Introduction

Introductory remarks on “gnosis” and “Gnosticism”

“Gnosticism” is a modern European term that first appears in the seventeenth-century writings of Cambridge Platonist Henry More (1614–87). For More, “Gnosticism” designates one of the earliest Christian heresies, connected to controversies addressed in Revelation 2:18–29 and in his own day.¹ The term “gnosis,” on the other hand, is one of several ancient Greek nouns for “knowledge,” specifically experiential or esoteric knowledge based on direct experience, which can be distinguished from mere perception, understanding, or skill. For Plato and other ancient thinkers, “gnosis” refers to that knowledge which enables perception of the underlying structures of reality, Being itself, or the divine.² Such gnosia was valued highly in many early Christian communities,³ yet the claims of some early Christians to possess gnosia came under suspicion and critique in the post-Pauline letter of 1 Timothy, which urges its readers to “avoid the profane chatter and contradictions of falsely so-called gnosia.”⁴ With this began the polemical contrast between “false gnosia” and “true faith.”

It is this polemical sense of “false gnosia” that Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons took up in the title of his major anti-heretical work: Refutation and Overthrow of Falsely So-Called Gnosis, or Against Heresies, written c. CE 180.⁵ Irenaeus used 1 Timothy’s phrase not only to designate his opponents’ gnosia as false, but, even more important, to construct a broad category of classification, a “Tree of Gnosia,” which could be traced back to the “arch-heretic” Simon Magus.⁶ In this sense, “Gnosia” refers to a wide variety of “false” thinkers and groups with a common parentage: the Simonians, as well as “a multitude of Gnostics,” called “Barbelo-Gnostics, Ophites, and Cainites,” Irenaeus regards as “the source and root,” “the mothers, fathers, and ancestors” of his chief opponents, the Valentinians.⁷ With this adaptation of “falsely so-called gnosia” into the “Tree of Gnosia,” Irenaeus established the groundwork for both the pejorative and collective uses of “Gnosia” and its modern derivative, “Gnosticism.”

For those who employ the category today, “Gnosticism” is most often defined as a religious movement that flourished from the second to fourth centuries CE in Jewish,
Christian, and pagan forms, and shared three essential features: (1) a religious system of thought emphasizing the salvific power of gnosis, a secret knowledge about the divine, the cosmos, and/or the true self, conveyed by revelation, contemplation, and/or ritual experience; (2) a radical dualism contrasting the superior realm of the divine to the lower realm of the cosmos and its creator; and (3) extensive and elaborate patterns of myth-making, or mythopoeia.

Serious challenges to such definitions of “Gnosticism” have been raised in recent years, most pointedly by Michael A. Williams and Karen L. King, who point out that the diverse range of evidence does not fit into such definitions. While some individuals and groups undoubtedly claimed to possess “gnosis” and thus called themselves “knowers” or “Gnostikoi,” the category of “Gnosticism” is an artificial construct, based on the anti-heretical writers’ efforts to unify their opponents under a single pejorative category (“falsely so-called Gnosis”), that carries with it a set of misleading implications. These include the tendency to: generalize from a single element or sample to all representatives of the category; emphasize the negative, unattractive, immoral, or false characteristics the heresiologists sought to expose and refute; unify many varieties of thought into one mythological system; and think of “Gnosticism” almost exclusively as a “Christian heresy.”

As a result of these observations, several alternatives to traditional conceptions of “Gnosticism” have emerged in recent scholarship. These include: abandonment of the term altogether as a hopelessly outdated and distorting category; redefinition of “Gnosticism” in a more narrow sense to designate a specific group whose members used the self-designation “Gnostikoi” (“knowers”) and/or “gnostike hairesis” (“gnostic sect”); acceptance of “Gnosticism,” “Gnostic,” and/or “Gnosis” as heuristic categories designed to highlight shared patterns of thought across religious texts and traditions. I have chosen to avoid “Gnosticism,” but to employ “Gnosis” and “Gnostic” in this third sense, as heuristic devices to designate not a single religious movement, but a broad range of religious systems with a shared emphasis on the saving significance of esoteric religious knowledge or “gnosis.” In my view, it is crucial to recognize the variety of such “gnosis-centered” traditions, but equally important to consider individual examples as distinct manifestations of a larger pattern of “gnosis-centered” religious thought. To recognize such a larger pattern of thought is not equivalent to constructing a single religious movement called “Gnosticism.” It is important to acknowledge that such gnosic-centered patterns of thought did not exist in a vacuum or ethereal world of ideas, but in distinct social worlds, among human individuals and communities, both within early Christianity and in the larger cultural worlds of late antiquity.

The sources: anti-heretical writings and the texts of Nag Hammadi

Before the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library in 1945, the available evidence for the religious thought of ancient “Gnosis” derived almost exclusively from reports and excerpts found in the writings of the heresiologists, especially Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Clement, Tertullian, and Epiphanius. In the course of describing their opponents’
beliefs and practices, these writers often provide valuable information, such as the names of individual teachers, schools, and sects; detailed accounts of their teachings; and occasional reports of social organization and ritual practice. Yet as valuable as these contemporary reports are, they must be seen within the context of the heresiologists’ polemical goals which were neither to document nor illuminate the religious systems of their opponents but rather to undermine them by exposing their diversity and “error.”

With the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library in 1945, a large and rich new body of primary-source material became available for investigation, but these sources, written by and for insiders, have proved challenging to understand, and the evidence of the anti-heretical writers has remained a valuable resource, even as it has continued to complicate the problem of defining “Gnosis” and “Gnosticism.” Critical analysis of the Nag Hammadi texts, and the relation of their religious perspectives to those who produced and read them, remains one of the most challenging and important tasks in the study of early Christianity and other ancient religious traditions. While the identity of those who produced the Nag Hammadi texts remains uncertain, there has emerged a general recognition that at least four major types of gnosis-centered thought can be distinguished. This essay treats the first three of these “types,” defined as follows:

1 **Thomasine Christianity**, represented chiefly by the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Book of Thomas the Contender*. While generally excluded from the category of “Gnosticism,” the *Gospel of Thomas* is included here because it exhibits a religious perspective in which “gnosis” figures prominently.

2 **The “Sethian,” Barbelo-Gnostic, or classic “Gnostic” system**, represented by the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, and several other Nag Hammadi texts, as well as Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.29; Epiphanius, *Refutation of All Heresies* 26, 39, and 40; and related heresiological reports.

3 **The Valentinian tradition**, known from the reports of Justin, Irenaeus, and later heresiologists as one of the leading Christian varieties of “Gnosis”; the evidence for the Valentinian tradition includes the fragments of Valentinus himself, Ptolemy’s *Letter to Flora*, and *Excerpts of Theodotus*, as well as several Nag Hammadi texts, including the *Gospel of Truth*, the *Gospel of Philip*, and the *Tripartite Tractate*.

I approach these as distinct types of Christian Gnosis that exhibit shared patterns of thought across a varied body of material. In what follows, I offer a brief description of each type, and focus on the conceptions of the divine and of the processes of creation and redemption in one representative example of each group.

