

## VALENTINUS AND HIS SCHOOL<sup>1</sup>

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### Resum

L'article ofereix una visió general sobre l'escola de Valentí el Gnòstic, que va ser un destacat grup cristià el segle II dC. Presentem un nombre de mestres que encara es coneixen pel seu nom. Els textos Valentinians també eren nombrosos en la Biblioteca de Nag Hammadi, una col·lecció de primers textos cristians trobats a Egipte l'any 1945. Els Valentinians són un dels grups cristians que intenten dibuixar un límit clar entre "Gnosticisme" i cristiandat. S'apunta a l'article que l'escola de Valentí Gnòstic tenia una forta orientació filosòfica. Això es fa especialment evident en el mite valentinià de la Saviesa, en el qual la teràpia d'emocions és una preocupació crucial. Els Valentinians van estar realment interessats en qüestions relacionades amb el progrés moral. També hi ha evidència que utilitzaven el mite políticament, és a dir, per explicar l'estructura de la societat.

**Paraules clau:** Grups cristians primitius, gnosticisme, Biblioteca de Nag Hammadi, mite i filosofia, progrés moral.

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### Abstract

The article offers an overview on the school of Valentinus, which was a prominent Christian group in the second century CE. It featured a number of teachers still known by name. Valentinian texts also loom large in the Nag Hammadi Library, a collection of early Christian texts found in Egypt 1945. Valentinians are one of the Christian groups defying attempts to draw a clear boundary between “Gnosticism” and Christianity. It is argued in the article that the school of Valentinus had a strong philosophical orientation. This becomes especially clear in the Valentinian myth of Wisdom, in which the therapy of emotions is a crucial concern. Valentinians were genuinely interested in issues related to one's moral progress. There is also evidence that they used myth politically, that is, to explain the structure of society.

**Keywords:** Early Christian groups; Gnosticism; Nag Hammadi Library; myth and philosophy; moral progress

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Scholars of «Gnosticism» most often concentrate on different aspects of «Gnostic theology.» This history-of-ideas approach is often accompanied with comparisons between «Gnosticism» and «Christianity» (or «the Christian church»), regarded as two clearly separate belief systems. In the history of research, there has been far less interest in more practical questions, such as how those people now designated «Gnostics» conducted their lives, what moral values they had, and how they perceived their relationship to the surrounding Greco-Roman society, Judaism and Christians. Such issues, however, have become increasingly prominent in more recent scholarship of early Christianity in general, and in Gnostic studies in particular. It has turned out that there is no basis for imagining «Gnostics» as a unified group of people that were clearly distinguished from, and opposed to, «Christians.» In fact, most of those people now called Gnostics did not use this title as a self-designation but identified themselves as Christians, and their moral values and lifestyles were more often than not similar to other Christians. Therefore, there is not a sufficient historical justification for the dualistic distinction between «Gnosticism» and «Christianity,» that still partially—and often implicitly rather than explicitly—characterizes scholarly discussion. The school of Valentinus, on which this article is focused, is an example of early Christian groups defying any simplistic attempts to draw a clear boundary between Gnosticism and Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

2. I have kept the footnotes to a minimum; fuller bibliographical references and discussion with other possible interpretations of evidence can be found in my two other studies, which

## 2. A POPULAR EARLY CHRISTIAN GROUP

The school of Valentinus was one of the most prominent Christian groups in the second century. Valentinus himself was a Christian teacher who was born and raised in Egypt, probably educated in Alexandria. He came to Rome in the 140's, where he must have enjoyed a considerable success. A later rumor had it that Valentinus was almost elected the bishop of Rome but suffered a narrow defeat to another Christian who had publicly confessed his faith under persecutions.<sup>3</sup> Although the rumor is historically dubious, it may reflect Valentinus' great popularity in Rome in the middle of the second century. An unusually large number of other Christian teachers known by name are also associated with Valentinus's group in our sources. The most famous among them are Ptolemaeus, Heracleon,<sup>4</sup> Theodotus, and Marcus.<sup>5</sup> Valentinian Christians were spread in the same parts of the Roman Empire as other Christians; their presence is attested in Egypt, Asia Minor, Rome and Lyons.

Both supporters and opponents regarded Valentinus as the founder of an early Christian school of thought. Some supporters designated themselves «the students of Valentinus,» and their opponents used school terminology in describing his group. The terms they used were «didaskaleion» and «scholē,» both referring to a «school.» The opponents' descriptions thus indicate that Valentinus' group bore some similarity to ancient philosophical schools.<sup>6</sup>

The significance of Valentinus' school can be seen, above all, in the amount of opposition it raised. It was against Valentinians that Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons, wrote his massive five-volume work, now usually known as *Against Heresies (Adversus Haereses)*, in around 180 CE. Other well-known Christian authors from the second to the fourth century, including Tertullian of Carthage, Hippolytus of Rome, Clement and Origen in Alexandria, and Epiphanius of

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this article draws upon: I. DUNDERBERG, *Beyond Gnosticism: Myth, Lifestyle and Society in the School of Valentinus*, New York: Columbia University Press 2008; IDEM, *The School of Valentinus*, in A. MARJANEN & P. LUOMANEN (eds.), *A Companion to Second-Century «Heretics»* (VigChrSup 76), Leiden: Brill 2005, 64-99. For a recent synthesis more focused on Valentinian theology as a belief system and on Valentinian rituals, see E. THOMASSEN, *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the "Valentinians"* (NHMS 60), Leiden: Brill 2006.

