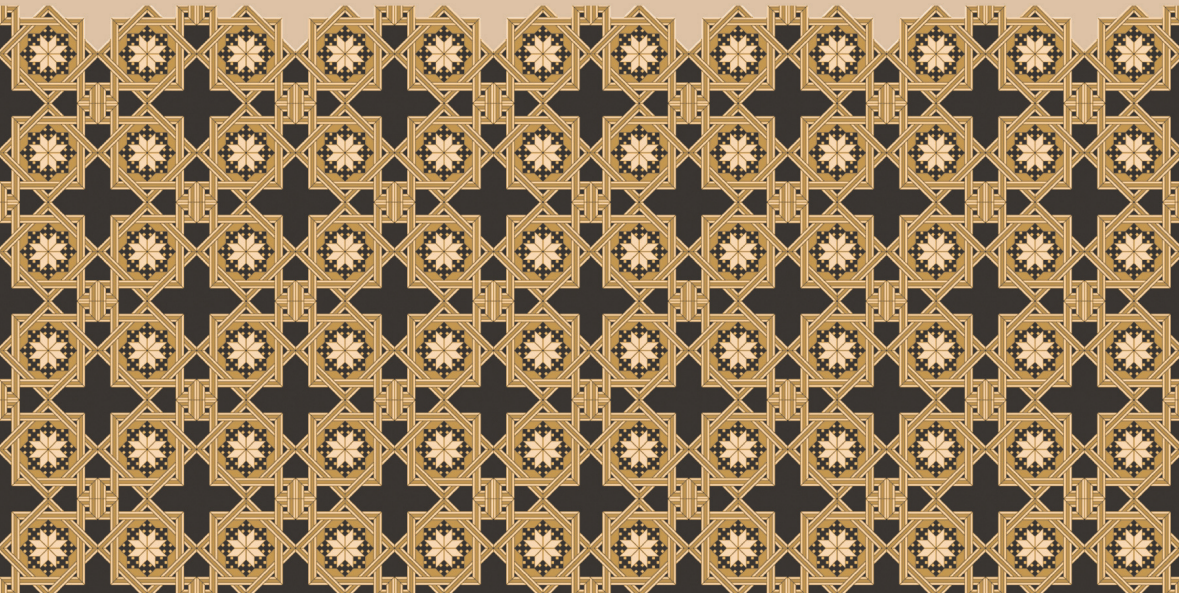


# BEYOND GNOSTICISM

[ MYTH, LIFESTYLE, AND SOCIETY ]  
[ IN THE SCHOOL OF VALENTINUS ]

Ismo Dunderberg











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Chapter 2: Ismo Dunderberg, “From Thomas to Valentinus: Genesis Exegesis in the Fragment 4 of Valentinus and Its Relationship to *Thomas*,” in *Thomasine Traditions in Antiquity: The Social and Cultural World of the Gospel of Thomas*, ed. Jon Ma. Asgeirsson, April D. De Conick, and Risto Uro, 221–237. Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 59. Leiden: Brill, 2006.

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Chapter 9: Ismo Dunderberg, “Body Metaphors in 1 Corinthians and in the *Interpretation of Knowledge* (NHC XI,1),” in *Actes du Huitième Congrès International d’Etudes Coptes. Paris 28 Juin—3 Juillet 2004*, ed. N. Bosson and A. Boud’hors. *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 163. Leuven: Peeters, 2007. Republished by permission of Peeters, Leuven.

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Ismo Dunderberg, “The School of Valentinus,” in *A Companion to Second-Century Christian “Heretics,”* ed. Antti Marjanen and Petri Luomanen, 64–99. *Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae* 76. Leiden: Brill, 2005.

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## BEYOND GNOSTICISM



## INTRODUCTION

THE SCHOOL of Valentinus, known for its keen interest in mythmaking, was one of the most significant factions denounced as heretical in nascent Christianity. Its influence in the early church is revealed not only in the surviving literary remnants of Valentinian teachers themselves, but also in the attacks leveled against them in the texts of other early Christians. Entire treatises were composed against Valentinians; the most prominent among these works was the five-volume *Against Heresies*, written c. 180 by Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons. In later centuries, Valentinus's reputation was established as one of the three archheretics in the early church—the other two being Marcion and, variably, Basilides or Arius.