1 **Thomasine Christianity: the Gospel of Thomas**

The *Gospel of Thomas* is perhaps the most widely known text of the Nag Hammadi library. This is in no small part because it is a sayings gospel that has proved extremely valuable to the study of Jesus’ sayings in the New Testament Gospels. It presents the
teachings of Jesus in ways that are both similar to and yet surprisingly different from the canonical Gospels. Many sayings in the Gospel of Thomas are extremely close to apocalyptic and wisdom traditions of the Q tradition. Others reflect esoteric Jewish and early Christian traditions of Genesis interpretation, while several exhibit a more mystical theology and realized eschatology than those found in other known Jesus traditions.

Valuable as the Gospel of Thomas has been for comparative gospel studies, it has also proved to be an extremely valuable text in its own right, especially for the evidence it provides of a distinctively Thomasine variety of Christianity, which is widely regarded as having its origins in the region of Syria and north-west Mesopotamia, and as having a distinctively ascetic character. The gospel's overarching theological perspective is centered around the promise of salvation through a process of seeking, finding, and understanding the message of Jesus. Unlike the canonical Gospels, which blend Jesus' sayings into a narrative account, the Gospel of Thomas is a collection of sayings with no narrative or historical frame. For it, the significance of Jesus resides not in the events of his life, death, or resurrection, but rather in the meaning of his sayings.

The Gospel of Thomas opens with a saying that acknowledges the obscurity of the sayings and places salvific importance on finding their hermeneia or meaning:

These are the hidden sayings that the living Jesus spoke and Didymus Judas Thomas wrote down. And he said, “Whoever finds the meaning (hermeneia) of these sayings will not taste death.”

(Gospel of Thomas, Prologue and Logion 1)
of creation and redemption that involves three stages: (1) a state of perfection in which the Spirit/primordial Adam existed as Light in perfect unity with the divine; (2) a moment of corruption or loss, in which the Light Adam is cast into darkness/the body/the cosmos; and (3) a salvific restoration or return to the beginning, in which the “Light” of Genesis 1:3 or the primordial human being of Genesis 1:26–27 is recovered within the self and the individual is redemptively transformed.

Within this mythic framework, the Gospel of Thomas may be said to reflect the notion that ritual initiation or visionary ascent effects a restoration of the primordial human being, the “Adam of great power and wealth,” “the one who came into being before coming into being.”36 Recovering this primordial “Adam before Adam” is compared to standing at the beginning and knowing the end.37 Paradoxically, the newly redeemed human being shares an identity with the original Adam, the primordial self which existed from before the creation of the world, an uncreated, divine self hidden within or behind the visible self.38 Restoring or being transformed into this pre-created self may also figure into the interpretation of Logion 22, which compares nursing infants to those who enter the Kingdom. In response to his disciples’ question whether they too must become “little ones,” Jesus replies that they will enter the Kingdom when a series of transformations and substitutions have taken place:

Jesus said to them, “When you make the two one and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and when you make the male (hooyt) and the female (shime) into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female, when you make eyes in place of an eye, and a hand in place of a hand, and a foot in place of a foot, an image in place of an image, then you will enter the Kingdom.”

(Gospel of Thomas, Logion 22)39

With each of these images, something new comes into being, replacing what was: duality becomes unity, as two become one; opposing spatial categories undergo a reciprocal or two-way exchange (“inside–outside,” “above–below”); the two genders become a single one;40 new body parts (eyes, hand, foot) replace old; and a new image is made in place of another image. The old, created self gives way to a new self, a new identity or way of being human, for female and male alike.41

To return to the state of the pure Light that was “in the beginning” is to revert to a state superior even to that of humankind created in the image of God, male and female (Gen. 1:26–27). Those who enter the Kingdom have come to be like “the Living Jesus,” having attained the “Gnosis” of seeing and understanding the hidden treasures of the Light, the Kingdom, the true self, the Living Jesus, and his words. Although these treasures, like the Kingdom, are hidden and invisible,42 the Jesus of the Gospel of Thomas announces their availability to those who seek them, as he promises that those who seek will find and be transformed. As they come to know the meaning of his sayings, they will become like him, a Living one, a being of Light and Spirit, and will thus be restored to the state of union with the Kingdom.
and their original selfhood as children of the divine. In presenting its collection of Jesus’ teachings, the Gospel of Thomas offers its reader a way to salvation through gnosis, knowing, and understanding the message and identity of Jesus, the divine, and the true self, as it provides contemporary readers an invaluable piece of evidence for Thomasine Christian thought.

2 The Sethian, Barbelo-Gnostic, or “classic Gnostic” system: the Hypostasis of the Archons

The Genesis accounts of creation also provide a rich source for the religious speculation of the “Sethian,” Barbelo-Gnostic, or “classic Gnostic” tradition. This variety of Gnosis was first defined by Hans-Martin Schenke and closely parallels Bentley Layton’s category of “classic Gnosticism.”\(^4^3\) The starting point for Schenke’s construction of the “Sethian system” and “Sethian corpus of texts” is the brief description of Sethians in Epiphanius,\(^4^4\) together with the parallels in Pseudo-Tertullian\(^4^5\) and Philastrius,\(^4^6\) as well as Irenaeus’s report about the teachings of the “Barbelo Gnostics.”\(^4^7\) In Schenke’s view, the Nag Hammadi texts which represent a “Sethian corpus” and provide the basis for any inquiry into what is Sethian include: Apocryphon of John, Hypostasis of the Archons (or The Reality of the Rulers), Gospel of the Egyptians, Apocalypse of Adam, Three Steles of Seth, Zostrianos, Melchizedek, Thought of Norea, Trimorphic Protennoia.\(^4^8\)

All of these texts, Schenke argued, are closely related to one another, and “all of them represent or presuppose one and the same Gnostic system,” with variations.\(^3^9\) The Apocryphon of John, which exists in four Coptic translations (three in the Nag Hammadi library, and one in the Berlin Codex), is generally recognized as the most important representative text of Sethian Gnosis.\(^5^0\) I have chosen to focus here on the similar, but less complex (Hypostasis of the Archons or The Reality of the Rulers), as a Sethian text that illustrates the religious, philosophical, and literary characteristics of Sethian Gnosis.

Among the features of the “Sethian system” identified by Schenke and shared, to varying degrees, by the texts of the Sethian corpus are the following ideas:

1. the belief that “Sethians” are the spiritual posterity or seed of Seth;
2. the conception of the heavenly/earthly Seth and/or Adam as Savior figures;
3. the notion of Four Aeons and Light-Givers, named Harmozel, Oroiael, Daveithe, and Eleleth, as heavenly places of rest for Adam, Seth, and the seed of Seth;
4. a divine Triad of Father, his consort Barbelo, and their son Autogenes (the Self-Generated), also known as the Anointed;
5. the depiction of the realm of Ialdabaoth, the Creator, and his offspring, the Archons or Rulers, as outside of and below that of the divine; and
6. speculation about distinct historical epochs, in which Ialdabaoth and his Archons try unsuccessfully to annihilate the seed of Seth.\(^5^1\)

While further study of individual “Sethian” texts has led to some revision of Schenke’s reconstruction of the “Sethian system,”\(^5^2\) there has been general support for the
hypothesis that there exists a Sethian corpus of texts and that its shared religious themes were spun from a rich, intertextual blend of sources drawn from Middle Platonism, Genesis interpretation, and certain strands of early Christian thought. Perhaps even more important, the literature of Sethian Gnosis displays a clear preference for mythic narrative as a mode of theological discourse.

