, “Notes pour la délimitation d’un corpus valentinien,” 243–259.

already forecloses a wide variety of approaches to the creation of truth by ancient people equally as Christian as Ignatius, Tertullian, or Justin.

Almost nothing certain is known about the *Gospel of Truth*. It has been described as “a homiletic reflection of the ‘Gospel’ or the message of salvation provided by Jesus Christ,” though if it is a homily, it is of very different sort from any other ancient example of the genre.⁷⁷ We know nothing about a community that might have held this text in regard and nothing certain about the reaction of any ancient reader to its contents. The most that anyone can claim definitively is that this text appears to have been copied at a monastery in the fourth or fifth century, perhaps one that was part of the Pachomian network.⁷⁸ But neither ownership nor composition of a text suggests that the readers or writers considered the *Gospel of Truth* an authority. A. J. Berkovitz and I have written elsewhere of the historiographical fallacy by which texts like the *Gospel of Truth* are supposed, a priori, to index rival Christianities that were subverted by an ascendant Orthodox Church in Late Antiquity.⁷⁹ I will pass over, then, ongoing arguments as to whether this text is a work of “Valentinian” Christians or not, and whether it is the same “Gospel of Truth (*evangelium veritatis*)” mentioned by Irenaeus.⁸⁰ To date, all of the theories adduced on the authorship of this text, its ideological forebears, its social location, and even its title, fail by virtue of circularity and, at best, explain little about the context or content of the *Gospel of Truth* itself.

My chief concern is to explore the text’s epistemic method: how it conceives of human access to truth. The *Gospel of Truth* is centrally concerned with questions of truth – who can access it, what it entails, where it came from, and what its relationship is to other discourses of humans – and yet it cites no text, carries the name of no author, and claims to speak only to those who already know the message which it conveys.⁸¹ In this sense it is not wisdom literature, if wisdom literature is meant to impart wise words to people in need of instruction. It is something quite apart, and although it may reflect some literary relationship with the *Gospel according to John*, for instance, intertexts must be searched out in the gaps: nothing in the *Gospel of Truth* suggests that the text is presented as anything but a self-contained revelation.

⁷⁷ Attridge and MacRae, “The Gospel of Truth,” 67.

⁷⁸ Lundhaug and Jenott, *The Monastic Origins of the Nag Hammadi Codices*.

⁷⁹ Berkovitz and Letteney, “Authority in Contemporary Historiography,” 10–11.

⁸⁰ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.11.9.

⁸¹ Van Unnick, “The ‘Gospel of Truth’ and the New Testament,” 105–107.

The *Gospel of Truth* is called as such by modern scholars because of its incipit, which reads: “The message of the truth [or gospel of truth] (ΠΕΥΑΓΓΕΛΙΟΝ ΝΤΜΗΕ) is joy for those who have received grace from the Father of truth.”⁸² By calling this literary production the *Gospel of Truth* we have already suggested what the referent is of the clause “the *Gospel of Truth* is joy”: it is the text that we are reading.⁸³ But what follows explicitly, repeatedly disavows that truth could be found in a text, or that truth is even discoverable by anyone other than those who have been chosen to receive such knowledge. A better name for this text might be *About the True Message*; while this text points to “the true message,” it is not “the true message” – at least it doesn’t claim to be.⁸⁴

The Gospel of Truth/*About the True Message* begins with a prologue followed by a story: a return to the beginning, before creation. The story goes like this: “the Totality went out searching for the one from whom they had come forth” (17.5–6), and succumbing to fear because it could not find the Father, the Totality gave rise to Error, which became powerful because it did not know the truth. With this new-found power, Error, “set about with a creation” (that is, the world as known by and to humans) and offered “power and beauty” as a “substitute for truth” (17.18–20). The text goes on to offer its first adjuration, one of many which are motivated by a central cosmological epistemology: everything that is made, is made by Error. “For this reason despise error” (17.28–29). “Knowledge” in this text is referred to as ΠΙΣΑΥΝΕ, the Lycopolitan spelling of the Sahidic COOYN with a semantic range equivalent

⁸² All translations of the *Gospel of Truth* are adapted from Attridge and McRae, “The Gospel of Truth,” and made with reference to additional textual notes of Grobel, *The Gospel of Truth: A Valentinian Meditation on the Gospel*.

⁸³ Even the earliest commentators were careful to point out that the *Gospel of Truth* was not meant as a counter-gospel, but the association of the text the *Gospel of Truth* as the referent of “is joy” is assumed from the *editio princeps* forward. See, for instance, Cerfaux, “De Saint Paul à L’Évangile de la Vérité,” 103. *Editio princeps* Michel Malinine, Henri-Charles Puech, and Gilles Quispel.

