In the previous post we saw that the Gospels almost certainly circulated anonymously at first, just as they were composed anonymously. It is an interesting question why the authors all chose to remain anonymous instead of indicating who they were. I have a theory about that, and I may post on it eventually when I get through a bit more of this thread on why the Gospels ended up with the names they did. At this stage, what we can say with certainty is that the Gospels are quoted in the early and mid-second centuries by proto-orthodox Christian authors, who never identify them as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

That is especially significant when we come to Justin around 150-60 CE, who explicitly quotes these books as “Memoirs of the Apostles,” but does not tell us which apostles they are to be associated with. This is in Rome, the capital of the Empire, and the seat of what was probably the largest, and certainly the most influential, church at the time.

Some thirty years after Justin, another proto-orthodox church father, Irenaeus, does identify the Gospels by name. He is the first to do so. And he too is associated with Rome.

Irenaeus is best known as a leading heresiologist. His five-volume work, “Against the Heresies,” written around 185 CE, still survives, and you can get it today in a handy English translation. The title that Irenaeus gave his work is “Refutation and Overthrow of Gnosis, Falsely So-Called.” In other words, it is an attack on Gnosticism; and for centuries, until the 20th century, it was one of our principal sources of information about Gnostic religion. (That changed with the discovery of Gnostic writings themselves, especially the Gnostic “library” of writings discovered near Nag Hammadi Egypt in 1945.)

There were many things indeed that disturbed Irenaeus ...