In its present form, *Hypostasis of the Archons* is a composite of two genres: a narrative of creation and a revelation or apocalypse, delivered from the angelic Illuminator Eleleth to Norea, spiritual daughter of Adam and Eve. These are introduced by a brief letter in which the narrator informs an unnamed recipient that his purpose in writing is to provide an account of “the hypostasis (reality or nature) of the authorities” about whom the “great apostle” Paul wrote. The narrative portions of *Hypostasis of the Archons* offer a retelling of the early chapters of Genesis as a story of confrontation between two modes of power: the Archons or Rulers of this world, led by the chief Archon Ialdabaoth, and multiple divine personae, including the Father, the Spirit, and the Illuminator Eleleth. Human beings enter the narrative as composite creatures, made of matter, soul, and Spirit, caught between these two opposed forces. The revelation from Eleleth to Norea promises salvation when the “True Human Being” comes and frees the spiritual children of Norea from the bondage of the Rulers.

The narrative begins abruptly with a brief episode that characterizes the chief Ruler Ialdabaoth as blind and arrogant, as he claims: “It is I who am god; there is none [apart from me].” The Ruler’s claim to be the only God elicits a voice of rebuke from Incorruptibility that exposes his error and sets in motion a process that leads to the creation of the first human beings. The origin of Ialdabaoth and his Archons is narrated later in the text, within Eleleth’s revelation to Norea. According to this account, Ialdabaoth came into being when Sophia, a personified female element of the divine, “wished to create something, alone without her consort.” Her solo effort brought forth Ialdabaoth, “an arrogant androgynous beast resembling a lion,” grossly deficient because he lacks the generative principle of form which comes only from the male parent. He becomes the “Chief Ruler” and Creator of the cosmos, and makes himself a vast realm after the pattern of the divine realms, complete with seven offspring of his own, who are “androgynous just like their father.” In their presence, Ialdabaoth claims to be “the god of the Entirety.” This false claim brings a rebuke from Zoe, the spiritual daughter of Sophia. Zoe breathes into his face and casts him down “into Tartaros, below the abyss.” Sabaoth, one of Ialdabaoth’s offspring, seeing the power of that angel, repents and is raised by Sophia and Zoe to the seventh heaven, where he reigns as Sabaoth, God of the Forces. Ialdabaoth’s envy at seeing his offspring’s splendor engenders envy, death, and further offspring, until “all the heavens of chaos became full of their multitudes.” Even this, the narrator insists, took place “by the will of the Father” so that “the sum of chaos might be attained.”

Contrary to popular notions that “Gnostic” theology identifies the God of the biblical tradition with the deficient Creator of the world, *Hypostasis of the Archons* and other Sethian texts in fact identify different aspects of the biblical God with several distinct characters – some divine, some archontic. The creators of Sethian myth divided the attributes of the biblical God among several distinct personae: (1) the
divine Father of the Entirety; (2) members of the divine Entirety – Sophia, Zoe, the Holy Spirit, and other personae that constitute the spiritual realm of Incorruptibility; (3) Ialdabaoth, the Chief Ruler of the cosmos; (4) his righteous son Sabaoth, who rules from the seventh heaven; and (5) the remaining Archons.

According to Hypostasis of the Archons, the attributes of humankind are assigned to three distinct categories of being: matter, soul, and Spirit. The Rulers seek to create the first human being as a “male counterpart” to the beautiful Voice from Incorruptibility that appears in the waters below. The Rulers, however, fail to understand their utter inability to grasp the divine – for they are made only of matter and soul (psychikos), while the Voice is of Spirit (pneumatike). Formed from soil, Adam becomes psychikos, from the soul (psyche) breathed in by the Rulers. But it is only when the Spirit comes “to dwell within him” that the first human creature became “a living soul.” It is this Spirit, not the soul, that gives Life. Adam is thus created as a composite of matter and soul from the Archons and Spirit from the divine realm.

The Rulers extract the life-giving Spirit from Adam when they open “his side like a living woman,” and Adam comes to be entirely of soul. The Spiritual Woman appears before Adam as “the Mother of the Living (Gen. 3:20), the physician, the woman, and she who has given birth.” Adam’s praise of the Spiritual Woman is interrupted as the Rulers, aroused once again by the female Spirit, conspire to sow their seed in her. The Spirit evades the Rulers’ attempts to grasp her by turning herself into a Tree, but leaves behind the carnal Eve, who is raped by the Rulers. When the Spirit later enters the Serpent, “the Instructor,” and encourages Adam and Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, they come to recognize that they are naked of the spiritual element. The Ruler curses them, expels them from the garden, and casts humankind into great distraction and pain.

The bodily Eve, deprived of Spirit, gives birth to Cain and Abel, and later to Seth and Norea. The births of Seth and Norea mark a decisive improvement in the situation of humankind. Two epithets associated with Norea – “an assistance for many generations” and “the virgin whom the Forces did not defile” – link her immediately to the spiritual realm and point to her ability to resist the Rulers’ efforts to “lead her astray” and “render service” to them. Norea cries out in a powerful voice and summons assistance from above. Eleleth, “the great angel who stands in the presence of the Holy Spirit,” comes to her and provides an account of the origin of the Rulers, her own origin in the realm above, and the future of her “offspring.” Eleleth assures Norea that she and her children belong to the Father and the imperishable Light. In three generations, Eleleth promises, “the True Human Being” will come “in a modeled form” to teach Norea’s offspring and anoint them in the chrism of eternal life. They will be freed from error and gain gnosis of “the Truth, their root, the Father of the entirety, and the Holy Spirit.”

For ancient Christian readers of Hypostasis of the Archons, of course, the True Human Being had already come in the “modeled form” of Jesus, and the eschatological promises of Eleleth had already begun to be fulfilled. They had been anointed from the chrism of eternal life and gained gnosis of the divine realm, the reality or nature of the Rulers, and their own identity. As the spiritual children of Norea, they already
exist “immortal in the midst of dying humankind,” and the Rulers “cannot approach them because of the spirit of truth within them.”

Rather than approaching this narrative as “Platonism gone wild,” or absurd fantasy, scholars of the Sethian tradition have suggested that Hypostasis of the Archons and other Sethian texts were not to be interpreted literally, but as mythic narratives, imaginative retellings of Genesis, New Testament traditions, and Platonic thought, encouraging their readers to struggle against the false “hypostasis” of the Rulers and align themselves with the true “hypostasis” of the divine realm. While such readings would lead readers to construct sharp boundaries between the polarized and hierarchically ordered categories of Spirit–Flesh, Living–Dying, Knowing–Ignorant, and Redeemed–Unredeemed, they would not necessarily lead to outright rejection of those assigned to the latter categories. Indeed, the text suggests, those who enter into the text’s theological perspectives and thereby gain gnosis of “the Truth” may well have been regarded as capable of moving higher and joining the redeemed, spiritual children of Norea, in the midst of “dying humankind.” In this way, Hypostasis of the Archons creates a dualistic system that remains open to the possibility of movement or conversion for those “others,” previously assigned to the category of “dying humankind.”

