extent by means of source critical ingenuity. For these reasons, only the writings of the church fathers, which can be dated with relative accuracy, will provide us with fixed points of reference. Any attempt to create chronological order and to trace historical developments must therefore take the patristic evidence as its point of departure.

3 Valentinus and “the Gnostic sect”

The most important piece of evidence of all in this regard is the work of Irenaeus of Lyons. Written in the 180s, it is the earliest preserved account of ancient Christian “heresies”. Irenaeus’ treatise, whose precise title was Exposure and refutation of the falsely called knowledge (Ἔλεγχος καὶ ἀνατροπὴ τῆς ψευδωνόμου γνώσεως), is also important because it, to a large extent, defined for posterity the category of “gnosis” and what it included. The main target of Irenaeus’ attack on those who falsely claim “gnosis” was the followers of Valentinus. This he states explicitly in his preface to Book I, and the first two thirds of that book are devoted to an extensive report on the doctrines and the ritual practices of the Valentinians (Haer. 1.1–8; 1.11–21). A long-term effect of Irenaeus’ perspective was that Valentinianism came to be perceived by scholars of the modern age as the prototypical example of “Gnosticism”.

However, Irenaeus’ notions about what constituted the Gnostic heresy are not unequivocal. On the one hand, he uses a wide concept of “gnosis” that includes much more than the Valentinians. In the final third of Book I he draws up a lineage of predecessors for the Valentinians, in which Simon Magus figures as the source and origin of all heresy (1.23–31). From this point of view, “the falsely called gnosis” of the Valentinians is just another manifestation of a larger heretical movement that began with the Samaritan heresiarch. The idea of this heretical movement was constructed by Irenaeus on the basis of two authoritative apostolic texts in particular: the account of the confrontation be-

---

8 The dating of Irenaeus’ work was extensively studied by Harnack, Geschichte der altchristlichen Litteratur, I/1, 263–288. Harnack concluded that the work was written between 181 and 189. For further details, see Markschies, “Grande Notice”, 38 n. 33.

9 The title has been lost in the Latin manuscript transmission of Irenaeus’ work (of the original Greek version only fragments are preserved, as quotations in other authors), but it is cited by Eusebius and several other ancient writers. See RD I/1, 31–35. In referring to this work I shall use the conventional abbreviation Haer.

10 See in particular Brox, “Γνωστικοί”, especially 108–11.
tween the apostles and Simon Magus in Acts 8, and the warning against “the falsely called gnosis” in 1 Tim 6:20. On the other hand, there also appears in Irenaeus a much narrower usage of the term “Gnostic”, according to which “the Gnostics” is the name given to a specific group or movement within the greater mass of heretics.¹¹ The view that Irenaeus identifies a special group of gnōstikoi in his work has become a common assumption in recent scholarship.¹² Furthermore, it is assumed that the doctrines of these “Gnostics” are to be found in the reports made by Irenaeus in the last chapters of Book I (chapters 29–31), and that Irenaeus regards them as the immediate predecessors of the Valentinians and the direct source of inspiration for Valentinus.

These assumptions are, in my opinion, well founded. A full discussion of the relevant evidence for them is beyond the scope of this lecture, but I shall discuss a couple of passages that are crucial for the argument that will be made later.

In one famous passage Irenaeus speaks about the source from which the school-founder Valentinus himself derived his teaching:

"Ἴδωμεν νῦν καὶ τὴν τούτων ἄστατον γνώμην, δύο ποι καὶ τριῶν ὄντων πῶς περί τῶν αὐτῶν οὐ τὰ αὐτὰ λέγουσιν, ἀλλὰ τοῖς πράγμασι καὶ τοῖς ὀνόμασιν ἐναντία ἀποφαίνονται· Ὁ μὲν γὰρ πρῶτος, ἀπὸ τῆς λεγομένης γνωστικῆς αἱρέσεως τὰς ἀρχὰς εἰς ἴδιον χαρακτῆρα διδασκαλείου μεθαρμόσας Οὐαλεντῖνος, οὕτως ὡρίσατο·

Now let us also look at how unstable the doctrine of these people is, and how, as soon as there are two or three of them, they do not say the same things about the same subject, but contradict themselves in regard to things and names. Thus, the first of them, Valentinus, by adapting from the so-called Gnostic sect the principal ideas for his own distinctive school teaching, put forth the following: ... (1.11.1)

The passage is quoted here in full because the context for Irenaeus’ statement is important: after having presented the intricate mythological system of the Valentinians in the first part of Book I, using as his main source a specific treatise he has been able to acquire (chapters 1–8), Irenaeus proceeds to describe the internal disagreements among the Valentinian teachers (chapters 11–12). He begins, naturally enough, with Valentinus himself, as the πρῶτος, “the first” (of

¹¹ RD II/1, 350–54 survey all the occurrences (around 15) of this usage in the five books of Haer.
and claims that Valentinus founded his school by taking over and adapting the principal ideas of “the so-called Gnostic sect”. This, Irenaeus implies, is how the Valentinian “school” began.

