Mysteries of Union: Language, Ritual, and Gender in GPhil (NHC II.3)

I’m delighted to be here this afternoon to share with you work in progress on GPhil (GPhil). This is a text that has delighted, fascinated, and frustrated me like no other text from the Nag Hammadi Library for more than 20 years now, and I’m very glad to have the opportunity to test out some of my interpretations with you. It’s a very special pleasure to be speaking to you at Karen King’s invitation and within the context of Karen’s course on Orthodoxy and Heresy in Early Christianity. Karen has been both a good friend and a scholarly inspiration to me ever since she invited me to participate in the conference on Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism at Claremont in 1985. Karen, it’s been a pleasure and honor to be counted as your friend and colleague all these years and I’m so happy to be here with you, your students, and the Harvard Divinity School community today to talk about “The Mysteries of Union in The Gospel of Philip.”

The “mysteries of union” in my title has several meanings, all of them rooted in the ancient conceptions of the Greek term mysterion.

1) First is the association of mysterion with Religious Rites – originally with the secret rituals of the Greek “mystery religions,” and later, of course, with the Christian sacraments – baptism, eucharist, etc. understood as “mysteries”;

2) Second is its association with Secret Teaching – again, originally this was connected with the secret myths revealed to initiates in the mystery religions; but later, “mystery” came to be associated with any teaching, saying, utterance, myth, text – any linguistic sign - that possesses hidden
or symbolic meanings (included here, Paul’s reference to those who “utter mysteries in the Spirit” (1 Cor 14:2).

3) Third, in biblical tradition, especially, “mystery” came to be associated with the notion of a divine plan or secret concealed from all except the recipients of divine revelation. Here we might think of GMark 4:11: “To you has been given the mysterion of the Basileia of God,” or any of Pauline and post-Pauline references to a divine plan previously hidden, but now revealed in Christ (1 Cor 15:51, Romans 11:25), see also Col 2:2, Eph 3:3).

All of these senses of mystery are present and interconnected in GPhil.¹ These interconnections are illustrated in the first set of passages on your handout. In Excerpts 60 and 69, we see a clear sense of the ritual sense of “mystery”:

60) The Lord did all things by means of a mystery (ᾗΝΝΟΥ ΜΥΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ): baptism, chrism, eucharist, ransom, and bridal chamber (ΟΥΝΝΥΜΦΩΝ). (67.27-67.30)

69) The Powers do not see those who have put on the perfect light and cannot seize them. One will put on the light in a mystery through the union (:bothrion pi musthiron bothrion). (70.5-70.9)

Note in 69 the link between mystery and union – Coptic term hotr, to which we shall return.

In 73, we see the notion of a secret or hidden divine plan uttered or revealed in a mythic narrative, again involving union, hotr:

73) Indeed one must speak of a mystery (ΧΩ ΝΟΥΜΥΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ). The Father of the Entirety united (bothrion) with the virgin who came down, and a fire illuminated him on that day. On that day he revealed the great bridal bedroom (παντοκτιστικός). It was for this purpose that his body came into being. On that day he came forth from the bridal bedroom as from what comes to pass between a bridegroom and a bride. . . (71.3-71.15)

In Sayings 52, 102, and 107, we see several reflections on the “mystery of marriage.” # 52 is at first ambiguous: 52) Great is the mystery of marriage (πιθυστηριον μεγαλος ουνοθ πε), for without it, the world would not exist. . . (64.31-65.1)

But what kind of marriage is this passage referring to? The uniting of the Father of everything with the

---

Virgin who came down? Human marriage and reproduction? Both of these, and/or something more?

Sayings 102 and 107 clearly build on the sense that “worldly marriage” and its sexual activities are appropriately hidden “behind closed doors,” so to speak. But there is another more symbolic sense of “marriage” at work in these passages. Contrasted with the mystery of worldly marriage in 102 there is the “true mystery” of “unpolluted marriage.”

102) No one can know when the man and woman have intercourse with one another, but they alone. For marriage in the world (πγαμος ἡπικοσμος) is a mystery (ουμυγσθπιον) for those who have married. If the marriage of pollution is hidden, how much more is unpolluted marriage a true mystery (ουμυγσθπιον ἤαλαςμοιον)! . . .(81.34-82.26)

In excerpt 107, there is an implied contrast again between worldly marriage, in which sexual union usually appears to happen at night, and “the mysteries of that marriage” which “are perfected rather in the day and the light.” Those who become children of the bridal chamber and receive the light, this passage tells us, have “already received the truth in the images,” and “the world has become the Aeon (the eternal realm.”

107) Every person who enters the bedroom (πκοιτων) will kindle the light, for [...] like the marriages that are [...] be night. The fire [...]night, is extinguished. But the mysteries of that marriage (ομυγσθπιον ΔΕ ἡπιγαμος) are perfected in day and light . . . If someone becomes a child of the bridal chamber (ΝΥΗΡΕ ἡπινυμφων), that person will receive the light. . . . When that person leaves this world, he or she has already received the truth in the form of images, and the world has become the Aion (eternal realm) (πκοωομος ἀγγυμωτε ἤναιοιον). . . (85.32-86.18)

Notice again here the connection between receiving (or putting on) the Light and the MYSTERY of marriage. Finally, Excerpt 105 shows that the “mysteries” of the marriage perfected in day and light, which includes receiving the Truth in images, are part of a broader category of mystery: “the mysteries of truth,” which are no longer hidden – at least not for some – but rather are revealed in type and image. With the reception of these “mysteries of truth” in type and image, the text declares, “thus perfect things were opened to us and the bedroom invites us in.”

105) . . .The mysteries of truth (ομυγσθπιον ἤταλαςμεια) are manifestly types and images. Thus the bedroom (πκοιτων) is hidden away: this stands for the Holy within the Holy. . . . Thus perfect things
were opened to us, along with the hidden aspects of truth. The Holies of the Holies was uncovered, and the bedroom (ΠΝΟΙΤΩΝ) invites us in. (84.14-85.21)

Here I believe “the mysteries of truth” refer to mysterion in its multiple senses: secret religious rituals, the secret teachings revealed to initiates, the notion of a divine plan previously hidden but now revealed – not to all, perhaps, but to those who have been united with the Light and become “children of the bridal chamber.”