3 The Valentinian tradition: Irenaeus’s account and the Gospel of Philip

The Valentinian tradition is the best known of all the varieties of Christian Gnosis, and appears to have been the most successful in attracting followers throughout the Roman Empire. According to ancient reports, Valentinus was active in Rome from around 140 to 160. His school developed into “Western” and “Eastern” branches, and communities of Valentinians still existed in the eastern part of the empire in the fourth century, despite active opposition from Irenaeus and later anti-heretical writers. Those whom we call “Valentinians” never used the term as a self-designation. Rather, the sources show that they were more likely to have called themselves “Christians,” “the church (ekklesia),” or “the spiritual seed,” reflecting their self-understanding as both spiritual offspring of the divine and spiritual members of the Christian community.

The surviving fragments of Valentinus’s writings, preserved mostly in the writings of Clement and Epiphanius, bear witness to a Christian thinker and writer of significant literary ability, who blended Platonic, biblical, and gnosis-centered themes to create a body of hymns, homilies, and letters with a distinctive mythopoetic rhetorical style. His conceptual and literary legacy lived on in the work of his followers, in the anti-heretical writers’ reports on Valentinian teaching, and in such texts as the Excerpta of Theodotus, Letter of Ptolemy to Flora, Tripartite Tractate, and Gospel of Philip. For the Valentinians, the redemptive work accomplished by Jesus Christ is understood within the framework of a Sophia myth similar to that of Hypostasis of the Archons and the Sethian tradition. The processes of creation and redemption are set in motion by Sophia and culminate in a redemptive cure that overcomes the deficiency of the cosmos and reconnects dispersed spiritual elements in the cosmos to
their divine source. This reconnection, accomplished in the activity of Jesus Christ, in language, and in ritual action, effects a redemptive movement from deficiency to fullness, incompleteness to completion, ignorance to gnosis of the self and the divine. Most characteristic of Valentinian thought is the notion that these redemptive movements occur in parallel moments within the divine, within episodes of the mythic narrative, and in the ritual processes by which members of the Valentinian community understood themselves to participate in the work of salvation.

Scholars distinguish between eastern and western branches of Valentinian thought, with crucial theological differences in conceptions of the divine, Sophia, and Christ. According to the eastern branch (represented in part by Tripartite Tractate, Gospel of Truth, Gospel of Philip, and Excerpts of Theodotus 1–42), the divine realm consists of an unlimited number of aeons existing in a hidden and seminal state within the Father which gradually become manifest as independent or discrete beings within the divine. According to this branch, Sophia desires to know the unknowable Father and is separated from the Pleroma. Outside the divine realm she gives birth to a son, usually called Christ. He retreats to the Pleroma, while Sophia remains outside.

By contrast, the western branch (represented in part by the reports of Irenaeus and Hippolytus, and Excerpts of Theodotus 43–65) describes the Pleroma as a system of thirty aeons, arranged in male–female pairs or syzygies, with Sophia appearing as the last and youngest of the aeons. The western branch further distinguishes between an upper Sophia and a lower Sophia, Acharamoth, who remains outside the divine Pleroma. In Christology, the eastern branch views the Savior as having a spiritual body and being incarnated in a material body. The western branch holds that the Savior neither suffered nor assumed a material body, but rather put on a “psychical Christ,” and it was this part alone that was crucified and suffered.

For the purposes of illustrating Valentinian thought in this section, I have chosen to highlight Irenaeus’s account of Valentinian myth in Against Heresies 1 and excerpts from the Gospel of Philip from Nag Hammadi.

**Irenaeus on the teachings of the Valentinians, Against Heresies 1.1–8**

Irenaeus’s account of the teachings of the Valentinians in Against Heresies 1.1–8 provides a particularly detailed summary of Valentinian myth. In this account, the divine is represented as a fullness or Pleroma of male (m.) and female (f.) spiritual beings, organized in male–female pairs or syzygies. These aeons come forth through a process of emanation, beginning with the invisible, pre-existent Father or Source (Bythos, m.), coexisting with Thought or Silence (Sige, f.). From them come forth Intellect (Nous, m.) and Truth (Aletheia, f.); Word (Logos, m.) and Life (Zoe, f.); Human Being (Anthropos, m.) and Church (Ekklesia, f.). From these eight come forth twenty-two more aeons, concluding with Wisdom or Sophia (f.), the last and youngest of the thirty aeons of the divine Pleroma.

As in Sethian myth, it is Sophia who sets in motion the processes of world creation and redemption. Though narratives of Sophia’s actions vary among the sources, in the major strand of Irenaeus’s account, Sophia suffers passion apart from the embrace of her male consort, Desired (Theletos, m.), as she seeks to know the first male
principle, “Bythos,” who can be known only by the second male principle, “Nous.” In her misguided and passionate search, Sophia is restrained by a power called Boundary or Limit (Horos), which preserves the ineffability of the Father by holding back Sophia and restoring her to herself. The Boundary separates the “formless, weak, and female fruit” of Sophia (her thinking and passions), and establishes them outside the divine realm. Sophia’s thinking, called “Achamoth,” is given “a fragrance of incorruptibility” by the Anointed (Christ) and the Holy Spirit, but as she searches for “the Light that had left her” (the Anointed), she again experiences passions: grief, fear, uncertainty, lack of gnosis, and “turning back (or conversion) toward the one who had made her alive.” The distraught Achamoth, or lower Sophia, is visited by yet another male figure, “the Savior,” who cures her of her passions by turning them from “incorporeal passions” into “incorporeal matter.” The lower Sophia becomes “pregnant with the contemplation of the lights,” or angels, that accompanied the Savior, and produces “spiritual offspring” after their image.

According to Irenaeus, then, Valentinian cosmology is based upon this myth of creation and Sophia’s pivotal role within it. On one hand, Sophia was both the source, the Mother, of the divine, spiritual (pneumatikos) essence as well as a mediator who links the divine and cosmic and who is active in the perfection and redemption of this spiritual essence. On the other hand, it was Sophia’s inappropriate emotions or “passions” which created the need within the cosmos for redemption in the first place. She was not only the source of the spiritual essence but also of the non-divine – material (hylikos) and animate (psychikos) – essences. Moreover, it was Sophia who was responsible for the dispersing (and therefore entrapping) of the spiritual elements within the non-divine elements of the cosmos. In the final act of the eschatological drama, Irenaeus reports:

When all the seed has grown to maturity, Achamoth their mother will – they say – leave the place of the midpoint, enter the Fullness, and receive as her bridegroom the Savior, who derives from all (the aeons), so that a pair is produced consisting of the Savior and Sophia who is Achamoth: they are the bridegroom and bride, and the entire fullness is the bridal chamber. And the spirituals are supposed to put off their souls; become intellectual spirits; unrestrainably and invisibly enter the fullness; and become brides of the angels that are with the Savior.

(Irenaeus, Against Heresies 1.7.1)

The Valentinian myth of Sophia thus conceptualizes redemption as coming about through the union of male and female as bridegroom and bride in the “bridal chamber.” At the same time, it depicts the calamitous consequences of inappropriate emotion and the desire to step beyond one’s boundaries, as well as the salvific benefits of restoring the rebellious, emotion-driven female to her proper place. In the end, the independent and rebellious Sophia-Achamoth is redeemed and restored precisely by returning to her proper place as the subordinate female bride of Christ.