The discourse of orthodoxy and heresy, implemented by the ancient opponents of the Valentinians, still characterizes much of the research done in this field. Scholars often try to place Valentinians on the theological battlefield where the struggle between orthodoxy and heresy was being fought. Valentinianism has been customarily regarded as one of the main currents of ancient Gnosticism. The ways scholars have defined the core of Gnostic thought have guided their reading of Valentinian sources. Because of this approach, the topics discussed in this study, such as moral exhortation, views about emotions, and critical analysis of power and society, have not received the attention they deserve on the basis of how large they loom in the original sources. None of these features has been regarded as constituting the distinct essence, or the “spirit,” of Gnosticism: hence the lack of interest in them in scholarship on Valentinian teaching.

However, it is precisely such features that enable us to draw a sharper picture of the school of Valentinus in its historical context. All these

issues were prominent in the teaching program of other ancient schools of thought, and other early Christian philosophers addressed many of them as well. Thus these issues need to be analyzed in more detail if our goal is not so much to understand *ourselves* (as third-millennium heirs to the orthodoxy-heresy debate) but to better understand Valentinians in the context of early Christianity and of ancient schools of thought.

## WHO WERE THE VALENTINIANS?

For a movement denounced as heretical in the early church, the Valentinian faction features an unusually large number of teachers known by name.<sup>1</sup> The most famous of them were Valentinus, Heracleon, Theodotus, Ptolemaeus, and Marcus (whom his opponents called the “Magician”). In addition, a number of less famous Valentinians—Florinus, Secundus, Axionicus, Ardesianes, Theotimus, and Alexander—are known from ancient sources.<sup>2</sup> The number of Valentinian teachers is particularly impressive if we take into account the relatively small size of ancient schools of thought. By way of comparison, as John Dillon points out, “we have names of about a dozen students of Proclus,” although he was the head of the Athenian Academy for more than forty years in the fifth century. It is estimated that Proclus had no more “than a half a dozen serious students at any one time.”<sup>3</sup>

A random selection of the Valentinians’ teachings survive in the works of their opponents, who offer summaries of their theologies and some brief fragments of their works. After the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library (from the latter part of the fourth century) in Upper Egypt in 1945, however, we are no longer dependent only on the opponents’ accounts of Valentinians but have at our disposal a considerable number of their own texts. The Nag Hammadi Library provides us with at least eight previously unknown Valentinian texts written by anonymous authors.<sup>4</sup>

It is not only the number of people known by name and remnants of their literary activity that bear witness to the significance of the school of Valentinus in nascent Christianity. Its impact can also be inferred from the energetic condemnation of this group in the works written by bishops and other key figures of early church history. Justin the Martyr, Irenaeus, Hippolytus of Rome, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen all regarded the Valentinians as posing a severe threat to what they considered to be true Christianity.<sup>5</sup> Although their portrayal of Valentinians is mostly very hostile, it is possible that Valentinian theology exerted some influence on their opinions.<sup>6</sup>

No other source has shaped our picture of Valentinian Christians as much as Irenaeus's *Against Heresies*. According to this work, Valentinians should have been easily identifiable. Irenaeus accuses them of being arrogant toward other Christians and of showing complete irreverence for any norms of good Christian behavior. Nevertheless, Irenaeus's work shows that the difference between Valentinians and other Christians was not at all clear. Valentinians themselves maintained that they accepted the Christian creed of God and Christ,<sup>7</sup> and they protested being classified as heretics.<sup>8</sup> When some of the Christian women from Irenaeus's circle attended meetings led by Marcus—characterized by extravagant liturgical innovations and sexual promiscuity, according to Irenaeus—they realized only in the course of events that they were not in a normal Christian service but in the middle of a strikingly different form of worship.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, it is clear that, from early on, some Valentinians formed distinctive groups, having their own meetings and developing new rituals. From the third century onward, they even had their own bishops. However, some other Valentinians, probably a majority of them, did not form a church of their own but remained within the community of other Christians, took part in its meetings, and shared their rituals. One Valentinian, Florinus, even managed to make a career in the ecclesiastical hierarchy in Rome at the end of the second century.<sup>10</sup> This indicates that Valentinians were not clearly separated from other Christians but belonged to the same community. This situation accounts for Irenaeus's concern to show that Valentinians "speak similarly but *think* differently"<sup>11</sup> about issues pertaining to the Christian doctrine. From Irenaeus's point of view, it is this secret teaching of the Valentinians that makes them such a great threat.

