RITUAL IN THE GOSPEL OF PHILIP

Elaine Pagels
Princeton University

Even now, fifty years after the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library, certain patristic scholars still use “gnosticism” as shorthand for all that is false, a foil for everything genuine and authentic. Perhaps this should not surprise us; but I confess I was disappointed to see that Peter Cramer’s recent book on baptism (Cambridge, 1993) merely repeats the ancient heresiologists’ charges and ignores the Nag Hammadi texts along with decades of secondary research. Following the pattern of ancient polemic, Cramer traces the origins of baptismal ritual against what he calls gnostic Christians’ “intellectualist and elitist belief.”1 “What is wrong with gnostics,” Cramer declares, is that they believe that “the vision of divine reality … can be translated into the language of objective knowing”; he concludes, predictably, that such intellectualizers have scant use for baptism, and no understanding of sacraments.

Those of us who work on the Nag Hammadi texts grew up on such sweeping generalizations about gnosticism and sacraments, generalizations ranging from Bousset’s claim that “the gnostic religion is entirely dominated by sacraments,”2 to Schmithal’s insistence that “sacramental piety is alien to gnosticism.”3 After fifty years of Nag Hammadi study we are finally learning (as Michael Williams’ recent monograph reminds us)4 to drop generalizations about whatever it is we thought we meant by the term “gnosticism” and speak instead about specific texts.

As we look again at sacraments in the Gospel of Philip, let us remind ourselves that it also is misleading to generalize about what is “Valentinian.” Doing so often has led us to read into whatever text

2 Ibid., 45.
3 See W. Bousset, “Gnosis,” PW VII.2,1503-1534, especially 1521.
we are investigating generalizations based on other sources. I suggest, too, that we leave aside certain questions raised by those scholars who pioneered this discussion, including Hans-Martin Schenke⁶ and Eric Segelberg,⁷ such as how many sacraments Philip presupposes, and what is the function of each. Most scholars today agree that the author of Philip is obviously no Hippolytus; instead of detailed description of ritual acts he interprets them impressionistically.⁸ And while the Gospel of Philip no doubt was compiled from various sources, I agree with Schenke that “the whole is governed by a quite specific spirit,”⁹ so that we may speak of the author’s viewpoint (as we do of, say, the Gospel of Mark, which, of course, also is compiled from various sources).

Much of what we find in Philip, Schenke reminds us, the author shares in common with many of his Christian contemporaries. Like perhaps the majority of other Christians, the author of Philip sees the primary transactions of religious life taking place in the community through ritual means—above all in baptism, chrism, and eucharist. Sacramental transactions occur, Philip says, when one who is God’s “image” uses water, oil, bread, and wine as "types and images" (85.16), that is, as means of receiving divine reality.

Does Philip have in mind some form of ritual separate from those practiced by the majority of his Christian contemporaries? A well-known passage in Irenaeus’ Adversus Haereses tells us that certain followers of Valentinus distinguish between water baptism and forms of ritual they call ἀπολυτρωσία, and apparently regard as a kind of second baptism, citing the words of Jesus (“I have another baptism with which to be baptized, and I eagerly hasten toward it,” Luke 12:50). Irenaeus tells us that by contriving prayers and rituals that allegedly surpass baptism, such Valentinians deprecate—even, in effect, deny—baptism.¹⁰

---

⁸ Cf. M. A. Williams, “Realized Eschatology in the Gospel of Philip,” Restoration Quarterly 3 (1971) 14: Philip “employs sacramental imagery with a great deal of freedom, as though viewing the initiation process as a continuous whole, rather than insisting upon analytically isolating the precise contribution of each sacrament.”
In the past, when scholars routinely used all the texts we had available to interpret any one of them, I shared the view, then widely held, that, in effect, all Valentinians followed such practices.\textsuperscript{11} The otherwise unattested eucharistic prayer for union with the angels that Philip attributes to Jesus (58.11-17) might be taken to support the view that Philip, too, knows ritual forms that differ from those shared by most Christians.