I trust these references to “mysterion” have aroused your curiosity and made you wonder, as I have: How are we to interpret these passages? What are they saying about the “mysteries” of language, the sacraments, gender, sexuality, and marriage? None of these questions are easy to answer, and I have long been puzzling over how we should understand the gospel’s perspectives on the “mysteries of union.” This is not unusual. Consider the challenges GPhil poses to those who would interpret it:

1) First is its literary genre -- this text is an anthology, a collection of excerpts taken from various sources, with no single voice or perspective;

2) Second is its densely coded symbolic language, especially with reference to ritual practices and scriptural interpretation. This is a text written for insiders, members of the Valentinian community of the second and third centuries who understood themselves to be “the spiritual seed”;

3) Third is its reliance on complex and esoteric theological perspectives, rooted in the mythic narratives and allegorical interpretations of the Valentinian tradition;

4) Fourth, its ambiguous evidence for social and ethical practice, especially in the areas of ritual, gender and sexuality, most notoriously in its references to the “bridal chamber” -- truly a mystery yet to be adequately interpreted.

Despite these difficulties, I believe we can make progress in understanding GPhil by approaching its various excerpts as the constituent parts of what is now a larger literary whole. Although this gospel is not the composition of a single author with a consistent or uniform perspective, it is nonetheless a
single text. Even more important, the meanings of this text do not exist in the social worlds behind the text, that is, the worlds of its original authors or readers. Rather, they emerge out of the interaction between the text and its readers, out of the interpretive possibilities the text’s features generate among its readers. By taking this kind of literary approach, I believe, we can acknowledge many different possible meanings, but we can also allow for the astute reader of Philip to discern in this seemingly jumbled collection of excerpts an underlying symbolic and mythic system of thought.

It has long been recognized that the GPhilip’s system of thought has deep roots in the Valentinian Christian tradition, more specifically of its Eastern branch. Although the text itself provides no mythic narrative, it’s clear that Valentinian myth, as known from other sources, underlies the text and its reflections on salvation. The Valentinian myth of creation and redemption, as most of you know, is a drama that takes place in three acts of union, separation, and reunification. In the first act, the primordial union of divine male and female principles constitutes the divine Fullness or Pleroma, also known as the Aion; in the second, Sophia’s disastrous actions lead to her separation from the divine realm and gives birth to the Demiurge, the realm of the Middle (kenoma), and the World (kosmos); in the third, redemption is effected through Christ, and with it comes the reunification of the separated principles with the divine Fullness.

While variations in this mythic pattern appear in a wide range of Nag Hammadi texts, one of the most striking characteristics of the Valentinian tradition, shared by the writings of Valentinus and GPhil alike, is the use of various literary devices – metaphor, word play, deliberate ambiguity, sexual imagery, polysemic symbols of various sorts -- as well as a theory of language, symbol, and interpretation. These features work to highlight the multivalence of language, to dissolve distinctions, collapse temporal and spatial boundaries, and expose the interconnection of events taking place simultaneously in the divine realm (the Aion), the cosmos, and within the individual.
In keeping with these features of the Valentinian tradition, *GPhil* conceptualizes the events of creation and redemption as a movement from union to separation to reunification, and expresses its conceptions in such metaphors as the mysteries of *union*, marriage (*gamos*), and *bridal chamber*. Each of these terms has multi-layered resonances in *GPhil*. To interpret “the mysteries of union” then requires attention not only to the symbolic and mythic systems of the text, but also to the metaphorical associations of the “mysteries of union” with other images of separation and re-union in the domains of language, ritual, sexuality and gender. I have found particularly useful for approaching the interpretation of *GPhil* the work of Patricia Cox Miller and Einar Thomassen. From Miller’s work on *The Gospel of Truth*, I draw the insight that in the Valentinian tradition, language and being were seen to be inextricably related, and that like *The Gospel of Truth*, *GPhil* may profitably be read as a text whose message is hermeneutical as well as soteriological: its theory of salvation is intimately related to its theory of language and interpretation.

From Einar Thomassen I draw the notion of “the dialectics of mutual participation.” This is an eastern Valentinian notion, based upon a logic of reciprocity between the Savior and the Valentinian church. According to this theory, the Savior becomes incarnate and identifies with those he comes to save; the saved, in turn, identify with the Savior. Even more important, it is precisely through the ritual activities or mysteries of the Valentinian church, including baptism, the eucharist, and the exchange of the kiss, that the initiate participates mutually with the Savior in several salvific moments at once, transcending the ordinary boundaries of time and space. He or she is in the Jordan with Jesus, on the mountain witnessing the Transfiguration, praying with him, eating the Last Supper with him, even on the cross and in the resurrection with him. Thomassen’s lucid discussion of the "dialectics of mutual participation" allows us to understand the ritual experience and imagination of the Valentinian as one of “mutual participation” -- already, here and now. Through the sacraments, properly experienced with
gnosis, the initiate receives the Name, puts on the Light, becomes a Christ, enters the divine Fullness, and the world becomes the Aion. By putting together Thomassen’s theory of “mutual participation” with Patricia Cox Miller’s attention to Valentinian theories of language, I want to argue that GPhil offers its readers an entry into “the mysteries of union” when the sacraments are properly experienced in the Valentinian sense, that is, entered into and experienced with gnosis. The key to the GPhilip’s conception of the “mysteries of union,” I want to argue, is to be found in the experience of gnosis, that is, in the consciousness of, and insight into, the union or connectedness of the hidden and the visible, the divine and the cosmic in the symbols and metaphors of language, ritual, and gender. This experience of gnosis, GPhil theorizes, makes visible the hidden depths of meaning in symbolic signs as “types and images of the Truth.” Such gnosis, GPhil declares, makes sacred or sacralizes worldly things by uncovering their hidden depths as “types and images of the Truth,” and thereby enables them to become vehicles for entering the bridal chamber and the Realm of Truth. By bringing gnosis to their activities, the GPhilip seems to argue, one is able to reunite that which was separated in creation and restore divine Fullness – in language, ritual, perhaps even in marriage and sexuality.