It is not surprising, as Clement of Alexandria reports, that the Valentinians approved of marriage as a reflection of the union of male and female emanations in
the divine realm. But perhaps even more important, as Ismo Dunderberg has argued, the Valentinian myth of Sophia provided a way of salvific knowledge and a therapy of emotions:

What Valentinians had to offer in the intellectual marketplace of their time was a distinctly Christian theory of how desire can be cured. For them, Christ was the healer who “came to restore the emotions of the soul.” Or, seen from another perspective, Valentinians contextualized their faith in Christ by expressing it in terms that made it seem more understandable, and more readily acceptable, to those having received a philosophical education.

The myth of Sophia was offered, then, not only to account for the origin of the cosmos and its elements, but to serve as a christocentric therapy of the emotions, a way to rid oneself of inappropriate or “noxious emotions” through repentance, prayer, and the saving work of Christ the healer. The myth of Sophia was equally crucial to the Valentinian theory and practice of ritual. The Marcosian deathbed ritual of redemption (apolytrosis), described by Irenaeus, and paralleled by material in The First Apocalypse of James (NHC 5.3), shows that some Valentinians regarded knowledge (gnosis) and ritual performance of the Sophia myth as “necessary for their salvation.” Even more instructive for understanding the Valentinian theory and practice of ritual, however, is the rich collection of excerpts in the Gospel of Philip from Nag Hammadi.

Union as an image of salvation: excerpts from the Gospel of Philip

The Gospel of Philip from Nag Hammadi (NHC 2.3) provides further evidence of Valentinian uses of sexual imagery, symbolic language, and ritual. There is no narrative myth in the Gospel of Philip. As a collection of various excerpts from different works, the gospel represents no single strand of Valentinian thought, but it can be seen to have theoretical and theological coherence as Valentinian, once its complex metaphors and symbols are related to Valentinian conceptions of language, ritual, and the redemptive work of Christ.

The following series of quotations from the Gospel of Philip illustrates some essential features of this Valentinian theory of redemption through a process of reunification in language, ritual, and the work of Christ.

Truth did not come to the world nakedly: rather, it came in prototypes and images: the world will not accept it in any other form. Rebirth exists along with an image of rebirth: by means of this image one must be truly reborn. Which image? Resurrection. And image must arise by means of image. By means of this image, the bridal chamber and the image must embark upon the realm of truth, that is, embark upon the return.

(Gospel of Philip 67.9–27)

The Lord did all things by means of a mystery: baptism, chrism, eucharist, ransom, and bridal chamber … [ … ] said, “I have come to make [the lower]
like the [upper and the] outer like the [inner, and to join] them in [ ... ] by means of prototypes [ ... ] ... Now what is innermost of all is the fullness. Beyond that, there is nothing further within. This is what is called the uppermost.

(Gospel of Philip 67.27–29)

Before the anointed Christ, certain beings came from a realm that they could not re-enter, and went to a realm that they could not yet leave. Then the anointed (Christ) came: he brought out those who had entered and brought in those who had left.

(Gospel of Philip 68.17–21)

In the days when Eve was [in] Adam, death did not exist. When she was separated from him, death came into existence. If he [re-enters] and takes it unto himself, death will not exist.

(Gospel of Philip 68.22–26)

We are reborn by the holy spirit. And we are born by the anointed (Christ) through two things. We are anointed by the spirit. When we were born we were joined. No one can see himself in the water or in a mirror without light. Nor again can you see by the light without water or a mirror. For this reason it is necessary to baptize with two things – light and water. And light means chrism.

(Gospel of Philip 69.4–14)

While the topics treated in these passages may seem disconnected, one can in fact perceive a theory of redemption through the unification of cosmic realities or symbols (images, words, male and female, water, mirror, light) with their prototypes in the divine realm or aeon (Truth), of the individual initiate with his/her divine counterpart and of the male with female.

E. Thomassen’s discussion of the “dialectics of mutual participation” in the Gospel of Philip allows one to understand the ritual system of the Valentinians as one in which the initiate participated mutually with the Savior in several salvific moments at once: he or she was reborn and participated in the Savior’s experiences of incarnation and baptism, scorn, death, resurrection, and reception of “the name that is above every name.” In the gospel’s reflections on the sacraments, such as baptism and chrism, several seemingly distinct moments are brought together in polysemic symbols and actions: the Savior’s incarnation, baptism, crucifixion, and resurrection may be collapsed into one single act, or the incarnation may be fused with references to the crucifixion, the garden narrative of Genesis 2–3, and the sacramental ointment or chrism of ritual practice. Thomassen interprets this to mean that within the thought world of the gospel, these referents are less significant as moments in a sequential narrative, and more significant in their common and mutually illuminated symbolism. As Thomassen points out, the logic of the text’s symbolic parallelism
between the redemptive acts performed by the Savior and the ritual acts of baptism, anointing, eucharist, redemption, and bridal chamber, carries with it the following implications: the acts of the Savior are in reality one single act, so each of the ritual acts will potentially reflect all of the components of the Savior’s acts. Thus, Valentinian theory and practice come together with salvific effect as the community recalls or recites the crucial moments of the myth, from the union of the Father with Sophia which produces the Savior’s spiritual body, through his descent in that body, his incarnation and birth, his baptism and anointing, the crucifixion, the separation from the cross, the resurrection, and the final unification in the bridal chamber. This series of successive events is seen as a single, indissoluble event from the perspective of its redemptive significance, and the Valentinian can participate in the redemptive event/s through the rituals of the Valentinian community. This method of identifying events of the Savior’s work and the various components of the ritual system creates a nearly inexhaustible source of symbolic multivalence.

This conception and experience of mutual participation illuminates crucial aspects of the religious dimensions of the Gospel of Philip, especially the blurring or dissolution of distinct moments of linear historical narrative in the transcendence of temporality. As the initiate re-enacts the mythic moments of Christ’s incarnation and redemptive work in her own baptism, she participates in a ritual moment that transcends and dissolves the ordinary boundaries of time and space. He or she is in the Jordan with Jesus, on the cross, in the resurrection, entering the Pleroma and receiving the Name – all at once, in the initiatory experience of her own individual baptism and in the continuing communal rites of the Valentinian community. This is a key feature of Valentinian thought, as it reveals the way language, symbols, and rituals work as “types and images” of the spiritual realm in the Gospel of Philip.

We might illuminate this theory further, not only by considering its relevance in the context of baptism, but by relating it to the performance of the initiate and the distinctive features of Valentinian writing, reading, and ritual performance. Indeed, this illustrates two crucially important points about Valentinian teaching: one, that any ritual event, word, or passage from scripture can bear multiple meanings and make reference to multiple moments or spiritual realities at once; and two, that the temporal distinction between paradigmatic moments in the Savior’s narrative – from creation through incarnation, baptism, crucifixion, and resurrection – and those moments in the initiate’s experience is dissolved in the experience of the ritual.

