Irenaeus of Lyons was the first church father of whom we know that, for his theology, he drew more or less on the books that later were collected in the New Testament canon. In contradistinction to the “heretics” whom he resisted, he also drew on the Old Testament, and for that reason he may be called the first biblical theologian in the current sense of the word. Although some of his works are lost, we still have the five volumes of his Against Heresies in which he formulated an impressive overview of the history of salvation according to the Scriptures as an “orthodox” response to Valentinian, Marcionite, and other “heretic” views. In the book under review, Bernard Mutschler concentrates on one aspect of Irenaeus’s work, in that he investigates how the bishop of Lyons draws on the Johannine corpus. He holds to Irenaeus’s view on authorship of the Johannine writings, which means that he investigates his use of the Fourth Gospel, the Epistles of John, and the Apocalypse. Since Mutschler judges that it would be too laborious to research Irenaeus’s use of the Johannine corpus in all the volumes of Against Heresies, he selects the third one, which draws extensively on the Fourth Gospel, although less extensively on the other Johannine writings.

After an introduction, in his first chapter Mutschler presents an analysis of the third volume of Against Heresies. It deals with the truth of the apostolic Scriptures transmitted
by the church; faith in the one God, Creator of heaven and earth; the biblical use of “God” and “Lord” for God the Father and God the Son; the four Evangelists’ acknowledgement of the one God, the law, and the prophets; the one Gospel in four books; Jesus Christ, true man and true God; and the unity of the church’s faith in contradistinction to the multiplicity of the heretics’ views. The second chapter is devoted to the order in which Irenaeus lists the four Gospels. It is shown that the order Matthew, Luke, Mark, John occurs most often in Against Heresies 3 and 4, which implies that Irenaeus also deviates from it.

In chapters 3–15 Mutschler presents his very detailed discussions of all the occurrences of Johannine words, allusions, and quotations in Against Heresies 3. In each chapter he quotes the relevant text in Greek or in the extant Latin translation, investigates its terms and their provenance, comments on Irenaeus’s apparent interpretations, gives a translation, and ends with a conclusion. He also refers to the extant Armenian and Syriac translations of Irenaeus’s text. As in the previous chapters, Mutschler refers extensively to the translations and comments of other scholars, to the extent that the footnotes—printed in small letters—often take up half or more than half of the pages. In these chapters he convincingly demonstrates how Irenaeus draws on the Fourth Gospel and 1 John in order to refute the Valentinians and other “heretics.” As one may expect, quotations from the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel occur relatively often. There is one quotation from and one possible allusion to 2 John and a few quotations from and allusions to the Apocalypse. As a matter of fact, Irenaeus also draws on the other Gospels, Acts, and other Epistles in order to underpin his position.

Two relatively short concluding chapters deal with Irenaeus’s historical context and give a survey of his antignostic use of the Johannine corpus in Against Heresies 3. It is noted that Irenaeus felt especially close to John, since in his youth he had known Polycarp, who had been a disciple of John. In Irenaeus’s view, this connection warranted that he stood in an uninterrupted tradition. The book concludes with an appendix that consists of a list of corrections of Rousseau’s and Doutreleau’s Sources chrétiennes edition of Irenaeus’s text, two lists of Johannine allusions and quotations, corrections and additions to Reynders’s Lexicon of Against Heresies in the four source languages, and an extensive yet incomplete bibliography (at least A. Merz, Selbstauslegung, and S. Freund, Vergil, are missing), and indices of texts, persons, geographical names, words, and subjects.

This book is the fruit of an intensive scholarly research and deals with an interesting theme. As a whole, Mutschler’s conclusions are solid and reliable. However, I must admit that reading this book was not always a satisfactory experience. Although in my view it is most useful and interesting to investigate how Scripture was read and interpreted by the church fathers, and although this premise entails, consequently, that detailed studies in
this field may be useful and interesting as well, I doubt whether it is useful to publish all of a scholar’s notes. This might be useful if the result were spectacular, but in the case of this book the conclusions from chapters 2–15 are usually very self-evident and predictable, and the overall conclusions of the book bring hardly anything new at all. Anyone who has ever read Irenaeus knows that he fought the Valentinians and other “heretics.” This is confirmed indeed by a close reading of Irenaeus’s use of Johannine texts in his Against Heresies 3, but do we need a book of more that six hundred pages to know this? It may be paradoxical to note that still something is missing. Although in his footnotes Mutschler carefully pays attention to Irenaeus’s readings of the Johannine texts and gives an index of the New Testament papyri and other codices to which he refers, he does not give a concluding survey of Irenaeus’s text, or textual variants, of the Johannine corpus in Against Heresies 3.

To be sure, this criticism does not mean that the book is useless. The meticulously detailed discussions of Irenaeus’s text and the elaborate footnotes provide us with a wealth of references to primary and secondary literature. The lists of Johannine allusions and quotations in Against Heresies 3 have never been collected before in this precise manner and may henceforth be consulted by those who are especially interested in this theme. Mutschler’s corrections of other authors’ mistakes will undoubtedly prove to be useful as well. But in my view it would have been preferable if in his book he had concentrated more consistently on the results of his research that he considers relevant for his readers. In fact, it would have been preferable to publish a book of six hundred pages in which Irenaeus’s use of the Johannine corpus in all five volumes of Against Heresies had been investigated, albeit less elaborately.