To illustrate and support my argument, I want to point to the various passages on the handout (not all of which I’ll cover in today’s lecture). Under Section II, the first passages focus on what I take to be the central binary opposition of the text: the opposition of the Aion and the kosmos, the eternal realm and the cosmic realm. In this section I also take you through some of the text’s key passages illustrating its theory of language and symbol. In Section III, I offer evidence for the gospel’s theory of the “dialectics of mutual participation” – that is, the salvific re-enactment of mythic events in the Valentinian community. In conclusion I share with you some conclusions and some questions about the significance of the interconnected “mysteries of union” in GPhil.
II. GPhil’s Theory of Language and Symbol: The Binary Opposition of Aion-Kosmos; the Truth and its Types and Images

Emerging out of the gospel’s mythic narrative of creation is the opposition between two realms: the Aion and the kosmos.

85) The world (ΠΚΟΣΜΟΣ) came into being through a transgression (ΠΑΡΑΠΤΩΜΑ). For he who created it wanted to create it imperishable and immortal. He fell and did not attain his desire. For the world’s imperishability was not, nor was that of he who made the world. For things are not imperishable, but children are. Nothing will be able to receive imperishability if it does not first become a child. . . (75.2-75.14)

This dualism, like the Platonic dualism of Being and Becoming, provides an organizing frame for the gospel’s reflections. In the Aion -- the spiritual or eternal realm, things that exist are “imperishable,” “indissoluble,” “eternal” (Exc. 6; 53.21-23) and characterized by union; in the kosmos, existence is diffuse and multiple (54.16), characterized by separation or division. One question the interpreter of the GPhilip might want to ask is: What is the relation between this opposition of Aion and Kosmos and other binary oppositions or dualisms, such as the distinction of male and female? It should be clear from the start that in GPhilip the distinctions of Aion-kosmos and the two genders simply do not map onto one other. The text nowhere suggests that the male is more closely associated with the divine realm or the female with the lower cosmic realm. Nonetheless, even as GPhil includes the feminine within the divine, the gospel ultimately reinforces prevailing norms of gender difference, hierarchy, and patriarchal marriage, as it gives salvific priority to the masculine in the symbolism of Father and Son, and assigns culpability to Sophia and the feminine for bringing about the creation of the cosmos. Still what I want to emphasize is that within the thought world of Philip, the categories of male and female, like other differentiated entities, are capable of existing in either the divine realm or the kosmos, yet in very different ways –summarized by the terms union and separation. In the Aion, male and female are joined together in union. In the kosmos, they are separated and in need of reunification.
Just as there are ways of being male or female in the spheres of Aion and kosmos, so there are ways of using language, of interpreting words and texts, and of participating in the sacraments that can be characterized as being “in the Aion” or “in the kosmos.” At several crucial points in GPhil, the effects of this dualism become a subject for theoretical reflection, and for the emergence of a dual theory of language as that which paradoxically communicates and betrays the Truth. On the one hand, "the truth engendered names in the world," and "the mysteries of truth are revealed in types and images." Indeed, as GPhil states in one of its most important passages, # 59:

59) Truth (ταλθεία) did not come into the world (πκοσμος) naked (εκχηκαρθυ), rather it came in types and images (ντυπος μν ηκικουν). The world will not accept it in any other form. . . . (67.9-67.27)

Here we have what appears to be a positive view of the connection of worldly “types and images” to the truth. Yet the next two passages, 7 and 9, point out a major problem: the deceptive character of language, and the pesky role of the Archons, the Rulers of this world, in turning people away from the spiritual, symbolic referents of language to their worldly meanings.

7) Names given to worldly things (νκοσμικος) are very deceptive (νουνδε μπλανη), for they turn the heart aside from the real (νετχοντ) to the unreal. And whoever hears the word "God" does not think of the reality, but has been thinking of what is not real; so also with the words "Father" and "Son" and "Holy Spirit" and "Life" and "Light" and "Resurrection" and "Church" and all the rest – it is not the real that one thinks of, but the unreal, although the words have referred to the real…. (53.23-54.5)

9) The Rulers (ναρχων) wanted to deceive (απαται) humankind (μπρωμε), since they saw that it had kinship (νουςγενεια) with truly good things. They took the names of the good and gave them to the non-good, to deceive humanity by the names and bind them to the non-good…. (54.18-31)

If this hermeneutical theory is applied to its vehicle, GPhil can be read as a literary product whose own words and "names," including perhaps its images and symbols of conjunction, are dually capable of deceiving or communicating the truth. The difference depends on the presence or absence of gnosis. Without it, language betrays or deceives, but with it, the text, like other symbolic words, rituals, and actions may become vehicles of the divine, carriers of that truth which has the power to redeem. Like the powerful "nonsense" language of the magical papyri, the metaphors, symbols, and ritual gestures of the Valentinian tradition may be seen paradoxically to betray or safeguard the divine, depending on their users’ powers of perception, their gnosis of the Truth at work in the symbols of language, ritual,
gender, and sexuality. This gnosis opens up the “perfect things” and “the hidden things of truth” through seemingly weak and despised “types and images,” as we see in 105:

105) . . . The mysteries of truth (ΜΥΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ ΝΤΑΛΗΣΙΑ) are manifestly types and images. Thus the bedroom (ΠΚΟΙΤΟΝ) is hidden away: this stands for the Holy within the Holy. . . . Thus perfect things were opened to us, along with the hidden aspects of truth. The Holies of the Holies was uncovered, and the bedroom (ΠΚΟΙΤΟΝ) invites us in. (84.14–85.21)

The first person plural pronoun “us” in the final sentence of this passage shows clearly the extraordinary claim GPhil makes for its readers: it invites readers to understand that they have entered into the hidden realm of Truth through “lowly types and images.” What has made possible this entry, GPhil asserts, is the redemptive activity of Jesus Christ. This activity has overturned the negative effects of the Archons and of the separation of Eve from Adam, and provides the mythic paradigms through which members of the Valentinian church achieve redemption. It is through these events -- the incarnation, Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan, the call of his disciples, his teachings, the Transfiguration, the Last Supper, and his death and resurrection – that the knowing person participates in Jesus’ saving activities and thereby effects his or her own redemption. With this idea, we return to Thomassen’s notion of the “dialectics of mutual participation.”