Yet closer analysis of Philip indicates, as Michel Desjardins points out, that its author neither denigrates “first baptism” nor indicates any knowledge of a “higher” or even a distinct baptismal ritual.\textsuperscript{12} When Philip speaks of baptism, he seems to have in mind no separate ritual, but, so far as we can tell, the kind of rite generally referred to in sources as diverse as the \textit{Didache}, Justin’s \textit{Apology}, and Hippolytus’ \textit{Apostolic Constitutions}. On the basis of the sparse and varied evidence available we cannot, of course, assume uniform baptismal practice among second and third century Christians. And although we cannot say what precise ritual form Philip may have in mind, he does mention divestiture of clothing (75.20-26), descent into water (64.24; 72.30-73.1; 77.10-15), and immersion as the threefold name (“father, son, and holy spirit”) is pronounced over the candidate (67.20-22) apparently followed by chrismation (69.5-14; 67.4-9), and the kiss of peace (59.1-6), and concluded by participation in the eucharist. Nothing in Philip’s allusive and poetic references to these ritual elements is incompatible with the ritual that Hippolytus, describing what is probably a conservative form of Roman practice some 70 to 80 years later, relates in detail. (Philip, however, does not mention—but may presuppose—the repeated acts of exorcism that Hippolytus describes as preceding baptism, nor does he mention “laying on of hands.”)

Much of Philip’s interpretation of the anticipated effects of baptism is commonplace as well. Justin Martyr, for example, repeatedly characterizes baptism as regeneration, citing the third chapter of John’s gospel, which promises spiritual rebirth “from water and the

\textsuperscript{11} E. Pagels, “A Valentinian Interpretation of Heracleon’s Understanding of Baptism and Eucharist and Its Critique of ‘Orthodox’ Sacramental Theology and Practice,” \textit{HTR} 65 (1972) 153-69; for a more recent perspective, see J. Jacobsen Buckley, “Conceptual Models and Polemical Issues in the Gospel of Philip,” \textit{ANRW} II/25.5, ed. W. Haase and H. Temporini, 4188: “Orthodox, ineffectual baptism is likened to a transaction in which the recipient unwittingly remains in debt.” Here Buckley contrasts orthodox baptism, regarded, in her view, as ineffective, with the effective rites Philip advocates.

holy spirit” (John 3:5; 1 Apol. 61). Hippolytus will agree that baptism conveys “regeneration from the holy spirit.” Besides rebirth, Philip associates baptism and chrism with resurrection, a well-known theme attributed to Paul (Rom 6:3-11; perhaps also Eph 5:14; Col 3:1). Philip rejects, however, the—equally Pauline—theme that baptism involves ritual death as well as (or prior to) rebirth. But Philip agrees with Justin and Hippolytus on the primary theme—that the holy spirit is expected to descend upon the baptismal candidate and effect regeneration.

What concerns Philip, however, is the awareness that ritual performance of baptism does not always effect these anticipated transactions. Consequently Philip—unlike any of the church fathers from Justin to Tertullian or Hippolytus—raises what is for him an urgent question: How is it that one person, receiving baptism, receives the holy spirit, while another may undergo the same ritual “without receiving anything” (64.24)? Klaus Koschorke observes that Philip does not regard the sacrament as working ex opere operato, but I suggest that our understanding of Philip is better served if we refrain from casting his views into language developed in Catholic/Protestant debate over a thousand years later. The doctrine of ex opere operato involves distinctions between objective operation of the sacrament and the recipient’s subjective state—neither of which concerns this author.

Instead, Philip considers sacramental efficacy in the context of religious convictions he shares with his Christian contemporaries and near contemporaries, including, for example, Justin, Tatian, Tertullian, Athanagoras, and Origen; namely, that baptism engages human beings with spiritual forces hidden from ordinary perception—forces both diabolical and divine. For Philip, as for his fellows, supernatural malevolence has much to do with human alienation from the true God. He agrees with Justin and Athanagoras that invidious spiritual powers, masking as pagan gods, use deceit to snare their prey into pagan worship, since they “do not wish (humanity) to be saved” (55.32-55.7).