⁸⁴ This point was made first by Hans Jonas and reiterated by Benoit Standaert, but their warnings do not seem to have been particularly effective. Jonas, “*Evangelium Veritatis* and the Valentinian Speculation,” 97. Standaert, “‘*Evangelium Veritatis*’ et ‘*Veritatis Evangelium*,’” 147. Jonas suggested that the “original” title may have been Περὶ τοῦ Εὐαγγελίου τῆς Ἀληθείας (“*Evangelium Veritatis* and the Valentinian Speculation,” 97), and while his suggestion is close to my proposed appellation, I am not convinced that the text carried any title in antiquity. None of the canonical gospels in the second century had “titles” either, even for Irenaeus. See Standaert, “‘*Evangelium Veritatis*’ et ‘*Veritatis Evangelium*,’” 138–141; and Larsen, “Correcting the Gospel,” 89–94. The *Gospel of Truth* is antiquity’s “Monster Mash” – a song *about* the Monster Mash that is not, itself, the Monster Mash.

to that of ἐπιστήμη. The *Gospel of Truth* argues that knowledge came into the world through the agency of Jesus (18.16–21), and that Jesus offers knowledge of the Father only to those who are preordained to receive the truth: those whose names are “in the living book of the living – the one written in the thought and the mind of the father . . . that (book) which no one [but Jesus] was able to take” (19.34–20.6).

This, then, is the core of the epistemic system that undergirds the *Gospel of Truth*: the “true message” is available only to those to whom it has been revealed; “the living who are inscribed in the book of the living” are given instruction “about themselves” (21.4–5). The text describes this return to knowledge in a series of arresting poetic images that resonate even today. Those who are given knowledge grasp the truth as “one who, having become drunk, has turned away from his drunkenness, and having returned to himself, has set right what are his own” (22.16–20). As in Seneca’s Stoicism, in the *Gospel of Truth*, cosmology, epistemology, and ethics are radically coherent; the system is self-referential, and preceptual knowledge is useless without a correlative epistemic outlook.

The *Gospel of Truth* goes out of its way to clarify that this knowledge is not textual. While textualized metaphors are used – “book (βιβλίον) of the living” (19.35), “a will (διαθήκη)” (20.15), or “the edict (δικταγμα) of the Father” (20.26) – the content of the “true message” cannot be bound in language:

This is the knowledge of the living book which he revealed to the aeons, at the end, as [his letters], revealing how they are not vowels nor are they consonants, so that one might read them and think of something foolish, but they are letters of the truth which they alone speak who know them. Each letter is a complete [thought] like a complete book, since they are letters written by the Unity, the Father having written them for the aeons in order that by the means of his letters they should know the Father. (22.38–23.18)

Here the author uses playful, bookish metaphors to stress precisely that no text could possibly contain truth. The “knowledge of the living book” may refer either to truth itself or to the names of those selected to know the truth. In either case, the knowledge itself is “neither vowels nor consonants” – literally, “they are not places of sound nor are they letters lacking their sounds” (23.3–5). The message cannot be contained in textualized form nor spoken in audible words. The *Gospel of Truth* has remarkably little to say positively about either preceptual truths or how one gains access to the “true message.” The message, it stresses repeatedly, is known only to those who have been elected. The text is

clearest only in a negative sense: books do not contain truth. One possible epistemic corollary to texts as repositories of truth – that the proper hermeneutic, applied to the right corpus of texts, could produce theologically defensible statements – is ruled out from the start.⁸⁵

In this sense, the *Gospel of Truth* forms an almost perfect contrast both with the traditions discussed in this chapter and with another text known from Nag Hammadi: the so-called *Gospel of the Egyptians*, written originally in Greek and preserved in two different versions in Codices 3 and 4.⁸⁶ Quite apart from the *Gospel of Truth*'s self-effacing textualizing metaphors, the *Gospel of the Egyptians* ends by declaring that the text was written by Seth himself in primordial times – literally “in letters” (Ϛ̅Ν Ϛ̅ENC̅Ϛ̅αι̅ 3.68.11) – “in order that, at the end of the times and the eras . . . it may come forth and reveal this incorruptible, holy race of the great savior” (3.68.14–22). Here, the *Gospel of the Egyptians* presents the preceptual knowledge which “comes forth” as that knowledge stored away in texts written by Seth, similar to the antediluvian knowledge that is recorded in Nag Hammadi's *The Three Steles of Seth*. In other words, a rejection of textualized, universal knowledge is not fundamentally “gnostic,” nor is it found throughout the Nag Hammadi codices.⁸⁷ But it is visible in bits and pieces, and represents a Christian epistemic tradition just as sophisticated as anything in Tertullian, Irenaeus, or Justin.