III. The Dialectics of Mutual Participation through Gnosis

According to Valentinian tradition, what creates the need for redemption is not only the emergence of the kosmos and the activities of the Demiurge and his Archons, but the separation of Eve from Adam, as narrated in Gen 2 and reinterpreted in Valentinian myth. In excerpts 70, 63, and 71, we see the connection between Eve’s separation from Adam and the origin of death. It is this separation, and not sin, that brings death and the need for redemption. As # 70 states, “Christ came to rectify the separation that was from the beginning and again unite the two.” So in one sense, this passage identifies Christ’s redemptive work as the reunification of male and female. Excerpt 71 suggests that is not only male and female, but soul and Spirit that go through a process of union, separation, and reunification. “When the spirit had become united to him (Adam), the Powers envied him because he
spoke words superior to them.” This image of Adam speaking a language superior to the Powers, and superior to what his archontic creation justified, recalls Valentinus, fragment C (in Layton’s numbering, from Clement, Strom 2.36.2-4):

“And even as awe overcame the angels in the presence of that modeled form because it uttered sounds superior to what its modeling justified, owing to the agent who had invisibly deposited in it a seed of higher essence and who spoke freely. . . For Adam, modeled in the name of the Human being (anthropos), made them stand in awe of the preexistent human being for precisely the latter stood in him.”

Yet in Philip 71 and 74, it is not the preexistent Anthropos (Human Being) or the Logos (Word), but rather the Spirit (one of two virgins from whom Adam came into being) that appears to be responsible for the superior speech and spiritual power of Adam.

74) Adam came into being from two virgins (παρθένοις), from the Spirit and from the virgin earth. Christ therefore was born of a virgin so that he might rectify the fall that occurred in the beginning. (71.16-71.21)

Yet because of their separation, and presumably that of Spirit from soul, # 74, states, “Christ was born of a virgin to rectify the fall that occurred in the beginning.” At one level, this would appear to refer directly and literally to Jesus’ mother the Virgin Mary, described in # 14 as conceiving by the Holy Spirit and as “the Virgin whom the Forces did not defile” (an epithet interestingly applied to Norea, spiritual daughter of Eve in The Reality of the Rulers).

But there is another, deeper meaning to this “mystery” according to # 73: “The Father of the Entirety united with the Virgin who came down and a fire illuminated him on that day.” This “Virgin” who came down would appear to refer not to Mary, but rather to the Virgin Spirit who came down and united with the Father, bringing about the revelation of the great bridal bedroom and the incarnation of the divine Son, who “came forth from the bridal bedroom as from what comes to pass between a bridegroom and bride.” I read the "great bridal bedroom" here as the divine Fullness of divine bridegroom and brides, that is, the unions or syzygies of male-female Aeons in the divine realm. In one sense, the bridal bedroom symbolizes the place or activity of their joining, as well as the union from
which their spiritual offspring comes forth, “as from what comes to pass between a bridegroom and a bride.” This metaphorical language suggests that the joining of Father and Virgin is like the union of bridegroom and bride, but it is also different. Like the union of a human bridegroom and bride, this act of joining takes place in a "bridal bedroom," which remains hidden, and it bears fruit. But in contrast to the bridal bedroom (pastos) of human marriage, this "great bridal bedroom" is revealed as fire/light illuminated the Father who joined with the Virgin. Interestingly, this revelation or uncovering of the "great bridal bedroom" is closely linked to the incarnation, the undefiled character of Jesus’ birth from the Virgin Mary, and his redemptive purpose: to reunite the separated and to reveal the Truth in “types and images,” including those of the “great bridal bedroom.” Each of these salvific revelations is connected to decisive, saving moments in the Valentinian interpretation of the story of Jesus of Nazareth, which we see in the next group of excerpts. There are many possible examples – here I focus on three in particular: namely, Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan; his establishment of the Eucharist; and the Kiss exchanged among disciples. With each of these, we see evidence for the GPhilip’s theory of “mutual participation,” as the events in Jesus’ life establish the mythic paradigm or prototype for the ritual activity of the Valentinian church. By bringing gnosis to their participation in those rituals grounded in Jesus’ activity –baptism, Eucharist, and the Kiss – that is, with the understanding that these rituals are “types and images” of the Truth – the Valentinians understood themselves to be effecting their own salvation. As “mysteries of union,” these rituals joined together the Truth of the divine and its worldly images: the mythic narrative of Jesus; the physical elements of the sacraments (water, Light, chrism, the cup, the kiss); and the human beings who participate in them.

Sayings 72 and 92 nicely illustrate the gospel’s understanding of the connection between what Jesus experienced in his baptism in the Jordan and what the members of the Valentinian community experience:

72) Jesus appeared [...] Jordan - the fullness of the Kingdom of Heaven. The person who [was born] before all
things was reborn; the one anointed in the beginning was reanointed; the one who had been ransomed in turn ransomed others. (70.34-71.3)

92) Just as Jesus perfected the water of baptism, so too he drew off death. For this reason we go down into the water, but not into death, so that we are not poured out into the spirit of the world \(\text{ὕποπτικοκοσμός}\). When that spirit blows \(\text{εὐκάλυφτικός}\), winter comes. When the Holy Spirit blows \(\text{εὐκάλυφτικός}\), the summer comes. (77.7-77.15)

Just as Jesus went down into the water to be ransomed and to ransom others, so those who go down in the water have the possibility of receiving the Holy Spirit and the gift of the name. # 51: “So it is with us – IF something comes to pass through a mystery.” That is, if the baptism is experienced as a “MYSTERY” – a ritual act with secret or hidden depths of meaning – those who participate with \textit{gnosis} receive the gift of the name and are reborn through the Holy Spirit (# 67). They are \textit{UNITED} (# 67) with the Truth through its types and images – the water, light, mirror, and chrism. If one does not experience them as a “Mystery,” the text suggests, they do not receive the name or the Holy Spirit, they are not reborn.