---

14 According to Lampe’s analysis, among patristic writers it is Origen who first raises this question. Origen may, of course, have been prompted by Valentinian Christians.  
16 See, for example, the incisive discussion by H. Wey, Die Funktionen der bösen Geister bei den griechischen Apologeten des zweiten Jahrhunderts nach Christus (Wintermur: Keller, 1957).
But Philip takes this common conspiracy theory one giant step farther. He—and apparently many of his fellow Valentinians—goes far beyond the majority of his fellow Christians: he declares that certain lower spiritual powers not only deceive people by luring them into pagan worship, but actually insinuate deceit into Christian worship as well, subverting its power. Philip insists that even Christian worship, once sabotaged by powers who “want to enslave (humanity) to themselves forever,” itself may become means not of deliverance, but of enslavement. Philip warns, then, that baptism, that transformer of spiritual energies, commonly understood to expel evil spirits and charge the initiate with God’s spirit, may have its circuits changed, so to speak, by invidious spiritual powers.

How could such sabotage happen? The Valentinian teacher Theodotus had warned that evil spirits “often” steal into the water with baptismal candidates, and receive the baptismal “seal” with them, and so become inseparably bound to their human captives (Exc. ex Theod. 83). But Philip attributes not to demons but to the archons a far more sophisticated form of deception. According to Philip, the archons subvert the sacrament by stealing the language that forms an essential element of Christian sacraments and Christian teaching. For, Philip explains, divine truth “brought names into the world for our sake, since it was not possible to show (or: teach) truth without (names)” (54.15-16). By introducing language, truth acted “out of love” for humanity, for whom language would become the indispensable means of learning truth. But those malevolent lower powers who seized upon truth’s gift and stole the “names,” intended to transform them from a means of disclosing truth into an instrument of deception:

The archons wanted to deceive humanity, since they saw that he had a kinship with what is truly good; and they took the names of those things that are good and gave them to those that are not good (Ἅνετνανοῦ λατάπι Λήνετ-

Names given to those (ετούτ Ἄνεου) in the world have a great deception (Ἅνεονος ἤππανη) for they separate the heart from what is established to what is not established. Thus the one who hears the name “God” does not perceive what is established, but what is not established. So also with the “father” and the “son” and the “holy spirit” and “life” and “light” and “the resurrection” and “the church” and all the other names—people do not perceive the things that are established, but they perceive the things that are not established (53.25-36).
Such sabotage threatens to reverse the effects of baptism. Because the archons have “switched the names,” the very terminology of Christian instruction, instead of enlightening catechumens, may deceive them. Instead of releasing the initiate from bondage to lower powers, such baptism may bind the candidate to malevolent archons. Tertullian, speaking for the majority of believers, expresses confidence that baptism “releases us from demons … and leaves their prince (the devil) drowned in the water.”\(^{17}\) Theodotus sees baptism as offering release from bondage to the astral and planetary powers (“until baptism, the astrologers are right …”).\(^{18}\) But according to Philip, the archons plan to use the very media of redemption in order to “take the free man and enslave him to themselves forever” (54.29-31).

Philip, following Johannine and Pauline theology, as we noted, often characterizes the effects of baptism as rebirth and resurrection. But, he warns, the archons attempting to subvert the effects of the sacrament also have deceived many—perhaps a majority—of baptized Christian into “error” concerning Christ’s divine birth and his resurrection. For Philip, these are anything but theoretical issues; they involve much more than theological speculation. Instead they constitute the central story—the myth, so to speak,—underlying sacramental action. “Myth is the mother of ritual,”\(^{19}\) Gershom Scholem once said, and Philip wholeheartedly would have agreed. For Philip, how one understands Jesus’ birth and his resurrection are practical matters, religiously speaking; they interpret what happens to the initiate in baptism.

Let us take a moment to see how this works. First, Philip declares, “some say that Mary conceived through the holy spirit; they are in error” (55.24-25). Philip castigates those who believe that Jesus’ birth was an event that derived its significance from its uniqueness, a miraculous event in which a woman conceived by parthenogenesis. Philip insists instead that Jesus, while born as we are from earthly parents, was born spiritually from the holy spirit and from the Father in heaven. In this μορφὴ, “the Father of all united with the virgin who descended,” that is, with the spirit (71.5-6), generating Christ’s “body” (71.9-10), that is, the church. Thus the

---

\(^{17}\) Tertullian, *De Bapt.* 9.9.