3. TERTULLIAN, *Against Valentinians*, 4:1-2.
4. Cf. A. WUCHERPENNIG, *Heracleon Philologus: Gnostische Johannesexegese im zweiten Jahrhundert* (WUNT 142), Tübingen: Mohr 2002.
5. Cf. N. FÖRSTER, *Marcus Magus: Kult, Lehre und Gemeindeleben einer valentiniaschen Gnostikgruppe. Sammlung der Quellen und Kommentar* (WUNT 114), Tübingen: Mohr 1999.
6. For other «school» indications in Valentinian evidence, cf. DUNDERBERG, *Beyond Gnosticism*, 3-4, 208-209 (with references to other literature).

Salamis, also took great pains to combat Valentinians, their theology and their interpretations of scripture.

### 3. MORALLY SUSPECT BEHAVIOR?

A fair amount of mudslinging was involved in the opponents' attacks against the Valentinians. Irenaeus accused them of being inclined to improper behavior. Not only did they have no scruples about attending gladiatorial shows and eating meat offered to idols but they also seduced and sexually abused women in their secret meetings. Irenaeus even details one instance in which all this had happened in the family of one deacon in Asia Minor, when the deacon invited an infamous Valentinian teacher called Marcus to his house. Irenaeus reports that the deacon's wife, «who was very beautiful, was defiled in mind and body by this magician.» Irenaeus also claims that Marcus's activities were first and foremost targeted at women «who are well-dressed and clothed in purple and who are very rich.» This Marcus attracted such women by teaching them to prophesy, and also with love potions and charms he concocted. Irenaeus entertains his audience by graphically describing how a woman duped by Marcus «tries to reward him not only by the gift of her possessions... but by sharing her body, desiring to unite herself in every way so that she may become one with him.»<sup>7</sup>

It is very difficult to know how much truth there is in such stories but they probably must be taken with a grain of salt. Accusations of lewd morality and sexual misconduct of other people were common in ancient polemics, both in debates between competing schools of thought, and in creating and circulating ethnic stereotypes of other nations. It should not be forgotten either that all Christians were suspected by outsiders of participating in nightly orgies where sex was unlimited and little children were slaughtered, sacrificed and eaten. The rumors spread about Valentinians probably fall into this same category of malevolent gossip.

What is particularly striking is that, later in his work, Irenaeus concedes that there were also well-behaved Valentinians who taught that «humans coming from above must follow a good course of conduct.»<sup>8</sup> Although in the first volume of his treatise *Against Heresies* Irenaeus describes immorality as an unavoidable consequence of Valentinian theology, his latter comment

7. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.13.3-5.

8. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.15.2.

shows that this was not the whole picture. In fact, there is nothing in the surviving Valentinian texts that would confirm Irenaeus' accusations of Valentinians behaving badly, whereas these texts contain a good deal of moral instruction, urging people to «follow a good course of conduct,» just as Irenaeus said.

#### 4. VALENTINIANS, GNOSTICS AND CHRISTIANS

The school of Valentinus is customarily defined as a Gnostic group. This designation is problematic for reasons that are now well known. It has been pointed out that «Gnosticism» itself is a late term, coined in the 17th century; that incorrect generalizations pertaining to Gnostic theology have rendered the whole term misleading,<sup>9</sup> and that scholars have more often than not used the term «Gnosticism» to construct an image of the deviant, impure, syncretistic and heretic other – as opposed to pure, authentic and orthodox «Christianity.»<sup>10</sup> Such a clear-cut division between Christianity and Gnosticism is historically unwarranted. The groups lumped together under the term «Gnosticism» formed no unified front, nor was there a unified party of True Christians to which all the opponents of these groups would have belonged.<sup>11</sup> Tertullian and Clement were worlds apart, as were also Irenaeus and Origen; there are points where Clement and Origen stood closer to Valentinians than to Irenaeus and Tertullian.

From Irenaeus, however, we know that there was a group of early Christians who called themselves «the Gnostics.»<sup>12</sup> The mythology of these people was very similar to that now attested in the large group of Nag Hammadi writings, classified as «Sethian»; this name was given to this group due to special reverence shown to Seth, Adam's third son, in many of the texts belonging

9. M. A. WILLIAMS, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1996.
10. Cf. K. L. KING, *What is Gnosticism?*, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2003.
11. My choice of words here reflects the immediate aftermath of the landslide victory of a Finnish nationalistic, non-immigration party, in the spring 2011; the party's name was in that time translated into English as «True Finns.» In August 2011, the party, even more preposterously, chose the title «The Finns» as the English translation for itself. It is a matter of course that this choice caused a great—and in my view fully justified—uproar among all other Finns.
12. For this group and its place in early Christianity, see now the lucid and insightful account by D. BRAKKE, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 2010.

to this group.<sup>13</sup> Many specialists are willing to identify «the Gnostics» known to Irenaeus with «the Sethians,» to whom the Nag Hammadi Library bears witness.

Valentinians did not belong to the Gnostics, but Irenaeus considers Valentinians to be their intellectual heirs. Valentinians shared with the Gnostics the belief that the world was not created by the supreme God but by an inferior creator-God and/or other lesser deities. Both groups also displayed keen interest in mythmaking. They did not write treatises on how the biblical story of creation should properly be interpreted. Instead, they produced new myths of creation that were only partially based upon the Old Testament. At the heart of their myths was the story of how the divine figure of Wisdom (*Sophia*) fell outside of the divine realm and thus set in motion the creation of an inferior world, ruled by the ignorant (and in some versions, malevolent) creator-God and his angelic troops.