51)Anyone who goes down into the water and comes up without having received anything and says "I am a Christian \(\text{ἀνόκ οὐχρηστιανός}\)" has borrowed the name. But one who receives the Holy Spirit has the gift of the name. Anyone who has received a gift will not have it taken away. But one who has borrowed something will have it taken back. So it is with us, if something comes to pass through a mystery \(\text{ὑπερ οὐ μυστήριον}\). (64.22-64.31)

67) We are reborn \(\text{Χῖτος}\) through the Holy Spirit. And we are born through Christ through two things. We are anointed through the Spirit. When we were born, we were united \(\text{ἀγαγωτή}\). No one can see himself either in the water or in a mirror without light \(\text{οὐκόειν}\). Nor again can you see by the light without water or a mirror. For this reason it is fitting to baptize with two things -- light and water. And the light is the chrism \(\text{πτηματικός}\). (69.4-69.14)

In # 51 we see clearly that \textit{GPhilip} distinguishes between the hidden and revealed aspects of sacred rituals, and between those who experience them salvifically and those who do not. Known only in their external, manifest dimensions, these rituals fail to confer the name or redeem. But when the Truth is known through its lowly types and images – water, light, chrism – the mystery of baptism has the power to render indissoluble, to confer the name, to transform, that is, to bring one through an experience in which one \textit{BECOMES} what one sees. But this salvific transformation takes place, according to \textit{GPhilip}, only when one \textbf{sees, knows, is joined to, and becomes} the divine reality hidden
and revealed in language – that is, in mythic narratives, in metaphors, sayings, prayers, and other linguistic images – and, of course, in the sacramental symbols and images.

It is precisely by means of such images, Exc. 59 suggests, that one must be truly reborn – and thereby embark upon the restoration. One who does this, the end of # 59 tells us, “is no longer a Christian but rather is a Christ.” The name acquired in baptism is not that of “Christian” but rather of “Christ.” This may point to one of the crucial dividing lines between the “orthodox” and the Valentinian interpretation of the sacraments. Would Bishop Irenaeus understand himself or any baptized person to have become a Christ? I think not.

59) Truth (ταλθεία) did not come into the world (πτόκος) naked (ἐκκαθαρθύνα) rather it came in types and images (ντύτιος μὴ νεκρόν). The world will not receive truth in any other way. There is rebirth and 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. The bridal chamber (πνυμφοῦν) and the image must embark upon the truth by means of this image, that is embark upon the restoration (ἀποκαταστάσις). Not only must those who produce the names of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit do so, but also those who have acquired these. If one does not acquire them, the name too will be taken from that person. But if one gets them in the chrism (πυρίμα) of [...] of the power (νταυναμίς) of the cross, which the apostles called the right and the left. For this person is no longer a Christian but rather is a Christ (οὐχρ). (67.9-67.27)

Those who have experienced the ritual of baptism salvifically have not only taken on a new name, they have also put on new clothing. As in the Pauline and post-Pauline metaphors of taking off the “old anthropos” and putting on the “New anthropos” like a garment, the GPhilip understands those who have been baptized to have put on “the perfect light” (69) “In the mystery through the union” and thereby to have “become perfect light’ (90). The end of # 86, below, similarly suggests that one “puts on” the Perfect Human Being.

26) No one will be able to encounter the king while naked (ἐκκαθαρθύνα). (58.15-58.17)

69) The Powers (νταυναμίς) do not see those who are clothed in the perfect light (ἡπτέλειον νοουεῖν), and consequently are not able to detain them. One will clothe himself in this light in the mystery through the union (τῷ πνυμφοῦν ἦν ἐκεῖν). (70.5-70.9)

90) The perfect human being (πρώμεν ἡπτέλειος) not only cannot be restrained, but also cannot be seen – for if something is seen it will be restrained. In other words, no one can obtain this grace without putting on the perfect light (ἡπτέλειον νοουεῖν) and becoming (νεκρωθεῖ) perfect light as well. . . . Only Jesus knows (γνωσθῇ) the end (ἡπτέλειος) of that person. (76.22-77.1)
Excerpts # 86 and 11 illustrate the gospel’s understanding of the salvific events by which Jesus established the basis for the community’s celebration of the Eucharist. Linking what happens when drinking “the cup of prayer” with what happens in baptism, # 86 suggests that in both the Eucharist and baptism one “puts on” the Perfect Human Being.” “Whenever we drink it, we take unto ourselves the perfect human being. ….. when one goes down into the water, one strips naked in order to put that one on.”

Exc 11 develops the Johannine language of “bread from heaven,” while Exc 21 offers an allegorical interpretation of the “flesh and blood” in GJohn 6:53: Therefore he said "He who does not eat my flesh and drink my blood does not have life within him" (Jn 6:53). What is meant by that? His flesh is the word and his blood is the Holy Spirit. Whoever has received these has food and has drink and clothing.”

86) The cup of prayer contains wine and contains water, being established as the type (ἐπτυπος) of the blood over which thanksgiving (εὐχαριστεῖ) is offered. And it is full of the Holy Spirit, and belongs entirely to the perfect human being (πτελειος θρηπωμε). Whenever we drink it, we take unto ourselves the perfect human being (πτελειος θρηπωμε). The living water is a body (οὐσωμα). It is necessary for us to put on the living human being (μπρωμε ετον). Therefore, when one is about to go down into the water, one strips naked (ευκακαςω) in order to put that one on. (75.14-75.25)

11) Before Christ came, there was no bread in the world, just as Paradise, where Adam was, had many trees for the food (νηποποφ) the animals but did not have wheat for the food of human beings, and human beings were nourished like the animals. But when Christ the perfect human being (πτελειος θρηπωμε) came, he brought bread from heaven so that human beings might be nourished with the food of the human being. (55.6-14; see also # 81, 73.19-27)