While references to baptism, chrism, and eucharist are relatively clear, the imagery of “the bridal chamber,” so central to the theological perspectives of the Gospel of Philip, is less clear. The bridal chamber has neither a single referent (such as marriage, sexual union, the bedroom) nor a specific ritual, but rather resonates simultaneously with multiple notions of union, most often involving the reunification of previously separated entities, such as the reunification of the divine aeon with its “types and images” in the world. Central to these, of course, is the notion of the separation of the female from the male in the creation of Eve from Adam in the second creation account of Genesis. Even more important is the notion of their salvific reunification through the work of
Christ. In this context, it is possible to make sense of the Gospel of Philip's reflections on the role of Mary Magdalene and the ritual kiss, expressed in the following passages:

There were three who always used to walk with the Lord: Mary, his mother, and his sister, and Magdalene, the one who was called his companion (koinonos). For Mary is the name of his sister and his mother and it is the name of his companion.

(Gospel of Philip 59.6–11)

The Sophia (Wisdom) who is called “the barren” is the mother [of the] angels. And the companion (koinonos) of the […] is Mary Magdalene. The […] loved] her more than [all] the disciples, and he used to kiss her often on her […] more] often than the rest of the disciples. […] They said to him, “Why do you love her more than all of us?” The Savior answered, saying to them, “Why do I not love you like her? If a blind person and one with sight are both in the darkness, they are not different from one another. When the light comes, then the person with sight will see the light, and the blind person will remain in the darkness.”

(Gospel of Philip 63.30–64.9)

If the female had not separated from the male, she and the male would not die. His separation became the beginning of death. Because of this Christ came to repair the separation which was from the beginning and re-unite the two and to give life to those who had died by separation and join them together.

(Gospel of Philip 70.9–18)

As female “companion” to Jesus, Mary Magdalene plays a role in the Gospel of Philip that is at once symbolic, spiritual, and salvific. Within the mythic context of the separation of Eve from Adam, the relationship of Mary Magdalene and Jesus represents a reunification of the separated female and male. As the iconic or imaged bridal chamber is a symbolic site for union, so the companionship and kiss of Mary Magdalene and Jesus symbolize the salvific moment when two previously separated elements (male and female, image and divine prototype, cosmic and divine) are reunited and bring forth spiritual fruit.

In the first passage, Mary Magdalene is linked to two other Mary’s, but it is she who is singled out as “the companion” (koinonos) of the Savior. The second passage elucidates Mary’s role as “companion” more fully as it includes references to Sophia, to the Savior’s love for Mary, and the “kiss.” This is not a kiss of romantic love or marriage, but a moment of mythic and ritual significance in the Valentinian community, for this kiss provided the mythic foundation for the ritual kiss in the religious life of the community: “For it is by a kiss that the perfect conceive and give birth. For this reason we also kiss one another. We receive conception from the grace which is in one another.” In this way, the kiss of Mary Magdalene and Jesus establishes a paradigm
and originating moment for spiritual conception through the mouth, that is, for the production of spiritual utterances: prophecy, poetry, song, and other manifestations of the divine Logos in language and sound.\textsuperscript{110} The kiss of Jesus and Mary Magdalene leads the rest of the disciples to recognize that Mary was not only loved more than all women, but that she was loved more than the other disciples as well because she, unlike the blind, has seen the light.

Even more important, the reference to Sophia at the beginning of this passage shows that the companionship of Mary and Jesus belongs within a mythic context as a symbol of the salvific reunification of female and male. Behind this image of salvific union lies a mythic narrative consisting of three stages: primordial union, separation, reunification.\textsuperscript{111} The first stage, based on the Valentinian myth of Sophia and its retelling of Genesis 2–3, involves the separation of Sophia from her divine counterpart and of Eve from Adam, as the third passage makes clear. Within the Gospel of Philip’s mythic narratives of union – separation – reunification, Christ is the savior who came to repair the separation and give life. In this Mary Magdalene plays a crucial role in the narrative of salvation. Their “kiss” signifies a spiritual relationship that effects salvation in two ways. First, the companionship and kiss of Mary Magdalene and Jesus represent the salvific moment when female and male are reunited.\textsuperscript{112} They undo the separation and restore the union of male and female among humans and, ultimately, within the divine. Second, their kiss establishes a mythic paradigm for the ritual kiss in the religious community, by which “the perfect conceive and give birth”\textsuperscript{113} to spiritual utterances, prophecy, poetry, song, and other manifestations of the divine Logos in language and sound.

As the female koinonos or spiritual partner of Jesus, Mary Magdalene plays a crucial role in the Gospel of Philip. Their companionship and kiss symbolize the sacred union of female and male that comes from spiritual insight or gnosis, and brings forth spiritual fruit. It does not involve literal marriage, sexual intercourse, or offspring, yet it may, nonetheless, point to an important role for Mary Magdalene and other women in the Valentinian community. As female “companion” (koinonos), Mary Magdalene is the spiritual counterpart to Jesus, especially beloved for her insight and vision. This insight gives her spiritual authority and may have reflected and increased the spiritual authority of other women in the community of the text as well, even as it aroused controversy.

**Conclusion**

This essay only begins to touch upon the variety and richness in the texts of Gnosis at Nag Hammadi. These texts employed a variety of strategies, including biblical interpretation, philosophical speculation, and their own unique style of myth-making to give expression to their religious views on the nature of the divine, the relation between creation and redemption, and the redemptive significance of Jesus Christ. Even such a brief survey as this demonstrates that those who would unify these texts and traditions under a single category like “Gnosticism” run the risk of ignoring the diversity and complexity. We contemporary readers can begin to understand these texts more fully.
as we bring to them modes of reading that are both more critical and more sensitive to their symbolic richness than were those of the anti-heretical writers of the early church.

Further reading

Primary sources

In addition to the translations listed in the Notes, the following should be noted:


Secondary sources


Notes


2 See, for example, Plato, Republic 613c; Alexander of Aphrodisias, Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle 1.307.27, discussed in Markschies, Gnosis, p. 2.

3 In 1 Cor. 1:5, for example, the Apostle Paul gives thanks for the Corinthians’ enrichment “in speech and gnosis,” but later in the letter challenges their arrogance and immaturity. “Gnosis,” linked to particular conceptions of faith, is also highly prized in the Gospel of John and the writings of Clement of Alexandria, among others.
4 1 Tim. 6:20–21: “Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you. Avoid the profane chatter and contradictions of falsely so-called knowledge; by professing it some have missed the mark as regards the faith.”

5 Irenaeus of Lyons, Against the Heresies, written around CE 180, was originally entitled Refutatio and Overthrow of Falsely So-Called Gnosis. For a recent English translation with notes, see Against the Heresies, Book 1, trans. and annot. D. Unger and J. J. Dillon, Ancient Christian Writers 55, New York: Paulist, 1992.

6 Irenaeus, Against Heresies 1.22. Acts of the Apostles 8:9–24 describes Simon as a magician who had amazed the people of Samaria, was baptized by Philip, and attempted to buy the power to convey the Holy Spirit from the apostles Peter and John. In the anti-heretical literature, Simon appears in Justin Martyr, First Apology 26.2–3 and Dialogue with Trypho 120.6, in T. B. Falls, Writings of Justin Martyr, The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation 6, Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1948, and in Irenaeus, Against Heresies 1.23.