There must have been some historical connection between the Gnostics and Valentinians; the affinities in their myths are too close and too many to be merely coincidental. It must be added, however, that Valentinians did not use the term «Gnostic» as a self-designation. They rather spoke of themselves as Christians. They also used other self-designations more closely related to their distinct teachings, such as «the elect offspring», «the children of the bridal chamber», «the spiritual ones», and «the progressing ones.» In spite of these more distinct self-designations, Valentinians had much in common with other Christians of the second century. Some Valentinians attended the same meetings as other Christians. They held Paul's epistles (except for those addressed to Titus and Timothy) to be authoritative, and also the same four gospels that are now in the New Testament. Many of their teachings would have been completely acceptable to most Christians in the early centuries. For example, few Christians would have found fault in Valentinus's teaching that one's heart can become a dwelling place of evil spirits, which torture it with «indecent desires,» and that only Christ's revelation of the good God can purify the heart suffering under this condition.<sup>14</sup>

Ptolemaeus, one of the better known Valentinian teachers, found it essential to prove all his claims with the teachings of the Savior, derived from Mat-

13. For a succinct introduction to Sethians, see M. A. WILLIAMS, *Sethianism*, in A. MARJANEN & P. LUOMANEN (eds.), *A Companion to Second-Century «Heretics»* (VigChrSup 76), Leiden: Brill 2005, 32-63.

14. Valentinus, Fragment 1 (= Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, 2.11.3-6).

thew's gospel.<sup>15</sup> Heracleon, another Valentinian teacher, wrote the first commentary known to us on John's gospel, and also commented on the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Unlike Marcion, the Valentinians did not reject the Old Testament but taught that the voice of the divine Spirit can be heard in it, though the Old Testament also contains less valuable materials, such as the creator-God's laws and human additions.<sup>16</sup>

It was the Christian character of Valentinian teachers that Irenaeus found especially disconcerting. He portrayed Valentinians as Christian pretenders who speak similarly but think differently. What Irenaeus wanted to achieve with his massive work was to lay bare what the Valentinians, who looked like ordinary Christians, secretly taught among themselves. Irenaeus readily describes the veil of secrecy surrounding Valentinian teaching: it was only revealed to the true initiates, and even to them only gradually. In the same vein, Tertullian complains how utterly frustrating it is to try to conduct any reasonable discussion with Valentinians:

If you question them in all good faith, they answer with a poker face and raised eyebrows, «that is obscure»; if you feel them out diplomatically, they swear they have the same beliefs as you, only blurred in translation... They do not even reveal their secrets to their own disciples before they make them their own, but instead they have a trick by which they persuade them before they teach them.<sup>17</sup>

Tertullian's portrayal of secretive Valentinians can also be suspected of being a rhetorical ploy. Celsus, in his second-century treatise against Christians, complained about their elusiveness in a similar manner: «If only they would undertake my question... But they refuse to answer, and indeed discourage questions of any sort.»<sup>18</sup>

What is more, there is evidence that Valentinians were less secretive than their opponents wanted their audiences to believe. Irenaeus relates that he was able to glean information on Valentinian theology by reading their books and by discussing with them:

And so, after changing upon commentaries of the disciples of Valentinus —as they style themselves— and after conversing with some of them and becoming acquain-

15. Ptolemaeus, *The Letter to Flora*.

16. E.g., Ptolemaeus, *Letter to Flora* (on which see below).

17. Tertullian, *Against Valentinians*, 1.16-18 (trans. Mark Riley).

18. Celsus, *On the True Doctrine* (according to Origen, *Against Celsus*, 1.9, 12; trans. Hoffman).

ted with their doctrine, we thought it necessary to inform you, our dear friend, about these portentous and profound mysteries...<sup>19</sup>

## 5. NEW VALENTINIAN DOCUMENTS

The discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library in Egypt in 1945 has considerably expanded our knowledge of what Valentinians taught. Before this discovery, firsthand information on their views was limited to a set of brief passages from their texts quoted in the works of their opponents; only one text —Ptolemaeus' *Letter to Flora*— survives in its entirety in this body of literature. The Nag Hammadi Library features at least eight texts that are usually classified as Valentinian. The most prominent of these are *The Tripartite Tractate*, a systematic account of Valentinian theology, comprising about 80 pages; the *Gospel of Truth*, an eloquent meditation on Christian proclamation; the *Gospel of Philip*, which despite its name is neither a story of Jesus nor a collection of his sayings but a notebook-like collection of excerpts probably derived from multiple sources; the *Treatise on the Resurrection*, which is a didactic letter on this topic addressed to a student called Reginus, chided for his lack of exercise in matters spiritual; and the *Interpretation of Knowledge*, which addresses a conflict within an early Christian community that was split into those who have the gift of the spirit and those who don't.<sup>20</sup>

Strikingly, none of the prominent Valentinian teachers whose names we know from their opponents' works — Valentinus, Ptolemaeus, Heracleon, Theodotus, Marcus — are mentioned in the Valentinian texts of the Nag Hammadi Library. This is especially surprising since we know that Valentinus' works held a place of honor among some of his followers (one of them carried with him a collection of psalms composed by Valentinus); that Origen knew Heracleon's *Commentary on John* in the beginning of the third century; and that Epiphanius of Salamis, in the middle of the fourth century, had access to a copy of Ptolemaeus' *Letter to Flora* —two hundred years after its original composition!

19. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1, pref. 2 (trans. Unger).