21) Some persons are afraid that they may arise naked (γυκακασω); therefore they want to arise in the flesh (ζηταπξ). And they do not know that those who wear the flesh are the ones who are nacked (ετκακαςω). Those who [...] to divest themselves are not nacked. "Flesh and blood shall not inherit the Kingdom of God" (1 Cor 15:50). What is this flesh that will not inherit it? The one we are wearing. And what, too, is this flesh that will inherit it? It is Jesus’ flesh and his blood. Therefore he said "He who does not eat my flesh and drink my blood does not have life within him" (Jn 6:53). What is meant by that? His flesh is the word (τεγκαπξ πε πλογος), and his blood is the Holy Spirit (πεγκνοπ πε πινα ετογαλβ). Whoever has received these has food and has drink and clothing. . . (56.26-57.22)

In Excerpt # 24, Jesus is presented in eucharistic prayer:

24) He said that day in the prayer of thanksgiving (ζηταπξ εγουχαριστεια), "You who have united
Here, in the context of a ritual (the Eucharist) in which one is clothed with logos and spirit, Jesus addresses the divine in prayer as the one who has UNITED the perfect light with the Holy Spirit.” He now petitions this divine one to engage in another act of unification: to unite the angels with us as images.” With the use of the term images (eikon), this passage immediately links to a much larger complex of passages on the relation between the Truth and its images, and to the “mysteries of union.” One of the most interesting of these, which I have not included here, is # 53 on the joining of the image and the angel and the resulting power that one takes on “from the imaged bridal chamber (pnymithoun nikonikoc). This passage asserts that without receiving a gendered power in the imaged bridal chamber, a man or woman is vulnerable to attacks from unclean spirits. In the imaged bridal chamber, a woman receives the male power of a bridegroom, a man the female power of a bride. At the same time, these angelic powers may be said to be joined with their respective human images. The imaged bridal chamber is thus a place of uniting or joining: of gendered human beings with angelic, spiritual powers of the opposite gender, and of human images with their angelic partners.

This brings me to what is perhaps the best known of the GPhilip’s reflections on the joining of male and female: the partnership between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, and the community’s mutual participation in their special relationship through the communal kiss. I call your attention to Exc. 28 and 48:

28) There were three who always walked with the Lord: Mary his mother, and her sister, and Magdalene, the one who was called his companion (tekoinunoc). His sister and his mother and his companion (teqswte) were each a Mary. (59.6-59.11)

48) The Wisdom (tsofia) who is called the barren is the mother [of the] angels. And the companion (tkoinunoc) of the [...] Mary Magdalene. The [...]loved] her more than [all] the disciples, [and he used to] kiss her on her [.... More often than the rest of the [disciples] [...]. They said to him "Why do you love (kme) her more than all of us?" The Savior answered and said 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." (63.30-64.9)
Within *GPhil's* mythic narratives of union - separation - salvation, Christ is the savior who came to repair the separation of male and female, and give life and join them together. These passages make clear that Jesus too participates in the salvific reunification of male and female, and that in this Mary Magdalene plays a crucial role in establishing the mythic paradigm. In # 28, she is designated as one of three Mary’s, but as the one who was called his “companion,” or koinonos, the Greek equivalent of the Coptic hotr – which we have seen before in numerous passages on the mysteries of union or joining.

*Koinonos* has a wide range of meanings in ancient literature, even within the literature of the early Church. It is related to the adjective *koinos*, meaning that which is common or shared, as in "Koine Greek," referring to Hellenistic Greek, the common or popular Greek of the Graeco-Roman world. It is also related to the term *koinonia*, usually translated as community or fellowship, familiar from Christian contexts today. In religious contexts, *Koinonos* might be applied to one who *shares* something in common with others in the community. It could mean: a companion in faith, a fellow community member, a partner, or fellow participant. It can also mean marriage partner, business partner, comrade, or friend. It can mean any of these things; the question is not what does it mean literally? But rather, what does it mean in *GPhil*? Here it becomes clear that koinonos is a metaphor for a deep spiritual partnership, a mythic paradigm of male-female pairing or union, AND a basis for the community’s mutual participation in the “mysteries of union” through the ritual act of the kiss.

To back up these claims, it’s useful to recall the Valentinian mythic narrative and its three acts of: union, separation, and salvific reunification. In # 48 we see the way the GPhilip connects the mythic separation of Sophia or Wisdom with the mythic role of Mary Magdalene: “The Wisdom (τσοφια) who is called the barren is the mother [of the] angels. And the companion (τκοινονος) of the [...] Mary Magdalene. The [...loved] her more than [all] the disciples, [and he used to] kiss her on her [...]. More often than the rest of the [disciples] [...].”
Whether the kiss was on the mouth, the head, or the hand, the “kiss” in the GPhil does not signify a romantic or sexual relationship, as many in contemporary culture would have it, but rather a spiritual relationship that effects salvation in 2 ways:

1) First, the kiss of Mary Magdalene and Jesus represents the salvific moment when female and male are reunited. They undo the separation that was from the beginning and begin the restoration of male-female union among humans, between the human and divine, and within the divine.

2) Second, their kiss establishes a pattern for the ritual kiss in the religious life of the community. Here I call your attention to Exc. 27:

27). . . . Human beings take nourishment from the promise of the heavenly place [...] from the mouth (ἐβολὴ ἐν τῷ πρόσωπο), and if the Word ( testimonia) had emanated from there, he would be nourished from the mouth (ἐβολὴ ἐν τῷ πρόσωπο), and would become perfect (νεκρωσμένος ἄνελειος). For it is through a kiss that the perfect conceive and give birth. For this reason, we too kiss one another: it is by the grace (τέλτη) residing in one another that we conceive. (58.17-59.6)

The kiss between Mary Magdalene and Jesus provides the mythic paradigm for sacred ritual and so for the community’s mutual participation in Christ’s saving activity: this takes place in the communal act of spiritual kissing that gives birth to language and sounds in the spiritual utterances, prophecy, poetry, song, and other manifestations of the divine Logos in the religious community.