The terminology Irenaeus uses for his opponents supports the idea that there were two branches within ancient Valentinianism, one tending toward a separate cult movement and one tending toward a school movement. Irenaeus designated one Valentinian faction, which I think mainly consisted of Marcus and his followers, as a cult society (*thiasos*).<sup>12</sup> In describing other Valentinians, however, Irenaeus prefers school terminology. He mentions people who claimed to be "students of Valentinus,"<sup>13</sup> considers Valentinus the founder of a school (*didaskaleion*),<sup>14</sup> and speaks about "the school of Valentinus" (*Oualentinou scholē, Valentini schola*).<sup>15</sup> Given that the term *didaskaleion* often denotes a philosophical school,<sup>16</sup> it seems clear that Valentinians bore some resemblance to ancient schools of thought.<sup>17</sup>

The school terminology Irenaeus uses for Valentinians corresponds with the strong emphasis they placed on education. In Valentinian texts, the world is described as a place of instruction that needs to be visited by those

coming from above. It is said in the *Valentinian Exposition* that a human being is made “a dwelling place . . . for the seeds” and “a school . . . for doctrine and for form.”<sup>18</sup> Corresponding to this image, Christ is often portrayed as a teacher in Valentinian texts. The *Gospel of Truth* describes how he went to “schools” and “spoke the word as a teacher.”<sup>19</sup> In the *Interpretation of Knowledge*, Christ is called “the teacher of immortality,” opposed to another figure designated as an “arrogant teacher.” While Christ represents a “living school,” the rival school of the arrogant teacher is confined to the interpretation of writings that only “taught about our death.”<sup>20</sup>

In addition, Ptolemaeus’s *Letter to Flora* demonstrates that Valentinian teachers adapted their teaching to the level of their students: they distinguished between instruction for beginners and more advanced teaching. The same distinction becomes visible in the *Gospel of Philip*: “The disciple of God . . . will look at the condition of the soul of each one and speak with him. . . . To the slaves he will give only the elementary lessons, to the children he will give the complete instruction.”<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that the idea of two or more levels of instruction was *not* a distinctively “Gnostic” element in Valentinian teaching; a similar approach to education was quite common in ancient schools of thought.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, the school context speaks to the notable scribal activity of Valentinians, which is not only confirmed by the number of texts written by them but also by references to their “treatises” or “commentaries” (*hupomnēmata*).<sup>23</sup> The sources also hint at the preservation and interpretation of Valentinus’s texts by his followers. Alexander is known for having a collection of Valentinus’s psalms—as if “they were the work of some authoritative author,” as Tertullian mockingly remarks.<sup>24</sup> The *Dialogue on the True Faith in God* introduces Droserius, who claims that Valentinus “was no ordinary man” and that his views “will not be open to contradiction.” Moreover, Droserius pays homage to Valentinus’s literary works: at his insistence, a passage from a work of Valentinus is read aloud before the closer scrutiny of Valentinian theology. Although the whole scene is likely fictitious,<sup>25</sup> it confirms Valentinus’s reputation as the founder of an early Christian group and as the author of works admired by his followers.

Yet another sign of the use of Valentinus’s hymns by his followers is the allegorical commentary to his poem *Harvest*. The commentary is secondary, but it was most likely added by the followers of Valentinus, not by his opponents.<sup>26</sup> The commentary shows that Valentinus’s compositions were also subject to interpretation among Valentinians.<sup>27</sup> Thus, even the scanty evidence for Valentinus’s own views allows the conclusion that there were

Valentinians who “valued the teachings of their founder,”<sup>28</sup> which is one of the characteristic features in ancient schools of thought.<sup>29</sup>

This does not mean that we should assume that those belonging to the school of Valentinus followed his opinions slavishly. There were different attitudes in ancient schools toward their founders. While in many schools traditions about and teachings of the founder were highly respected, there were groups, such as the Stoics, in which the teachings of the founder were not regarded “as a binding orthodoxy.”<sup>30</sup> Deviation from the views of one’s teacher was also quite common in early Christian groups of the second century.<sup>31</sup> I completely agree with Michael Kaler and Marie-Pierre Bus-sière’s recent conclusion that Heracleon “developed his own theological and philosophical views.”<sup>32</sup> This point, however, suffices to question his affiliation with the school of Valentinus only if it is assumed that this school required uncritical acceptance of the founder’s (or the school’s) opinions.<sup>33</sup> Since I do not see any compelling reason for this assumption, I continue to regard Heracleon as a Valentinian. That he had a theological profile of his own does not, in my view, disprove this identification suggested by external evidence.<sup>34</sup>