20. Most up-to-date editions of these texts are published in the series Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies (Brill) and Bibliothèque Copte de Nag Hammadi (University of Laval Presses and Peeters). For a new English translation of the texts included in the Nag Hammadi Library, see M. MEYER (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition*, New York: HarperOne 2008. A good sample of Valentinian key sources are also translated in B. LAYTON (trans.), *The Gnostic Scriptures*, New York: Doubleday 1987, 223-353.

## 6. VALENTINUS'S TEACHINGS

It debated whether Valentinus, the founding head of the school, was really a Valentinian. The debate was launched by the German patristic scholar Christoph Marksches who, in his dissertation published in 1992, portrayed Valentinus as a Platonic biblical scholar who belonged to the same Alexandrian tradition of allegorical interpretation of scriptures as the Jewish philosopher Philo, and two famous Christian theologians, Clement and Origen. According to Marksches, the complex Valentinian myths of origin were developed only among the followers of Valentinus.<sup>21</sup> The Norwegian historian of religion Einar Thomassen, however, comes to the opposite conclusion in his large synthesis of Valentinian theology. Thomassen reaffirms the older position that Valentinus was the ultimate source of Valentinian theology and myth.<sup>22</sup>

Uncertainty over Valentinus's views is due to the paucity of evidence. None of the texts he wrote survive; we only have less than a dozen brief quotations from them in the works of his opponents. Some specialists think that Valentinus was the author of the *Gospel of Truth*, but the attribution remains uncertain; neither the text itself nor external evidence lends any irrefutable proof for this view.

What makes Marksches' view compelling is his observation that the surviving fragments of Valentinus contain no clear references to any key topics of the Valentinian myth. Neither Wisdom's fall nor the ignorant creator-God is mentioned in these fragments. What is more, there are few traces of a dualistic separation between the divine world and our world, which is considered part and parcel of the Gnostic worldview. In fact, one finds an opposite teaching in the fragments of Valentinus. True, he regarded, in a Platonic fashion, our world as an inferior copy of the divine realm. However, he posits no radical break between this world and the divine one. On the contrary, he maintained that different parts of the universe form a cosmic chain where all links belong together.

Valentinus illustrated his idea of our world by comparing it to a portrait, which is inferior to the person who posed for it. Valentinus did not dwell on the negative aspect inherent in this metaphor —that is, he did not emphasize the picture's poor quality in comparison to the model. Instead, he emphasizes the positive aspect of the portrait: what lends value to it is the person it

21. CHR. MARKSCHIES, *Valentinus Gnosticus? Untersuchungen zur valentinianischen Gnosis; mit einem Kommentar zu den Fragmenten Valentins* (WUNT 65), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1992.

22. THOMASSEN, *The Spiritual Seed*, 416-490.

depicts.<sup>23</sup> In the Roman world, statues of emperors represented imperial power in the provinces. Valentinus probably had something similar in mind: a portrait is valuable because it stands in for the presence of an honored person. In this case, it is not so important how good the portrait is as such; it is more important whom it depicts. (The following thought may help us clarify the idea: If you mock the portrait of an important person, you insult not only the painter but also the model.) What Valentinus wants to say with all this is that our world is «trustworthy» because it is an image of the eternal realm, and because God's invisible essence operates in it. This train of thought presupposes a relatively positive view of the visible world. The world is an inferior copy of the divine realm but it is not so bad that we could not recognize the original model from it.

Valentinus also composed poems; the only surviving example is the elegant piece entitled *Summer Harvest*.<sup>24</sup> It is also a very sophisticated poem. Valentinus combines in it the well-known idea of a cosmic chain with an equally well-known Stoic notion that there is a divine spirit that permeates and supports the entire universe. Here are Valentinus' words:

I see that all is suspended by the Spirit,  
 I understand that all is carried by the Spirit:  
 flesh, hanging from soul,  
 soul, <depending on> air,  
 air, hanging from aether,  
 fruits borne from the depth,  
 a babe brought forth from the womb.

What is surprising in this poem is the combination of two cosmic elements, air and aether, with two features linked with humans, that is, flesh and soul. In a cosmological poem like this, one might expect that two latter elements would be water and earth, two items in traditional lists of four cosmological substances.

The choice of the words «flesh» and «soul» no doubt betrays the influence of Pauline terminology on Valentinus but this does not explain why «soul» stands next to «air» in his poem. There is, however, a feasible connection between the soul and air in ancient science.<sup>25</sup> It was a popular explanation for

23. Valentinus, Fragment 5 (= Clement, *Strom.* 4.89.6-90.1).

24. Valentinus, Fragment 8 (= Hippolytus, *Refutation*, 6.37.7).

25. Cf. I. DUUNDERBERG, *Stoic Traditions in the School of Valentinus*, in T. RASIMUS – T. ENGBERG-PEDERSEN – I. DUUNDERBERG (eds.), *Stoicism in Early Christianity*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Aca-

the Greek word for «soul» (*psychē*) that it derives from similarly sounding words meaning «cold» (*psychos*, *psychros*), «cooling» (*psyxis*), and «to make cold» (*psychō*). Accordingly, it was commonplace to assume the soul is somehow «cold.» This in turn was connected with the idea that the characteristic feature of air is coldness. Hence, the idea that the soul came into being as the result of chilling that took place as our innermost essence passed through the cold air on its way to earth.

The Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo vividly described how this «warm nature within us,» that is, our mind, became the soul in the air in the same manner as hot iron is hardened by plunging it into cold water.<sup>26</sup> I assume that Valentinus' poem *Harvest* reflects the same idea: He mentions the soul next to air since he thought that the soul came into being in the cold air. The soul, thus, is one step in the transformation of our «true self» from warm to cold, and from subtle to coarse; «flesh» represents the final step in the same process.

It stands to reason that salvation requires the reversed process, that from cold to warm, and from coarse to subtle. This conclusion is not mentioned in Valentinus' poem, but this is the way similar metaphors related to cold and warm are employed in other Valentinian texts. There's a poetic account in the *Gospel of Truth* of how a warm wind draws up «cold water» on earth and makes it warm; and it is described in the *Gospel of Philip* how summer comes when the Holy Spirit blows like a wind, while the spirit of this world brings about winter.<sup>27</sup>

The fragments of Valentinus thus show that he knew and made use of philosophical traditions of his time. This background helps make sense of his other teachings, some of which may seem odd to us. For example, Valentinus taught that Jesus had an exceptional body; he «ate and drank in his own manner, without excreting.»<sup>28</sup> This argument, which may sound awkward, or silly, or even blasphemous to us, is often explained as a statement related to early Christian debates on whether Jesus was fully human or not. This was indeed a debated issue —even among Valentinians. Hippolytus of Rome informs us that they were split into two fractions due to this question:

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demics 2010, 245-264, esp. 248-250. My reading is indebted to the fine analysis of Origen's view about the soul (and its Philonic background) by H. STRUTWOLF, *Gnosis als System: Zur Rezeption der valentinianischen Gnosis bei Origines* (FKDG 56), Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht 1993, esp. 250.

26. Philo, *Somn.* 1.31.

27. *Gos. Tru.* 34-35; *Gos. Phil.* § 109 (p. 77); cf. *Gos. Phil.* § 7-8 (p. 52).

28. Valentinus, Fragment 3 (= Clement, *Strom.* 3.59.3).

some of them insisted that Jesus only had a spiritual body, while others thought that he also had a body consisting of the soul.<sup>29</sup> Both parties agreed with Valentinus that Jesus did not have a normal body, but they could not agree in what way exactly the body of Jesus was different from the ordinary human one.

As for Valentinus' teaching about Christ's extraordinary digestive system, it is, however, important to note that similar stories were told about prominent Greek philosophers. One of these legends was that the famous Pythagoras never excreted, never had sex, was never drunk, and never laughed.<sup>30</sup> These all were taken as signs of his exceptional self-control. If we take this background into account, it seems that Valentinus' point was not so much to strike a balance in early Christian debates about Jesus' humanity, but instead he wanted to show that Jesus had the same level of self-control as the very best of the Greek philosophers.

Valentinus knew, adopted and adapted non-philosophical traditions as well. His version of the story of Adam's creation suggests that he was familiar with Sethian myths of origin. In Valentinus' view, Adam was created by angels. However, there was a seed of divine essence in Adam, which made him superior to the creator-angels. Adam's superiority is revealed to them as soon as he starts to speak. Recognizing the truly divine human in him, the angels are struck with fear and try to destroy, or conceal, Adam.<sup>31</sup>

A very similar story of Adam as opposed to creator-angels is related in the Sethian *Secret Revelation of John*.<sup>32</sup> What Valentinus adds to this tradition is the idea that Adam with his uninhibited speech humiliated the angels. This added feature, again, creates a link to traditional stories about philosophers who irritated tyrants with their frank speech. My reading of this fragment of Valentinus, in short, is that he portrays Adam as the first philosopher and the angels as cosmic tyrants who did not abide criticism well.

29. Hippolytus, *Refutation* 6.35.5-7. Hippolytus identifies the former view as an eastern Valentinian teaching, and the latter as the western one. THOMASSEN, *The Spiritual Seed*, 43-45, thinks however that Hippolytus misunderstood the debate; in Thomassen's opinion, this was «an internal difference within the western school.» Moreover, Thomassen maintains that the body of Christ in this context is the church.
30. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 8.19.
31. Valentinus, Fragment 1 (= Clement, *Strom.* 2.36.2-4).
32. *Secr. John* (NHC II) 19-21parr.

## 7. MYTH AND SOCIETY IN THE SCHOOL OF VALENTINUS

The brief passage on Adam's creation is the only glimpse we have of Valentinus as a mythmaker; it is impossible to tell if he was more active on this front. It is, however, quite clear that some of his followers were. There are different versions of the Valentinian creation myth in the opponents' works, most prominently in Irenaeus and Hippolytus, and in the *Tripartite Tractate* and some other Valentinian texts of the Nag Hammadi Library.

The Valentinian myth of origin revolves around the figure of Wisdom (*Sophia*) and the story of her exile outside the divine realm.<sup>33</sup> The youngest of the divine beings, she disturbs the serenity of the divine realm, either because she loved the true God too much, or because she wanted to create something in the same way as the true God had done. Since her aspirations are doomed to fail, she (or a part of her) is expelled from the divine realm.

Abandoned in emptiness, Wisdom sets the creation of an inferior world in motion. Her first creation is the inferior creator-God, who is unaware of the truly divine realm and erroneously believes that he is the only god. This god's most important achievement is the human being, who consists of three elements, matter, soul and spirit; the spirit is of divine origin and is transmitted to the first human without the creator-God's knowledge.

It may be very difficult to explain what the ancient Christian audiences found attractive in the complex pedigree of the divine household offered in the Valentinian myth. The function of the story of Wisdom's fall seems easier to explain. Similar stories were told in a less complex form —the soul lost in the material world and seeking its way back to its true home.<sup>34</sup> The story of Wisdom was no doubt an exemplary story; the hearer could recognize in the tale of Wisdom's exile and sufferings outside the divine realm a reflection of the fate of one's own soul.