As the female koinonos or spiritual partner of Jesus, Mary Magdalene plays a role in GPhil that is at once symbolic, spiritual, and social. Their companionship and kiss symbolize the sacred union of female and male that comes from spiritual insight or gnosis, and brings forth spiritual fruit in the life of the community. It does not involve literal marriage, sexual intercourse, or reproduction, but it does point to a crucial role for Mary Magdalene and other spiritual women. 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 reflect and increase the spiritual authority of other women in the community of the text as well, even as it aroused the jealousy of some, as we see in
CONCLUSIONS

To wrap up this talk, I now want to return to three passages I introduced in section one: 105, 102, and 107, and then draw some conclusions on the “mysteries of union” in GPhil.

105) At present, we have access to the visible aspects of creation. We say that they are what is mighty and glorious, while hidden things are powerless and contemptible. . . The mysteries of truth (οὐσία Νταλχεία) are manifestly types and images. Thus the bedroom (ΠΚΟΙΤΩΝ) is hidden away: this stands for the Holy within the Holy. . . . The upper realm was opened for us in the lower realm, so that we might enter into the hidden realm of truth: this is what is truly glorious and mighty. And it is through contemptible types (ἡμείς τοῦτο) and powerless things that we shall enter. . . Thus perfect things were opened to us, along with the hidden aspects of truth. The Holies of the Holies was uncovered, and the bedroom (ΠΚΟΙΤΩΝ) invites us in. (84.14-85.21)

102) No one can know when the man and woman have intercourse with one another, but they alone. For marriage in the world (ΠΓΑΜΟΣ ΠΚΟΙΟΜΟΣ) is a mystery (οὐσία τοῦτο) for those who have married. If the marriage of pollution is hidden, how much more is unpolluted marriage a true mystery (οὐσία τοῦτο)! . . . (81.34-82.26)

107). . . If someone becomes a child of the bridal chamber (Νυγή γυναικίων), that person will receive the light. . . . When that person leaves this world, he or she has already received the truth in the form of images, and the world has become the Aion (eternal realm) (ΠΚΟΙΟΜΟΣ Πρόθυμος Ναίκεια). For to this person the Aion is fullness (Μπλήρωμα) and, as such, is revealed to him or her alone – hidden not in darkness and night, but hidden in a perfect day and holy light. (85.32-86.18)

As I have sought to show, the perspectives of GPhil are centered around a symbolic understanding of the "mysteries of union." The meanings of this symbol extend far beyond the unification of Christ and the Church, or of male and female, to include the conjunction and transformation of language, ritual, and gender alike. The spiritual transformation in each of these domains is expressed through a variety of symbols, which image two differentiated entities in changing relation: from a state of separation to a union that brings spiritual transformation and redemption. This symbolism of union resonates at several levels at once: At the individual level, it relates to the unification of the soul and the spirit within the self; at the interpersonal level, its relates to the (social and/or sexual) union of man and woman; at the level of divine-human relations, it corresponds to the
pro/creative union of the divine Father and the Virgin, the redemptive relation of Christ and Sophia/Mary Magdalene/the Church, and the unification of the “angels” and the “images.” But at the highest and most crucial level, the symbolism of the mysteries of union relates to the world and the Aion – that is, to the redemptive process by which the divine is revealed in the world (kosmos), and the world becomes the eternal realm (Aion).

Thus, in an important sense, as a symbolic cluster the “mysteries of union” convey two central claims of the Valentinian tradition: 1) that the divine is to be understood as a complex fullness (pleroma) in which difference and plurality are not dissolved or denied, but preserved in a complex system of multiple syzygies or unions; 2) that gnosis carries the power of redemption, and this redemption extends from the human individual to worldly images of the Truth in language, ritual, gender, and sexuality. It is thus precisely the joining together, the union of gnosis with these various symbols of Truth that releases their redemptive power and brings the AION into the cosmic realm.

The symbolism of union is connected not only to theoretical matters of gnostic soteriology, but also to practical consequences in the social realm. Though the gospel's stance on issues of sexuality and marriage will continue to be debated, it appears to me that GPhil offers an alternative to the traditional symbolizations of gender, yet at the same time reinforces prevailing norms of gender difference and hierarchy, as it idealizes the symbolism of patriarchal marriage. As a polysemic symbol, the mysteries of union cannot be interpreted simply to affirm or deny marriage and sexuality. Even the opposition of undefiled and defiled marriage points less to a distinction in practice than to a distinction in perspective. The difference is the perspective of gnosis which sees the divine in the image without mistaking the image for the divine. In GPhil it is this perspective that carries the transformative power of redemption. Though this symbol is capable, like all symbols and words, of deceiving, the symbolic system of GPhil suggests that through the interpreter's gnosis or insight, the
ability to discern what is true/real and what is false (within language, ritual, and sexuality) such symbols take on the power to transform and replace the deficiency of cosmos with the fullness of the Aion.

The key to the GPhilip’s conception of the “mysteries of union,” I have sought to argue, is to be found in the present experience of the text’s readers when hidden or symbolic meanings are uncovered in the experience of GNOSIS. This experience, the GPhilip theorizes, makes visible and sacralizes the hidden depths of language, ritual, and sexuality as “types and images of the Truth.”

1) Language becomes sacralized as linguistic utterances of all kinds – individual words, prayers, narratives, scriptures and other texts – are expressed and received with gnosis as symbolic expressions, or “types and images,” of the Truth;

2) Ritual becomes sacralized as its gestures, actions, and material elements – water, chrism, bread, wine, etc. – are perceived with gnosis as vehicles of the divine, effecting initiation, transformation, and salvation, precisely by making present for mutual participation sacred moments of the mythic past and future – including the baptism, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, to the restoration of all things in the end time.

3) Gender and sexuality become sacralized as the distinction and reunification of male and female, recognized as “types and images of the Truth,” become vehicles of entering the bridal chamber and the Realm of Truth. All of these processes of sacralization, I would argue, are part of GPhil’s theory of the “Mysteries of Union” – the processes of “entering the realm of Truth” by performing symbolic interpretation in the earthly realms of language, ritual, and gender.