7 Irenaeus, Against Heresies 1.29–30.

8 Pearson, Ancient Gnosticism, pp. 12–14, provides a lucid example of one such definition.

9 M. A. Williams, Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996, and K. L. King, What is Gnosticism?, have amply demonstrated the ways in which the modern term “Gnosticism” carries with it the distortions of Irenaeus’s polemical construction, as well as numerous other problems of historical description and classification.


11 For fuller discussion of this perspective, see King, What is Gnosticism? and Williams, Rethinking “Gnosticism.”

12 So most strongly, Williams, Rethinking “Gnosticism,” whose proposal that “biblical demiurgical traditions” be used as an alternative to “Gnosticism” has not been widely adopted.


17 M. Meyer, “Epilogue: Schools of Thought in the Nag Hammadi Scriptures,” includes discussion of Gospel of Thomas (Nag Hammadi Codex [NHC] 2.2), The Book of Thomas the Contender (NHC
2.7), Dialogue of the Savior (NHC 3.5), and The Acts of Thomas under the category of “Thomas Christianity.” Layton, Gnostic Scriptures, pp. 359–412, includes the Hymn of the Pearl from the Acts of Thomas, along with these two Nag Hammadi texts under the category of “the School of St. Thomas.”

For example Layton, Gnostic Scriptures, pp. x–xvi, 357–409, presents these not as examples of “Gnosticism,” but rather as a distinct variety of Christian scripture from the geographical region of northern Mesopotamia, exhibiting “a mystical conception of salvation through self-acquaintance,” or gnosis of the self. Pearson, Ancient Gnosticism, pp. 256–72, entitles his section on the Thomas material “Thomas Christianity,” and clearly excludes it from his category of “Gnosticism.” Pearson writes: ‘The Gospel of Thomas is not a Gnostic text, though some scholars argue that it is. But there is no doctrine of pleromatic emanations in it, no Sophia myth, and no ignorant or malevolent Demiurge. What it does share in common with Gnosticism is the emphasis on self-knowledge, but that is not something specific to Gnosticism as we have defined it” (p. 257).

J. D. Turner, “The Sethian School of Thought,” in Meyer, Nag Hammadi Scriptures, pp. 784–9, provides a very clear and concise account of “Sethian” as “a typological category” in modern scholarship. The Sethian materials are recognized as strongly connected to certain traditions of Jewish scriptural interpretation and apocalyptic thought, Greek philosophy (especially Middle Platonism), and certain early Christian traditions.


Although the focus of this essay is on patterns of thought, I agree strongly with the argument of I. Dunderberg, Beyond Gnosticism, on the value of considering “moral exhortation, views about emotions, and critical analysis of power and society,” in the study of Valentinian and other gnostic-centered traditions.


See, for example, A. DeConick, Seek to See Him: Ascent and Vision Mysticism in the Gospel of Thomas, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996.


Gospel of Thomas, Logion 2; adapted from trans. Meyer, Gospel of Thomas, p. 23.

Gospel of Thomas, Logion 3, brings together the themes of Kingdom and knowledge, and implies a connection between knowledge of self as a child of the “living Father” and knowledge of the identity of Jesus: “When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living Father.” Adapted from trans. Meyer, Gospel of Thomas, p. 23.
31 *Gospel of Thomas*, Logia 111 and 59, contrast the realms of Death and Life and suggest that one who lives from or looks to the Living One will not see death and becomes superior to the world.
32 *Gospel of Thomas*, Logion 29, for example, illustrates the opposition between Flesh and Spirit, as Jesus declares his amazement that the great wealth of Spirit has come to dwell in the poverty of the body.
33 *Gospel of Thomas*, Logia 24 and 61, show that the dualism of Light and Darkness corresponds to two types of people: those who are “undivided,” having made the two one, are filled with Light and shine upon the kosmos; those, on the other hand, who exist in duality are dominated by darkness.
35 The imagery of becoming “little children” “is also part of a general Adamic typology, for the little child, the baptized person, was thought to be as innocent and sinless as Adam and Eve were before the fall” (Davies, *Gospel of Thomas*, p. 119). Such innocence has not to do only with sexuality, but also with ignorance of the distinction between good and evil.
37 *Gospel of Thomas*, Logion 18.
38 Bloom, “‘Whoever Discovers the Interpretation of These Sayings … ’,” in Meyer, *Gospel of Thomas*, appropriates a trope from W. B. Yeats to describe this pre-Adamic self: “Like William Blake, like Jakob Böhme, this Jesus is looking for the face he had before the world was made” (p. 136).
40 When “the male and the female” are made into “a single one,” this saying suggests, the distinction of the two genders is transformed, but not abandoned. There is still a “male” and a “female,” but they are not “male” and “female” as they once were: “the [new] male” will not be “male” in the old sense and “the [new] female” will not be “female” in the old sense. Yet in contrast to the differences between the “old,” untransformed states of male and female, the “new” male and female become one and the same.
41 These images of “old” and “new” human being (anthropos) are strikingly similar to the Pauline notions of “old anthropos” and “new anthropos” (see especially Rom. 6:6, Col. 3:9–10, Eph. 4:22–24), and similarly share connections to both Genesis interpretation and baptismal practice.
42 *Gospel of Thomas*, Logion 113: “The Father’s Kingdom is spread out upon the earth and people do not see it.” Adapted from trans. Meyer, *Gospel of Thomas*, p. 65.
44 Epiphanius, *Refutation of All Heresies* 39 (cf. also 40.7.1–5).
45 Pseudo-Tertullian, *Against All Heresies* 2.
47 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.29.
48 These texts with their sources: *Apocryphon of John* (Berlin Codex, 2; NHC II.1, III.1, IV.1; together with the parallels in Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.29), *Hypostasis of the Archons* (NHC II.4), *Gospel of the Egyptians* (NCH II.4, IV.2), *Apocalypse of Adam* (NHC V.5), Three Steles of Seth (NHC VII.5), *Zostrianos* (NHC VIII.1), *Melchizedek* (NHC IX.1), *Thought of Norea* (NHC IX.2), *Trimorphic Protennoia* (NHC XIII.1B). Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, pp. 5–214, includes in his collection of “Classic Gnostic Scripture” these nine texts from Schenke’s Sethian corpus, as well as *Thunder, Perfect Mind* (NHC VI.2), *Allogenes* (NHC XI.3), as well as the reports of Irenaeus on Satorninos and the Gnostics (*Against Heresies* 1.29 and 1.30), of Porphyry on “the Gnostics” (*The Life of Plotinus*), and of Epiphanius on the Sethians, the Archontics, and the Gnostics (*Refutation of All Heresies*).

For example, J. D. Turner has refined Schenke’s hypothesis by highlighting evidence for diversity and historical development of Sethian thought. J. D. Turner, Sethian Gnosticism and Platonic Tradition, Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi: Section Études 6, Québec, Canada: Presses de l’Université Laval; Louvain/Paris: Peeters, 2001.


Hypostasis of the Archons 94.2–19.


Hypostasis of the Archons 93.32–94.2. On the origins of the “Sophia myth” see, for example, G. W. MacRae, “The Jewish Background of the Gnostic Sophia Myth,” Novum Testamentum 12, 1970, pp. 86–101. Similar but varying accounts of the “Sophia myth” occur in both Sethian and Valentinian texts. See below for further discussion of the Valentinian accounts.