What is particularly striking in the Valentinian Wisdom myth is the attention paid to the emotions Wisdom experienced in the emptiness outside the divine realm: she is described as being in the state of anxiety, fear and pain. Accordingly, Christ appears at different stages of the myth as the healer of

33. My account follows at this point Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.4.

34. The best examples of such accounts in the Nag Hammadi Library are *Exegesis of the Soul* and *Authoritative Discourse (Authentikos Logos)*. A similar story is also elaborated in the latter part of the *Gospel of Mary* (not included in the Nag Hammadi Library, but in another Coptic collection of early Christian texts).

Wisdom's harmful emotions. He either removes them completely or turns them into something else.

In antiquity, the therapy of emotions was one of the most important benefits the philosophers promised to offer to their students. The philosophers often portrayed themselves as the doctors of the mind, who were able to cure those entangled in excessive emotions by means of rational analysis.<sup>35</sup> The Valentinian Wisdom myth provides us with one of the earliest Christian adaptations of this theme; the idea of Christ as the doctor of emotions became popular later in the teachings of great Christian theologians such as Clement of Alexandria.

Another crucial point in the Valentinian myth is the idea of the three essences bestowed upon Adam in creation, that is, matter, soul and spirit.<sup>36</sup> It should be noted that «matter» does not equal «body» in this connection; it is only at a later point of the story that humans are provided with «the garments of flesh,» mentioned in Genesis 3. Matter is here rather an invisible essence that is doomed to destruction. Spirit, in turn, is an essence that cannot suffer destruction. The soul occupies a middle place between the two: it can either be inclined to matter or to spirit. Accordingly, the soul will either be destroyed or saved, depending on the choice it makes between matter and spirit.

Valentinians also used the distinction between matter, soul and spirit to divide humankind into three different groups. In this model, the non-Christians belong to the material race that had no hope of salvation at all, while Christians are divided into more advanced spiritual Christians and less advanced «ensouled» or «animate» Christians. This division goes back to Paul, who in First Corinthians 2:10-16 had placed Christians into two categories using the same terminology.

Irenaeus claims that Valentinians designated themselves the spiritual Christians and placed all other Christians into the inferior class of animate ones. Irenaeus describes this division as a completely fixed system: neither promotion nor relegation from one class to another was possible. This in fact was the reason why Valentinians so readily indulged in bad behavior, according to Irenaeus: as spiritual Christians their salvation was guaranteed no matter what they did, because their spiritual essence was indestructible; they thought they were «saved by nature» while all other Christians had to believe and do good works to be saved.

35. Essential for this aspect of ancient philosophy is M. NUSSBAUM, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1994.

36. For one account of this teaching, see Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.6-7.

It seems quite clear to me that Irenaeus exaggerated the rigidity of the Valentinian doctrine of three classes of humankind. Irenaeus wants to portray this doctrine in a way that makes it least attractive to all other Christians. This aim is served by the impression we gain from Irenaeus that Valentinians would not grant these «lower-class» Christians full inclusion into their group. In other words, the animate Christians should not entertain any hopes of being promoted to the higher class of spiritual Christians. The obvious conclusion is that the animate Christians would gain nothing by joining Valentinian groups.

Other sources show that Valentinian teachers held different views about «spiritual» and «animate» classes of humankind. For example, Heracleon did not use this distinction to separate two kinds of Christians. Instead, he placed the Jews, who worship the creator-God, in the middle category of the animate ones. The spiritual ones are all those who worship the true God «in spirit and truth.» It may be tempting to think that «the Jews» also include the lower-class Christians who still believe in the Jewish god, but this does not seem to be the case here. Heracleon supports his position with a quotation from an apocryphal Christian text where the Jews were depicted as worshippers of «angels, months, and the moon.»<sup>37</sup> Although this probably gives a misleading picture of Jewish worship, this picture was prevalent among Christians. The important thing here is that this portrayal is confined to the Jews (in Christian imagination). Nothing suggests that Christians of any bent could be intended here as well. Hence, my conclusion is that Heracleon used the division of humankind into three classes to make an ethnic argument: all Christians belong to a different, more advanced class of people than the Jews. Heracleon, in other words, posited one version of the popular idea that Christians form «a third race,» distinct both from the pagans and the Jews.

Another ethnic application of the tripartite division of humankind is attested in the Valentinian *Tripartite Tractate*. Like Heracleon, the author of this text identifies the Greeks with «the material ones» and the Jews with the animate ones.. In the first part of this text, it is related how the material and animate beings were mixed with each other in a primeval battle between these two groups. One finds here an element of Valentinian political theology: as the result of this battle, both parties were infected with the lust for power. The solution to this problem is the creation of a cosmic household with a clear administrative structure: all beings were vested with a certain amount of power, so that everyone rules over someone and is ruled by someone:

37. Heracleon, Fragment 21.

Each of the rulers, with the category and the grade that came to be his lot in accordance with the way they had appeared, took his position, having been given his charge in the economy. And so none of them is without a command, and none is without a king above him, from the ends of the heavens to the ends of the earth... There are kings and there are masters, as well as those whom they command: some are there to punish, others to give judgment, some to give relief and healing, others to instruct, and still others to keep watch.<sup>38</sup>

The ethnic aspect of the argument developed in the *Tripartite Tractate* becomes visible in the latter part of the text. It is described there how the Jews gradually gained a better insight into the things divine, and thus became distinguished from the Greeks. However, it is the arrival of the Savior that brings about ultimate clarity as to who belongs to what group, and the responses of humans to his proclamation show which group they belong to. The spiritual ones accept the Savior at once, whereas the animate ones first hesitate but then accept. It is only the material ones who reject him completely.