Despite all the attacks against it, Valentinian Christianity proved remarkably resilient. It even survived the new period in church history beginning with the emperor Constantine’s granting of privileges to the Christian church at the beginning of the fourth century. Valentinianism was then officially declared one of the heretical sects against which the church began to fight with the support of the state. For Valentinians, this meant that their rights to own properties used for religious meetings were restricted, their works were censored, and they fell victim to Christian hooligans who were supported by bishops and tolerated by emperors. Extant sources offer glimpses of the fates of Valentinians in the Christianized Roman Empire. From them we learn that toward the end of the fourth century a gang of furious monks burned down a Valentinian church—without being punished by officials.<sup>35</sup> New legislation was still issued against Valentinians at a church council held at the end of the seventh century, which indicates their survival up to this point.<sup>36</sup>

## THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

As I started to research the school of Valentinus, the most intriguing question was: how much continuity, if any, was there between Valentinus and other members of the school of Valentinus? It was Christoph Markschie’s

study *Valentinus Gnosticus?* (1994) that attracted my attention to this problem.<sup>37</sup> The provocative thesis of this book, based upon a meticulous analysis of the surviving excerpts from Valentinus's works, was that Valentinus was neither a Gnostic nor a Valentinian. I found especially persuasive Markschie's attempt at understanding the fragments of Valentinus in their own right, without reading Gnostic mythology into them. Yet Markschie's conclusion begged the question of how a group of early Christians came to be called "the school of Valentinus" if Valentinus's own teaching was so different from theirs.

The creation myth seemed the most obvious place to start a study on continuity and discontinuity, since most of our evidence for Valentinian theology is related to this issue. In reading and trying to make sense of Valentinian stories of creation, however, I gradually became aware of a second problem, which I now consider to be of much greater importance than the one with which I began my study. I found myself asking time and time again: what could possibly have been the purpose of such highly complicated myths for Valentinian Christians?

One answer seemed obvious. For some Valentinians, myth was important because of its close link to ritual practice. Key points of the Valentinian cosmogonic myth were recapitulated in the ritual of redemption (*apolutrōsis*) performed in their meetings. Moreover, if there ever existed a Valentinian ritual of the bridal chamber—an issue over which scholars are divided—it was probably connected with the Valentinian myth of divine couples inhabiting the divine realm called Fullness (*plērōma*) or linked with an idea of one's heavenly partner (*suzugos*).

Whereas much ink has been spilled over the ritualistic aspects of the Valentinian myth,<sup>38</sup> I began to wonder whether this aspect suffices to explain the Valentinian interest in mythmaking. It is even possible that the practice of the redemption ritual was confined to the cultic branch of this group.<sup>39</sup> Thus this aspect did not appear to be the only available explanation for the Valentinian mythmaking. In closer reading of the relevant sources, it began to seem increasingly obvious to me that Valentinian teachers used the cosmogonic myth not only because of its connection to ritual but also to explain the world they were living in. The clearest example of this approach is the way myth is connected with social reality in the *Tripartite Tractate* (NHC I, 5), the fullest exposition of Valentinian theology known to us thus far. This text explains the political structure of society by means of a cosmic myth in which the key issue is the origin of power. In this text, myth is directly linked with a portrayal of the church oppressed by those in power.<sup>40</sup>

While the *Tripartite Tractate* supplies us with a decidedly political interpretation of myth, my suggestion is that most Valentinians used myth to lend justification to the lifestyle they recommended to their followers. This, in fact, is the way things usually were in ancient schools of thought. My premise is that the Valentinians in the school branch did not entirely differ from this general picture. Against this background, it now seems to me that Valentinian reinterpretation of traditional myths, such as those in the first pages of the book of Genesis or the story of Wisdom's fall in the divine realm, was connected with a broad range of issues related to lifestyle and society. Therefore, my focus is on how Valentinians used myth to construct pictures of social reality and, in this way, provided a foundation for a way of life and the moral instruction connected with it.