It is not clear whether the *Gospel of Truth* constituted “scripture” for any community in antiquity. The text is self-effacing; it stresses over and over again that truth is not so feeble as to require the written word, and that no language has the power necessary to express truth, let alone convey its

⁸⁵ Compare with the viewpoint of the *Gospel according to Philip* in Nag Hammadi Codex 2, which allows that Truth cannot be understood by humans outside of “types and images,” but nevertheless holds out some hope for the interpretation of those images as a manner of attaining the Truth that lies behind them. “Truth did not come into the world naked, but it came in types and images. The world will not receive truth in any other way.” (67.9–12) Translation Wesley W. Isenberg.

⁸⁶ The title derives from Jean Doresse's description in “Trois livres gnostiques inédits: Evangile des Egyptiens. Epître d'Eugnoste. Sagesse de Jésus Christ.” The original title of the tractate appears in the explicit of the version in Codex 3 – “The holy book of the great and invisible spirit (τ̅Β̅Ι̅Β̅Λ̅Ο̅C̅ τ̅Ρ̅Ι̅Ε̅Ρ̅Α̅ Ἰ̅Π̅Ν̅Ο̅C̅ Ν̅Α̅Ζ̅Ο̅Ρ̅Α̅Τ̅Ο̅Ν Ἰ̅Π̅Π̅Ν̅Ε̅Υ̅Μ̅Α̅).” For a discussion of the title see Böhling, Wisse, and Labib (eds.), *Nag Hammadi codices III, 2 and IV, 2: the Gospel of the Egyptians*, 18–23.

⁸⁷ Pace Thomassen, “Revelation as Book and Book as Revelation: Reflections on the *Gospel of Truth*,” who reads the text both as a “gnostic” tractate among others in a definable group, and one whose epistemic corollaries are other texts from Nag Hammadi, like the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, *The Three Steles of Seth*, and the *Hymn of the Pearl*. Thomassen mistakes textualizing metaphors in the *Gospel of Truth* for a textually grounded epistemology, which the text explicitly (though, apparently, subtly) rejects.

meaning to those who do not possess it already. The text does not engage in a mere apophaticism, in which the mystery of truth will always outstrip any description, nor does it express a negative theology, in which only negative statements can be made with confidence, as a sort of precursor to the late ancient theological outlook attached to the name of Dionysus the Areopagite. Rather, it presents an epistemic system that purposefully repudiates the idea that a book could reveal knowledge that is anything more than an emanation of Error. As I move on to discuss other Christian epistemic systems it will be important to keep in mind that the seeming inevitability of textual interpretation, even among Christians, is a mirage; the great doctrinal controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries played out on a field of Orthodox construction. The fact of textual interpretation as theologically foundational is neither obvious nor uncontroversial – even among Jerome’s “eminent men.” Nor was it universal, as we see in the system of knowledge supposed and promulgated by the *Gospel of Truth*.

A misplaced textualism runs through the history of scholarship on the *Gospel of Truth*. Geoffrey Smith cites ten separate studies considering what he calls the text’s “unwavering commitment to biblical interpretation,” to which we can add Smith’s own article as well.⁸⁸ There is at least one problem with this characterization of the *Gospel of Truth*, however. In regard to biblical interpretation, this text is neither. Put differently, if “biblical interpretation” is to remain a category of critical use whatsoever we must say that the *Gospel of Truth* does none of it. There are no citation formulae. There are no quotations. There is no discussion of written authority. There are, at best, allusions to topics, words, and concepts that are also discussed in scriptural texts.⁸⁹ But it would be difficult to discuss the generation of the Son as Platonic *logos*, for instance, without language that sounds like the *Gospel according to John* 1:1 and 1:18. Likewise, the relationship of a personified Error to its source, framed in almost any way, will look like an oblique reference to *Ben Sira* 24:3 to a sufficiently motivated critic. There may be “scriptural resonances” in the *Gospel of Truth*, and the text as we have it might be a meditation on texts that would eventually become part of the Orthodox Christian canon.⁹⁰ In other words, it might engage in allusion as defined

⁸⁸ Smith, “Constructing a Christian Universe: Mythological Exegesis of Ben Sira 24 and John’s Prologue in the *Gospel of Truth*,” 67. The studies are catalogued in 67n9.

⁸⁹ Cf. van Unnik, “The ‘Gospel of Truth’ and the New Testament,” 107.