As polysemic symbols, the mysteries of union cannot be interpreted simply to affirm or deny marriage and sexuality, gender complementarity or hierarchy. Even the opposition of undefiled and defiled marriage points less to a distinction in practice than to a distinction in perspective. The
difference is the perspective of *gnosis* which sees the divine in the image without mistaking the image for the divine. In *G*Philip it is this perspective that carries the transformative power of redemption. Though the symbol of union is capable, like any symbol, word, or name, of deceiving, *G*Philip suggests that it is the interpreter's *gnosis* or insight that generates the ability to discern what is true/real and what is false within language, ritual, and sexuality, and thus to challenge prevailing norms of restrictive textual interpretation, theological orthodoxies, or gender hierarchies, and to replace their deficiencies with the fullness of Truth.

53) The forms of evil spirit include male ones and female ones. The males are they which unite with the souls which inhabit a female form, but the females are they which are mingled with those in a male form, though one who was disobedient. And none shall be able to escape them, since they detain him if he does not receive a male power or a female power, the bridegroom and the bride. **One receives them from the mirrored bridal chamber.** When the wanton women see a male sitting alone, they leap down on him and play with him and defile him. So also the lecherous men, when they see a beautiful woman sitting alone, they persuade her and compel her, wishing to defile her. But if they see the man and his wife sitting beside one another, the female cannot come into the man, nor can the male come into the woman. So if the image and the angel are united with one another, neither can any venture to go into the man or the woman. (65.1-65.26)
ENDNOTES


3 In assuming a symbolic and mythic "system" for *GPhil*, I recognize that the excerpts that comprise the text come from various sources, written at various times by various authors. Yet together these various excerpts now constitute a single text and it is methodologically sound for those interested in readers’ responses to the text to consider the larger whole text, rather than its sources, as the focus for analysis and interpretation. For the most thorough study of the sources of *GPhil*, see Martha Lee Turner, *The Gospel According to Philip: The Sources and Coherence of an Early Christian Collection* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996). Given the difference in our approaches and the goals of our analyses, it should be clear that I disagree strongly with Turner’s statement, p. 11, that “interpretations which ignore” the multiple traditions represented in *GPhil* “and conflate material from diverse traditions will be skewed or even valueless.”

4 Christ’s soteriological work brings about a transformation from ignorance to *gnosis*, separation to unity, deficiency to fullness, allowing initiates here and now to move from the deceptive realm of the kosmos to the divine realm, the Aion, the realm of Truth. Patricia Cox Miller, ""Words with an Alien Voice": Gnostics, Scripture, and Canon,” *JAAR* 57 (1989), 459-483, has described the *Gospel of Truth* as a text whose "theory of salvation is intimately related to its theory of language and interpretation," and whose "primary message is hermeneutical, rather than soteriological." By contrast, the *GPhil* can be described as a text whose primary message is soteriological, and the soteriology is worked out in a number of domains, including the hermeneutical.

5 Elaine H. Pagels, "Adam and Eve, Christ and the Church," *The New Testament and Gnosis*, ed. Logan and Wedderburn, 160. Pagels goes on to say of the threefold process unfolding in each of three levels: "This structure allows the Valentinian exegete to interpret the passages relating to Adam and Eve (or Christ and the church) in varying ways, depending on which stage of the drama he intends to explicate." It is this variety of interpretive possibilities that is of particular interesting for my approach to the text.

6 In formulating this series of characteristics, I was aided by the work of J. David Dawson on Valentinus's allegorical revision of prior gnostic myth. *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) 127-182.

7 Robert M. Grant, "The Mystery of Marriage in *GPhil*," *VigChr* 15 (1961) 138, writes: "What *GPhil* reveals to us is a highly significant picture of salvation as equivalent to marriage and of marriage as an archetype of salvation."

8 By focusing on this complex nexus of symbolic categories, it becomes possible to see the ways in which such oppositions as divine realm/world (aion/kosmos), truth/names, and female/male are "mapped onto one another and become mutually defining." At the same time, it is possible to avoid the
assumption that these associations set up the usual associations across pairs, as in the association of male with the spiritual realm (the aion) and the female with the cosmos. It will be possible to see the significance of the gospel’s images of differentiation and union within a variety of conceptual and practical domains, especially those of sexuality, social relations, cosmology, language theory, hermeneutics, and soteriology. By analysing the interrelation of these images I do not seek to argue that all differences are ultimately conformable to gender, nor that the conjunction of difference necessarily leads to a dissolution of difference as two become one. While some categories of difference are ultimately dissolved, others, including the category of gender, may more appropriately be described as transformed within the mystery of the bridal chamber, where "the two become one," yet somehow remain two, in a sacred and mysterious conjunction of 'female' and 'male' difference. By viewing the bridal chamber and other images of union as polysemic symbols within a symbolic system replete with images of difference and transformation, one may understand more fully the ways in which these images resonate with a multiplicity of conjunctions and transformations, beginning with the two genders becoming one and extending through the restoration of fullness in the divine. Within GPhil's symbolic system, it may be precisely this multiplicity of conjunctions within the consciousness or understanding (gnosis) of the astute reader that restores the fullness (pleroma) of a divine unity in which difference and plurality are not dissolved or denied, but preserved in a complex system of multiple gendered and non-gendered syzygies or pairings joined together in the mysteries of union.

9 P. C. Miller, 497, discusses the "complex phenomenon" or "intricate net of associations: of stoicheia and its associations with astronomy (the cosmic stoicheia = the planets and stars), with language (the alphabetic stoicheia = the vowels), and with human existence (the bodily stoicheia = ?)."

10 Patricia Cox Miller, on The Gospel of Truth.

11 Their companionship may also parallel the union of Light with Holy Spirit and of angels with images. GPhil 58,10-14: He said on that day in the thanksgiving, “You who have joined (hotr) the perfect Light with the Holy Spirit, unite the angels also with us, as images.”

13a“Bridal chamber” appears as a central symbol throughout GPhil; in GPhil 65,11-12, it is modified by eikonikos, iconic or imaged, the adjective formed from the Greek noun eikon (image).


15 Scholarship is deeply divided. J.J. Buckley views ; M.W. Williams, K. Rudolph, etc. - view it as supporting only a non-sexual, ascetic form of "spiritual marriage," and others, including El. Pagels, consider the text open to a variety of interpretations on sexual options.