The *Interpretation of Knowledge* provides us with yet another take on this theme. The text could be read as an insider's version of the same practical issues that Irenaeus described from an opponent's perspective. Irenaeus claims that Valentinians were arrogant towards other Christians, which could be even seen in the way they walked —like pompous Gallian roosters!<sup>39</sup> The position developed in the *Interpretation of Knowledge* may offer one explanation why such accusations came about.

As I mentioned above, the author of the *Interpretation of Knowledge* addresses a situation of conflict in a community split into those who are spiritually well-off and those who are not. The author finds the real cause of trouble in the latter group because they are jealous of those having the gift of the Spirit. It turns out that one reason for dissatisfaction is that only those belonging to the advanced group are entitled to speak in the congregation meetings. The author argues in favor of this privilege granted to the elite and urges the have-nots to be content with their place in the congregation.

If the *Interpretation of Knowledge* reflects a common Valentinian practice, or even if it is a description of how Valentinians thought things should have been, it can be easily seen why Valentinians were accused of presenting themselves as superior to others. This much granted, two qualifications are necessary. First, the *Interpretation of Knowledge* presupposes that Christians at

38. *Tri. Trac.* 99-100.

39. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.15.2.

different levels of insight were all present in the same meeting; the text does not lend support to the idea that Valentinians arranged secret meetings among themselves. Second, the text does not subscribe to the idea that those placed in the spiritual class considered themselves as a race saved by nature. It is noteworthy that these people are called «those making progress.» The same designation was used in philosophical texts for those who were seriously aiming at moral improvement but who were not yet perfect; they still had to make a serious effort to do the right thing. This is the level at which those with the spiritual gift are placed in the *Interpretation of Knowledge*: they are progressing but have not yet attained perfection.

I take one more instance of the variant ways Valentinians interpreted the animate-spiritual divide; this example comes from Clement of Alexandria's collection of Valentinian teaching, entitled the *Excerpts of Theodotus*.<sup>40</sup> One of the passages in this collection describes a great wedding feast to which the spiritual ones and «the righteous souls» are summoned. These are obviously the souls that have made the right choice, pro spirit, contra matter. At the wedding feast, the two groups become completely equal to each other and know each other. After this, a separation follows once again: the spiritual substance discards the souls and returns to the place of its origin, that is, to the Father.<sup>41</sup>

This passage is usually considered evidence for Valentinian eschatology.<sup>42</sup> It is possible, however, to take this as an eschatological myth which is used to illustrate how the spirit and soul should be united in one's inner self. It is noteworthy that the description of the spirit's return ends up with the affirmation that it will see God. The same goal is set for the spiritual person in other parts of the same text, and it is emphasized that one will be able to see God only when the soul essence has also entered.<sup>43</sup> Hence, the talk about the coming together of the spiritual ones and the righteous souls may not refer to different kinds of groups in the real world; the account could also be a narrative illustration of the right state of mind required for the vision of God.

40. For what follows, see I. DUNDERBERG, *Valentinian Theories on Classes of Humankind* (forthcoming in the proceedings of the 2011 meeting of the *Patristische Arbeitsgemeinschaft*).

41. Clement, *Exc. Theod.* 63-64.

42. Cf., e.g., the classic study by E. PAGELS, «Conflicting Versions of Valentinian Eschatology: Irenaeus' Treatise vs. the Excerpts from Theodotus», *HTR* 67 (1974) 35-53.

43. Clement, *Exc. Theod.* 56.4-5.

## 8. INSTRUCTION AT DIFFERENT LEVELS

I have already mentioned Ptolemaeus, who composed a didactic letter addressed to a woman called Flora. This text is important for offering a glimpse of Valentinian instruction addressed to novices. The letter is in fact a carefully structured study on the law in the Old Testament. In the first part of his treatise, Ptolemaeus maintains that there are different layers in the biblical law. In addition to God's own laws, it contains human additions by Moses and the elders of the Jewish people. In the second part, Ptolemaeus argues that God's own law is contradictory. The prime example is that this law accepts revenge, in the form of the principle "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." According to Ptolemaeus, God had the good intention of reducing evil with these laws but his intention did not materialize. It escaped God's notice that if you avenge a murder with another one, there will be more violence, not less. Ptolemaeus infers that such a God cannot be perfect; he is righteous, in the same manner as judges are, but he is not good. The distinction seems very similar to that drawn by Marcion and his followers.