\(^{18}\) Exc. ex Theod. 78.1-2.

paradigm was established, so that we, too, following Christ, likewise are sacramentally “born again through the image” (67.12-15; 71.19-20). Although we, like Jesus, were born first of human parents, Philip says, “we are indeed reborn through the holy spirit” (69.5), as the Gospel of John confirms (cf. 3:5), so that, “when we became Christians we had both father and mother” (52.24-25)—both holy spirit and heavenly father.

Philip declares that “the apostles and the apostolic ones” err in remaining oblivious of—or offended by—the holy spirit’s actions. Such people apparently interpret Jesus’ birth and resurrection as if they happened only to him and not to ourselves as well. Philip indicates that his perspective differs from that of many other Christians, who regard Jesus’ divine birth as a unique, revelatory historical event—instead of an event that becomes, as it has for Philip, a sacramental paradigm.

When Philip turns to the second dispute—the dispute over resurrection—again he takes for granted a direct analogy between Christ’s experience and that of the initiate. “Those who say the Lord died first and [then] rose up err; for he first arose and then died.” Philip makes the analogy explicit: “If one does not first attain the resurrection, he will not die” (56.15-19). Taking up the topic later, he adds that:

Those who say they will die first and then rise err. If they do not first receive the resurrection while they live, when they die they shall receive nothing. So also, speaking about baptism, they say, “Baptism is a great thing, because if people receive it they shall live” (73.1-7).

As others have noted, Philip takes issue with Christians who take Paul’s words to mean that in baptism we undergo ritual death20 (cf. Rom 6:3-4: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death …”). Philip declares that, on the contrary, “when we go down into the water [of baptism] we do not go down into death” but are reborn. Then, through chrism, (apparently the anointing that completes the baptismal ritual) we receive resurrection. Here again, Christ’s paradigm is fulfilled in the initiate: “for the Father anointed the son, and the son anointed the apostles, and the apostles anointed us” (74.17-18). Saying 67 seems to indicate that baptism, chrism and eucharist (which may also be

---

characterized as bridechamber) convey, respectively, rebirth, resurrection, and reunion, or “entrance into the truth which is the restoration.” What matters to Philip is less to delineate the action of each sacrament than to show that the initiate first reenacts Jesus’ divine birth, then his resurrection, and, finally, his reunion with his syzygos. (Philip’s allusive style does not allow us to specify precisely the action of each ritual element; as indicated above, I agree with Williams, Sevrin, and others who see all of these as elements of the complete initiation.)

Philip’s theology does involve identification mysticism, as Ménard says; but not, as Ménard suggests, identification “de l’âme à son moi”—that is, identification between the soul and some sort of ‘given,’ essentially divine self. (On this basis, Ménard concludes that this gospel, for all its “Semitic” overlay, essentially consists of a confluence of Neoplatonist and Stoic elements.) Philip clearly regards his teaching as Pauline sacramental theology, which centers on the identification between the initiate and Christ—an identification evinced in Philip’s characterization of Christ as πτέλειος ἀριστεύς (55.14), and of the initiate, conversely, as having the potential to become, through sacramental transformation, a Christ (οὐρά, 67.27).

Philip’s sacramental theology shares much in common, then, with the majority of his Christian contemporaries; as we noted, sacramental transactions occur, Philip says, when one who is God’s “image” uses water, oil, bread, and wine as “types and images,” that is, as means of receiving divine reality. Far from rejecting visible sacraments, Philip, as we have seen, regards them as the indispensable means of receiving reality. Philip does acknowledge that types and images share in some of the same ambivalence as does language: both involve a hidden element as well as a manifest one (cf. 57.25-29). So, Philip explains, the “cup of prayer containing wine and water is a type of the blood which is eucharized (εὐχαριστεῖται); and it is full of the holy spirit” (ἐφορίζεται ἐπὶ πνεύματος). This similarity has led Karl Koschorke (and Bernard Barc, following him) to argue that types and images share in the same provisional, ambivalent relationship to