⁹⁰ There is even a place where the *Gospel of Truth* appears to be familiar with a story known from canonical gospel texts: the story of “the shepherd who left behind the ninety-nine” to search for the one who is lost. The story is known from the *Gospel according to*

by Devorah Dimant: “a device for the simultaneous activation of two texts.”⁹¹ However, if similar language, or even *purposeful* allusion to a biblical text constitutes “an unwavering commitment to biblical interpretation”⁹² even in the absence of an epistemic method in which authoritative knowledge *could* be found in a text, then the concept of “biblical interpretation” has lost all utility as a scholarly tool. If “biblical interpretation” indicates simply that a text uses biblical language, we have already allotted a linguistic primacy to the bible which can only be defended on theological grounds. Further, we have emulsified our sources such that every text, no matter what its generative epistemic method, necessarily “interprets biblical text” if the text has anything to say about Jesus. This would be an absurd position to take, of course. Whatever it is that the *Gospel of Truth* is doing – even if there are purposeful biblical allusions, invocations, or resonances strewn throughout the text – it is a far cry from what Irenaeus means by biblical interpretation or from the operations that Athanasius performs in reading New Testament texts as an anti-Arian cudgel.

The only thing that can be said with certainty concerning the *Gospel of Truth* is that a Christian community in Egypt was interested in preserving it in the fourth or fifth century. This is especially intriguing because known Christian communities in late ancient Egypt were, so far as we can tell, more or less uniformly interested in scriptural exegesis, and in textualized forms of truth production. The *Gospel of Truth* stands in stark contrast, and appears to be inexplicable within a late ancient Egyptian Christian context. And yet, there it was: preaching a message of epistemic certainty that text is no container for truth and espousing an epistemic position that explains in simple terms why it cites no text, carries the name of no author, and appears as a wholly self-contained revelation that is, nevertheless, *not* Truth.

CONCLUSION

Marcellus’s error, with which this chapter began, was epistemic. He failed to understand the Roman augur’s methods, and therefore his proposed

Matthew 18:12–14, but there is no reason to think that the texts have a literary relationship. Even a commentator like Kendrick Grobel, who is insistent on the idea of New Testament interpretation as a central feature of the *Gospel of Truth*, calls the suggestion that this is an explicit invocation of the Matthean story “queer ‘exegesis.’” Grobel, *The Gospel of Truth*, 129.

⁹¹ Dimant, “Use and Interpretation of Mikra in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha,” 410.

⁹² Smith, “Constructing a Christian Universe,” 67.

temple was religiously unacceptable because he did not distinguish between the preceptual truths which he knew – that gods sent signs – and the epistemic truths by which the source of such signs were identified. Some of the authors investigated in this chapter, such as Irenaeus and Tertullian, held to remarkably similar theological precepts even when their opinions differed dramatically about why such precepts were true. With the addition of Justin, these three authors found authoritative text to be a useful ally in making theological arguments, while Ignatius and the author of the *Gospel of Truth* rejected the idea that textual interpretation could serve as a vector for the production of reliable knowledge. Of those surveyed who reject scriptural interpretation as a central locus of truth production, only the author of the *Gospel of Truth* was omitted from Jerome's late fourth-century catalogue of influential Christian men.

I have argued throughout my survey of second- and third-century Christian sources that in the period before the Nicene controversy, those calling themselves “Orthodox” (ὀρθόδοξοι) distinguished between correct and heretical theologies on the basis of preceptual (δοξαστικός) knowledge. Jerome's list of “eminent men” who contributed to the Orthodox patrimony demonstrates that even in the waning years of the fourth century methodological diversity among “Orthodox” fathers was acceptable, at least among those who lived before the Nicene controversy. In his biography of Ignatius, for instance, Jerome pointedly demonstrates knowledge of the bishop's letters themselves rather than just stories about the martyr.⁹³ But he offers no methodological censure of Ignatius, even though he knew Ignatius's rejection of scriptural interpretation, and even though he willingly criticized eminent men like Tertullian for theological, preceptual lapses.⁹⁴

I turn now to the Nicene controversy, in which the underdetermined nature of scripture led to a schism among Christians who called themselves Orthodox (and “Universal”/καθολικοί). In response to the crisis, Christian scholars came up with new ways of making arguments, and over the course of a generation came to define Orthodoxy in a more expansive manner. Scholars such as Athanasius redefined Orthodoxy not only as a series of preceptual truths, but as a set of preceptual truths *arrived at through a newly articulated scholastic method*. It was not

⁹³ Jerome, *On Eminent Men*, 16.

⁹⁴ Jerome, *On Eminent Men*, 53.

enough to arrive at common precepts by way of different scholarly practices, as Irenaeus and Tertullian had done generations before. Diversity of method came to the fore as a theological problem among Catholic Christians. Chapter 3 describes the redefinition of Orthodoxy to include both preceptual and epistemic knowledge.