Ptolemaeus, however, did not agree with Marcion's conclusion that Christians should dismiss the Old Testament completely. Instead, Ptolemaeus taught how Christians can understand the Old Testament in the right way, that is, allegorically. The examples Ptolemaeus gives of his allegorical interpretation, though, contain no mythic speculation; the examples he gives are entirely practical and aimed at moral improvement:

The third subdivision of God's law is the symbolic part, which is after the image of the superior, spiritual realm: I mean, what is ordained about offerings, circumcision, the Sabbath, fasting, Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and the like... For the Savior commanded us to offer offerings, but not dumb beasts or incense: rather, spiritual praises and glorifications and prayers of thanksgiving, and offerings in the form of sharing and good deeds. And he wishes us to perform circumcision, but not circumcision of the bodily foreskin, rather of the spiritual heart, and to keep Sabbath, for he wants us to be inactive in wicked acts; and to fast, though he does not wish us to perform physical fasts, rather spiritual ones, which consist of abstinence from all bad deeds.<sup>44</sup>

At the end of his letter, Ptolemaeus promises to offer additional teaching to Flora, if she proves worthy of it. This closure clearly shows that Valenti-

44. Ptolemaeus, *Letter to Flora*, 33.5.8-13.

nians adapted their teaching to the abilities of their students. The same idea is expressed in a more vivid manner in the *Gospel of Philip*:

If (the disciple of God) is wise, he understands what discipleship is. Bodily forms will not deceive him, but he will examine the condition of each person's soul and speak appropriately with the person. In the world, many animals have human form. If the disciple of God identify them as pigs, he feeds them acorns. If cattle, he feeds them barley, chaff and fodder. If dogs, he throws them some bones. If slaves, he feeds them what is preliminary. If children, he feeds them what is complete.<sup>45</sup>

The closure of Ptolemaeus' *Letter to Flora*, however, should not be taken as demonstration of his wicked intention to lure a poorly educated Christian woman into his group. It was commonplace in antiquity—and it still is—that teaching must be adjusted to the student's level of understanding; we have evidence for this practice in all varieties of groups offering education (Hermetic, philosophical, Christian, Jewish). Another idea connected with this was that advanced teaching was only delivered orally, so that any potential misunderstandings of the students could be immediately corrected. Some teachers even forbade their students to make notes of the lectures they heard. Against this background, it is feasible that Valentinians indeed preferred traditions transmitted through «the living voice», as Irenaeus claimed.<sup>46</sup> Clement of Alexandria reports about the claim that Valentinus was taught by a certain Theodas, who was alleged to be one of Paul's students. If this information is of any value historically, Valentinus may have authorized his teaching with a claim to the oral transmission of Paul's views. Unfortunately, this piece of information is not very secure in terms of historical reliability.<sup>47</sup>

## 9. A PERSECUTED MINORITY GROUP

I conclude my contribution with a brief account of what happened to Valentinians in the Roman empire after its gradual Christianization from the fourth century onwards. All Valentinian teachers known to us by name belong to the second century but Valentinian theology remained popular in the sub-

45. *Gos. Phil.* 80.23-81.14 (trans. Meyer, with modification).

46. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.2.1; cf. Hans-Friedrich Weiss, *Friühes Christentum und Gnosis: Eine rezeptionsgeschichtliche Studie* (WUNT 225), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2008, 420.

47. Cf. MARKSCHIES, *Valentinus Gnosticus?*, 299-300.

sequent centuries. This is shown by the survival of Valentinian treatises in Coptic translations and copies stemming from the fourth century, and by the fact that Epiphanius had a copy of Ptolemaeus' *Letter to Flora* in the latter half of the fourth century. It has also been suggested that Valentinian theology had an impact not only on Origen but also on Saint Antony, the famous Egyptian hermit.<sup>48</sup> All these are evidence that Valentinianism did not suddenly fade away after its bloom in the second century.

Nevertheless, the opponents' efforts to make Valentinianism a heresy finally paid off, when Christianity became a privileged religion in the Roman Empire at the beginning of the fourth century. From this point on, the forms of Christianity denounced as heretical began to be suppressed with the support of the imperial power. Laws against heresies were issued, though they were not always actively enforced.

One such law prohibited heretics from possessing any places of worship. Valentinians, however, still had such places at the end of the fourth century. We know this much from correspondence between Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan, and the emperor Theodosius I.<sup>49</sup> In the year 388, Ambrose wrote to Theodosius to complain about his decision that a synagogue that had been burnt down by Christians should be rebuilt with the church's funds. Ambrose finds this completely outrageous, and asks, «Shall, then, the burning of the temple of the Valentinians be also avenged?» It turns out from the letter that a gang of furious monks had burnt down a Valentinian place of worship «in some village.» Ambrose took it as a matter of course that no compensation for the injured party was needed in the latter case; hence, none is now needed for the Jews either. It would, Ambrose reasoned, completely out of question that «a place be made for the unbelief of the Jews out of the spoils of the Church.»

It is indicative of the new era in the Roman Empire that the emperor Theodosius yielded to Ambrose's argument and retracted his earlier decision that the church compensate for the damage done to the Jews. Valentinians, however, held out in the Christian Empire despite the orthodox harrassment of the heretics; their longevity is suggested by the fact that they are still mentioned in the Canons of the Second Council of Trullo, held close to the end of

48. Origen: STRUTWOLF, *Gnosis als System*; Antony: D. BRAKKE, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 2006, 17-19.

49. The correspondence (Ambrose, *Ep. 80-81*) is quoted in J. STEVENSON – W. H. C. FREND (eds.), *Creeds, Councils and Controversies: Documents illustrating the history of the church AD 337-461* (revised ed.), London: SPCK 1989, 135-137.

the seventh century (692): «And the Manichaeans, and Valentinians and Marcionites and all of similar heresies must give certificates and anathematize each his own heresy.»<sup>50</sup>

50. Canon 95, quoted according to *Anti-Nicene Fathers*. Instructive for the late history of Valentinians is the study by K. KOSCHORKE, *Patristische Materialien zur Spätgeschichte der valentinianischen Gnosis*, in M. KRAUSE (ed.), *Gnosis and Gnosticism* (NHS 17), Leiden: Brill 1981, 120-139.