If Irenaeus is here using the expression “the so-called Gnostic sect”, rather than “the Gnostics”, which appears later in his work whenever he refers to this group, this is probably because he in this passage is mentioning the group for the first time. By saying “so-called” he is allowing for the possibility that the reader may not have heard of this group before. The word hairesis is hardly to be understood as “sect” in the sense of a single community, since Irenaeus in chapters 29–31 speaks of several groups of gnostikoi. Hairesis must therefore here be taken to mean a “school of thought”, in the sense of a set of presuppositions shared by a certain number of people who from a sociological point of view exist as distinct groups.
Irenaeus then goes on to report the doctrine of “Valentinus”. Arriving at his views on the origin of Christ, he says that according to the heresiarch himself, Christ was brought forth by the Mother (i.e. Sophia); he came into being together with a shadow, after the Mother had ended up outside the Pleroma. Christ, however, cut himself loose from the shadow, left his mother and ascended to the Pleroma. The Mother then gave birth to another son, the Demiurge, and “together with him was emitted an archon on the left as well, in the same way as the falsely called Gnostics of whom we shall speak later.” Irenaeus is here offering a concrete piece of evidence to shore up his claim that Valentinus was inspired by the Gnostic hairesis. In fact, in chapter 30 he reports a system that contains a similar set of ideas. This system tells of a First Woman who was unable to contain all the light flowing to her from the two superior figures called the First Man/the Father and the Second Man/Son. She suffers a split. On the right side, she gave birth to Christ, and was taken up together with him into the aeon above. To the left, however, the light spilled over and became Sophia Pronunikos, a male-female figure, who sank down into the lower regions and eventually gave birth to Yaldabaoth (1.30.2–5). It may be argued that there is not a complete fit in every detail between the two stories; however, for Irenaeus the similarity was evidently great enough to lend credence to his claim about Valentinus’ sources.

To what extent Irenaeus’ claim is justified, however, remains to be investigated. For that purpose, a comparative analysis of the information about the “Gnostics” given by Irenaeus in Haer. 1.29–31 and of what we know about Valentinian doctrine will be necessary. Specifically, the analysis will have to concentrate on the two systems described in chapters 29 and 30, where Irenaeus appears to be reporting original sources in some detail. The Valentinian system to which comparison can be made is known in several variants: from Irenaeus, from other patristic writers, and in the Nag Hammadi codices. The question of the historical relationships between these two sets of documents is surprisingly

---

16 The attribution to Valentinus himself of the system reported in 1.11.1 is generally dismissed by contemporary scholarship (e.g. Markschies, Valentinus, 364–79; Thomassen, Spiritual Seed, 23–27). The summarising form of the report suggests that Irenaeus here depends on earlier, unidentified heresiological sources.

17 Συμπροβεβλῆσθαι δὲ αὐτῷ καὶ ἀριστερὸν ἄρχοντα ἐδογμάτισεν, ὁμοίως τοῖς ῥηθησομένοις ὑπ’ ἡμῶν ψευδωνύμως γνωστικοῖς (1.11.1). See also below, p. 31.

18 More or less complete versions of the Valentinian system are found in Iren. Haer. 1.1–8, 1.11.1, 1.14–15; [Hipp.] Haer. 6.29.2–6.36; Tri. Trac. (NHC I,5); Val. Exp. (NHC XI,1). Less complete versions and fragments of other systems are attested by Epiphanius, Pan. 31.5–6, Clement of Alexandria’s Excerpts from Theodotus, Iren. Haer. 1.11.2–1.12.
understudied, although it would be unfair to claim that it has been entirely ignored.\textsuperscript{19}

Chapters 29 and 30 report two distinct treatises. The one used in chapter 29 is mainly a protological account, describing the generation and the architecture of the transcendent world. The figure of Barbelo here plays an important part. The account ends with a brief description of how the world creator, called the Protarchon, came into being, and of the subsequent creation of the world. In the treatise reported in chapter 30, the situation is the reverse. After a summary protology, the account concentrates on the creation and the structure of the cosmos, the creation of the human being, and the subsequently unfolding salvation history. In this treatise, the world creator is named Yaldabaoth and there is no mention of Barbelo.

Evidently, the two treatises represent two distinct mythological systems. Nevertheless, Irenaeus presents them as variant doctrines held by two groups that are both included in the common category of “the Gnostics”\textsuperscript{20}. I shall first discuss the system of chapter 29, which raises a few questions of its own.

4 Irenaeus, \textit{Haer. 1.29} and the \textit{Apocryphon of John}

From the point of view of historical reconstruction, Irenaeus’ testimony in chapter 29 is of special interest in that it is one of the rare instances where literary contact between a patristic source and a Nag Hammadi tractate can be detected with certainty. The tractate in question is the \textit{Apocryphon of John}, a text that is preserved in three Coptic versions in the Nag Hammadi codices, while a fourth

\textsuperscript{19} Deserving mention in particular are Anne McGuire’s unpublished dissertation “Valentinus”, and Alastair Logan’s \textit{Gnostic Truth}.

\textsuperscript{20} The treatise of \textit{Haer. 1.29} is introduced by the words “Some of them maintain that ...”, and that of 1.30 by “Others, however, say that ...” (cf. above, n. 15). As for the category to which both of these groups belong, Irenaeus begins chapter 29 by saying that he will now report the doctrines of “the great mass of Barbelo Gnostics (\textit{multitudo gnosticorum Barbelo})”, which has sprung up “like mushrooms out of the ground”. In their Sources Chrétiennes edition, Rousseau and Doutreleau argue that the word \textit{Barbelo} cannot be part of the original text, but must be a later gloss (RD I/1, 296–99). I find their arguments quite persuasive: the figure of Barbelo appears only in 1.29 and not in the reports on the doctrines of the “others” who are said to belong to the same \textit{multitudo}; moreover, whenever Irenaeus refers to “the Gnostics” in other parts of his work, Barbelo is never mentioned (cf. RD II/1, 350–54).