22 Ménard, L’Évangile selon Philippe, 35: “Ces divers rapprochements nous amèneront aussi à conclure que, malgré toutes les influences sémitiques qu’il a pu subir, L’Évangile selon Philippe demeure ou ouvrage de gnose de type hellénistique. Il se situe au confluent des deux grandes philosophies grecques, le néo-platonisme et le stoïcisme.”
divine reality as does language. Consequentially, where Philip characterizes the sacramental elements as **εὐθύμη**, Koschorke translates the term as ‘*wertlos,*’ thus characterizing types and images as ‘worthless.’ But Schenke has given us here a more accurate translation of **εὐθύμη**: not ‘*wertlos,*’ but ‘*verachtate,*’ that is, ‘*despised,*’ a term which Philip immediately qualifies as “‘despised, as compared with the perfect glory.” Sevrin observes from the context that Philip characterizes “types and images” as simultaneously *precious* and despised, *strong* and *weak,* depending upon whether one sees them in relation to the divine truth itself, or to this world. But the whole passage demonstrates, as Sevrin notes, the enormous grace such images convey: “It is thanks to the contemptible types and the weak things that we enter ... into the secret of the truth.”

For while Philip’s discussion of *names* is equivocal and ambivalent, when he discusses “types and images”—the sacramental elements—he does not equivocate. While “names” are necessary to teach truth, Philip notes that, when implicated in deception, they may also teach error. But “types and images” do much more than *words*; they do more than *teach*; instead they—and they alone, Philip says,—*convey* divine reality. We recall the famous passage: “truth did not come into the world naked, but it came in types and images; the world will not receive truth in any other way.” The passage continues:

> There is rebirth and an image of rebirth. It is necessary, truly, that we be reborn through the image. What is the resurrection and the image? Through the

---


24 “Die ‘Namen,’” 312.


27 While Sevrin regards the terms as synonymous (“Les Noces,” 143-193), Barc wants *typos* to refer to the elements, and *eikones* to the spiritual realities *within* the elements (“Les Noms de la Triade” 361-363.)
image, one must rise up. The bridal chamber and the image? Through the image, one must enter into the truth, which is the restoration.28

Unlike words, then, which only teach about or symbolize divine reality,29 the sacramental elements convey it. (Philip, one gathers, is not a low church Protestant!) Philip uses the action verb εἰρην (Greek ποιεῖν) to characterize their efficacy: “The Lord did everything in a mystery: baptism, chrism, eucharist, redemption, and bridechamber” (67.29-30). Philip repeatedly says that one who participates in sacraments “receives” divine reality: “When we drink [the eucharistic ‘cup of prayer’] we shall receive for ourselves the wholly perfect man” (75.15-20, see note for other references).30 The author takes for granted that baptism, chrism, and eucharist effect transformation (“from water and fire the soul and the spirit came into being; from water and fire the son of the bridal chamber came into being”) (67.4-6). In fact, as we have seen, it is precisely this conviction about the efficacy of the sacraments that raises for Philip that question so central to his concern—how it happens that some people participating in these sacraments, nevertheless “receive nothing”—or, at best, a name to which they cannot truly lay claim. For those who receive only the “names” (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) without receiving the divine realities they signify will find out that the name they received in baptism (“Christian”) will be taken away from them as well (67.20-21).

Is Philip saying, then, what several distinguished commentators generally have taken him to mean—that Christian sacraments which effectively transform and redeem some recipients remain only empty vessels—or, worse, deceit—for the rest? Noting the contrast Philip draws between those who already have “received truth in the images” and those who hold the name “Christian” only provisionally, such commentators as Jacques Ménard have assumed that this contrast spells out essential and permanent division between the pneumatic elect and psychic believers.31 Yet Philip’s concern is not

---

28 In this passage, notoriously difficult to translate, I follow Sevrin’s reading; for his rationale, see “Les Noces” 172f.
30 57.9; 59.5-6; 64.24-31; 67.10; 73.2-6, 17-19; 74.22; 86.6-10.
31 See, for example, Ménard, L’Évangile selon Philippe, 20-25, 230-46. All of these commentators, pioneers in the study of the Gospel of Philip, ventured into this difficult text in the traditional way, as we all learned to do, by assembling all possible clues from every text that might have relevance, from the polemics of the heresiologists to the Apocryphon of John or Pistis Sophia. In doing so, they seem to have adopted the conviction basic to the heresiologists’ accounts—that Valentinian Christians concern
so much—and certainly not only—with the spiritual elite as he is with those whom David Tripp calls the “weaker brethren,”32 those who call themselves Christians, but are unwittingly implicated in error. For Philip does not see the irreconcilable distinction between psychic and pneumatic Christians that many commentators have inferred from the heresiologists’ accounts (and, all too often, have read into such works as the Gospel of Philip). Instead, as Michel Desjardins notes, Philip invokes the distinction he finds in Paul’s letters (cf. I Cor 2:14-15) between Christians whom Paul calls “psychics” and those he calls “pneumatics.” And Philip, like Paul, expresses concern, not contempt, for those who, although baptized, have not yet attained gnosis, who have not yet received “the truth in the images”33 (86.14).