Hypostasis of the Archons 94.34–95.4.

Hypostasis of the Archons 95.4–12.


Hypostasis of the Archons 96.3–16.

This distinction clearly resonates with one made by Paul in 1 Cor. 2:14–16: “that which is of psyche/soul (psykhê) cannot grasp the things of the spirit (ta pneumatikà).”

Hypostasis of the Archons 88.10–16.

Hypostasis of the Archons 89.3–11.

Hypostasis of the Archons 89.11–17.

Hypostasis of the Archons 89.17–27.

Hypostasis of the Archons 90.13–19.

Hypostasis of the Archons 91.7–11.

Hypostasis of the Archons 91.11–21. There is some ambiguity about the paternity of Cain. Described as “their son,” Cain could be the child either of the Rulers’ rape or of Adam.

Hypostasis of the Archons 91.34–92.3.

Hypostasis of the Archons 92.18–92.32.

Hypostasis of the Archons 92.32–93.2.

In Hypostasis of the Archons 94.32–96.11, Eleleth narrates the myth of Sophia down to the creation of the full number of chaos “after the pattern of the things above,” as taking place “by the will of the Father of the Entirety” (96.11–15).

Hypostasis of the Archons 96.27–97.20.


Such dualisms create hierarchical oppositions in which the first pole is esteemed, while the second is devalued and demeaned. It should be noted that the narrative uses sexual metaphors to represent both redemptive and non-redemptive states. Metaphors of virginity, conception, and birth ennoble the categories of the female and the Spirit, while metaphors of sexual desire and rape criticize the Archontic and the androgynous. For further analysis, see A. McGuire, “Women, Gender, and Gnosis.
78 Close analysis of Hypostasis of the Archons and other texts of the Sethian corpus has produced different positions on the extent to which Sethian views of salvation were “open” or “closed.” See, for example, M. A. Williams, “Deterministic Elitism? or Inclusive Theories of Conversion?,” in his Rethinking Gnosticism, pp. 191–212. In the majority of texts, even those that would seem to have the most deterministic world view, persons without gnosis would appear to be capable of transformation or conversion.
80 Tripartite Tractate 125:4–5; Heracleon, frag. 37; Irenaeus, Against Heresies 1.5.6, and not insignificantly, the fragments of Valentinus.
81 Excerpts of Theodotus; Irenaeus, Against Heresies 1.5.6–6.1; and Tripartite Tractate 115.23–116.5.
82 Layton, Gnostic Scriptures, pp. 221–22, aptly distinguishes three sides of Valentinus’s literary personality: (1) the mythmaker; (2) the Platonizing biblical theologian; and (3) the mystical poet.
83 Thomassen discusses these differences in more detail in her Spiritual Seed; and “The Valentinian School of Gnostic Thought,” in Meyer, Nag Hammadi Scriptures, p. 793.
84 C. Markschies, Valentinus Gnosticus?, Tübingen: Mohr, 1992, and others have pointed out quite rightly that the fragments of Valentinus themselves exhibit no explicit traces of the Sophia myth itself. Nonetheless, Layton, Gnostic Scriptures, pp. 217–22, and others have argued that there may well have been some connection between Sethian myth and later developments of the Valentinian tradition.
85 For English translation of the entire account, see Unger and Dillon, Against the Heresies, Book 1, pp. 23–45. For a slightly abbreviated translation with detailed introduction and notes, see B. Layton, “Ptolemy’s Version of the Gnostic Myth,” in Gnostic Scriptures, pp. 276–302.
86 Irenaeus, Against Heresies 1.1.1–3.
87 There are significant variants included even in Irenaeus, Against Heresies 1.1–8. See G. C. Stead, “The Valentinian Myth of Sophia,” Journal of Theological Studies 20, 1969, pp. 75–104, for a detailed analysis of the variations in the anti-heretical accounts of the Sophia myth. For more recent discussion, see Dunderberg, Beyond Gnosticism, pp. 97–118.
88 Irenaeus, Against Heresies 1.2.2. In what is usually designated the B strand, it is Sophia’s desire to create something alone, apart from her male consort, that brings the Demiurge and his cosmos into being.
89 Irenaeus, Against Heresies 1.2.3–4.
90 Irenaeus, Against Heresies 1.2.5. Against Heresies 1.2.4 in Layton, Gnostic Scriptures: “For, thinking and its consequent passion were separated from her; she remained inside the fullness; but her thinking and the passion were bounded apart by the boundary, were fenced off with a palisade, and existed outside the fullness. This (thinking) was a spiritual essence, since it was a natural impulse to action on the part of an aeon. Yet it was without form and imageless because she had not comprehended anything. And – they say – for this reason it was a weak and female fruit” (p. 285).
91 Irenaeus, Against Heresies 1.4.1.
92 Irenaeus, Against Heresies 1.4.5.
93 Ibid.
94 Sophia’s redemptive roles, however, pale in comparison to those of the male figures who come to redeem her, the Creator, and humankind alike: the Boundary or Limit; the Anointed; Jesus; and the Savior, who becomes Achamoth’s “bridegroom” in the final, eschatological redemption – Against Heresies 1.7.1.

97 Clement of Alexandria, Miscellanies 3.1, reports that the Valentinians “hold that the union of man and woman is derived from the divine emanation in heaven above” and “approve of marriage.”

98 Dunderberg, Beyond Gnosticism, p. 97.

99 Dunderberg, Beyond Gnosticism, p. 117–18.

100 Irenaeus, Against Heresies 1.21.1–5. For lucid discussion, see Dunderberg, Beyond Gnosticism, pp. 113–17.

101 Dunderberg, Beyond Gnosticism, p. 114.

102 Thomassen, Spiritual Seed, pp. 94–5.

103 Thomassen, Spiritual Seed, p. 95.

104 As Thomassen points out, Spiritual Seed, p. 101, sharing in the redemptive event provided by the ritual/s does not imply a simple identity between the Savior and the saved acting in the ritual, but a relationship of model and image. On the other hand, the relationship remains an ambiguous one of simultaneous identity and difference, with the Savior acquiring properties of the salvandus in the model narrative itself and the salvandus becoming Christs and fathers of spiritual offspring through the image of the ritual (Gospel of Philip 67.26–27; 61:20–35).

105 "Bridal chamber" appears as a central symbol throughout the gospel; in Gospel of Philip 65.11–12, it is modified by eikonikos, iconic or imaged, the adjective formed from the Greek noun eikon (image).

106 See also Gospel of Philip 68.22–26: “When Eve was still in Adam death did not exist. When she was separated from him death came into being. If he enters again and attains his former self, death will be no more.”

107 Their companionship may also parallel the union of Light with Holy Spirit and of angels with images. Gospel of Philip 58.10–14: "He said on that day in the thanksgiving, 'You who have joined the perfect Light with the Holy Spirit, unite the angels also with us, as images'."


112 Their companionship may also parallel the union of Light with Holy Spirit and of angels with images. Gospel of Philip 58.10–14: He said on that day in the thanksgiving, “You who have joined (hotri) the perfect Light with the Holy Spirit, unite the angels also with us, as images.”

113 Gospel of Philip 58.30–59.6.