When Philip considers the future prospects of such “weaker brethren,” he expresses great hope. For although he has told how malevolent archons conspired “to take the free man and enslave him to themselves forever,” Philip never says their plan succeeded—at least not for long. On the contrary, the archons soon found their plans foiled. Immediately after describing how the archons conspired to deceive humankind by switching the names, Philip goes on to say that:

*Afterward, what a favor (οὐγνώμονας for χαίρε, literally, what grace) they do for them! They make [the names] be removed from the things that are not good, and place them among the good* (54.25 - 29).34

While the latter sentence is simple enough to translate, Robert McL. Wilson acknowledges that he has difficulty accepting what it says: “It is difficult to think of the archons causing men to remove what is not good to the good (in the ‘true’ sense).”35 Ménard, confronted with the same difficulty, concludes that the archons set the names not on what is *truly* good, but only what is “good” in a *worldly* sense.36 Both Wilson and Ménard rightly feel that it is out of charac-
ter for the archons, who “wanted to make [the free man] a slave to themselves forever” now to reverse the effects of their malevolence.

Philip explains, however, that the archons do this not, as they imagine, on their own volition, but only as the holy spirit uses them as her unwitting agents:

The archons thought it was by their own power and will that they were doing what they did, but the holy spirit secretly was accomplishing everything through them as it wished.

So, Philip says, the spirit “shepherds everyone and rules every power, both tame and wild” (60.30-31). At present, Philip continues, evil prevails, even among “the seed of the holy spirit,” some of whom remain, he says, “the slaves of evil.” His characterization may find a parallel in Theodotus’ account of Valentinian Christians who say that “the finest emanation of Sophia”—her seed, apparently—consist both of those who are “called” as well as those who are “chosen” (cf. Matt 22:14; Exc. ex Theod. 21.1). While Philip does not makes this same distinction, he does, throughout the body of his work, characterize some Christians as free, and others as slaves. But Philip concludes his gospel with a vision of the time of consummation, when finally “the perfect light will pour out upon everyone; and all those who are in it will receive (the chrism); then the slaves will be free and the captives delivered” (85.25-30).

Philip offers, then, a view of the Christian community presently divided between those who have gnosis, and those entangled in erroneous beliefs, who remain, unwittingly—but only temporarily—subject to the archons. Philip envisions their final inclusion with the “free” in the deliverance Christ offers. But to participate in the eschatological consummation requires that they have participated in the church’s sacraments; for no one, Philip warns, will receive (the perfect light) in the consummation who has not already received it here in “types and images” (86.6-7), that is, apparently, in baptismal ritual.

Philip offers, then, a rare glimpse of the Christian community as this Valentinian Christian perceives it—a community divided

37 Earlier Philip had explained that when Christ came into the world, he found the soul “subject to the robbers, and taken captive. But he saved it—those who were good in the world, and the evil” (53.11-13). This last phrase, which also has baffled commentators, makes sense only when we see that the holy spirit’s power ultimately prevails over that of the archons to offer deliverance to those who are still slaves. Their ultimate deliverance is neither automatic nor universal; but, Philip declares, “The one who is enslaved against his will will be able to become free” (79.15).
between the few who have *gnosis*, and the many who remain caught in what he regards as erroneous beliefs concerning Christ’s birth and resurrection (beliefs that seem to echo what Bultmannian church historians call “the kerygma”). Philip offers, too, a glimpse of Christian baptismal theology as we have rarely seen it—a baptismal theology based upon both the Johannine view of baptism as rebirth and the Pauline view of baptism as resurrection.