## SOURCES

Although the school of Valentinus was an influential current in the early church, the literary remnants surviving from the texts written by its members were meager until the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library. This collection shows that copies of Valentinian works were still in circulation in Egypt in the middle of the fourth century. On the other hand, the burial of this library indicates that Valentinian writings belonged to those not tolerated by representatives of the nascent state church.<sup>41</sup>

Before the Nag Hammadi codices were found in Upper Egypt in 1945, the only sources on Valentinian teachers were the texts written by their opponents. These texts contain (1) a limited number of direct quotations from the works of Valentinian teachers (including two entire compositions) and (2) the opponents' summaries of their theology and lifestyle. The first group includes the following texts:<sup>42</sup>

- Fragments of Valentinus's own texts, mainly preserved in the works of Clement of Alexandria and Hippolytus of Rome
- Fragments of Heracleon's commentaries on the New Testament gospels, mainly preserved in Origen's *Commentary on John*
- Fragments of Theodotus's and other Valentinians' teachings in Clement's work *Excerpts from Theodotus*
- Ptolemaeus's *Letter to Flora*, quoted in its entirety in the *Panarion* of Epiphanius of Salamis
- A Valentinian *Letter of Instruction* ("Lehrbrief") also quoted by Epiphanius (*Panarion* 31.5–6)<sup>43</sup>

I would add to this group a lengthy account of a Valentinian theory about God and preexistent “stuff” or “matter” (*hulē*) in Methodius’s treatise *On Free Will*; large parts of this account were later reproduced in Adaman-tius’s *Dialogue on the True Faith in God*. While this account has been notoriously overlooked in previous scholarship, I shall argue in chapter 4 that it deserves serious consideration as a possibly authentic source of Valentinian teaching that may go back to Valentinus himself.

The early Christian authors writing against Valentinians are often identified as belonging to “patristic” theologians, but I prefer to designate their works as “hostile sources.” This designation reminds us that their treatises are not neutral accounts of what Valentinians taught and did but often show outright hostility toward them. The opponents wanted to reveal that Valentinianism was a dangerous heresy. For this purpose, they did not aim at a balanced presentation of all aspects of Valentinian teaching. Instead, they focused on issues that demonstrated how this teaching deviated from what they considered to be the true Christian doctrine. Valentinian theology thus became defined by its differences from what the opponents saw as normative Christianity.

What Irenaeus and his successors found most offensive in the teaching of Valentinians was their assumption that there exists a separate Creator-God (Demiurge) distinct from the supreme God. This is the dominant issue in his discussion with and polemic against the Valentinians. As Rowan Greer has pointed out, Irenaeus “insists upon ‘the first and greatest head’ in the orthodox Rule, viz. that concerned with the one creator god, who contains all but is uncontained. . . . Irenaeus’s refutation of the Valentinians hinges upon the orthodox doctrine of God. . . . He is not worried about gnostic dualism save insofar as it undermines belief in the Creator.”<sup>44</sup>

Irenaeus and other early opponents also wanted to make the social boundary between the faithful and the Valentinians as clear as possible. This accounts for the fact that the opponents’ accounts of the Valentinians, especially those by Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Epiphanius, involve considerable amounts of harsh irony and mudslinging. These aspects in their works are based upon the conventional rhetorical strategies of their time. It cannot be known whether any of these opponents knew of Valentinian moral exhortation, for which we now have plenty of evidence in the Valentinian texts of the Nag Hammadi Library. If they did, they would not have had much use for it anyway, since it would not have suited their portrait of Valentinians as prone to everything evil.

In consequence, when using the opponents’ texts as sources, their bias against Valentinians must constantly be kept in mind. These texts do provide us with essential information about Valentinian theology, but they are

not entirely reliable as a record of what Valentinians really taught and how they behaved. Also, it should not be forgotten that these hostile sources are not independent of one another. Most accounts of Valentinian theology in hostile sources written after Irenaeus are more or less dependent on him. This means that we can speak of “multiple attestation,” necessary to verify the reliability of information—especially in the case of biased secondhand sources—only after confirming that this information really comes from a number of original sources and not just from a single hostile source copied in later, equally hostile treatises.

Irenaeus’s summation of Valentinian theology in *Against Heresies* 1.1–7 (often called “the Great Account” and identified in scholarship as “System/Version A”) is mainly based upon one strand of this theology. This version is often designated the “system of Ptolemaeus,”<sup>45</sup> but Irenaeus himself identifies the followers of Ptolemaeus, and not Ptolemaeus himself, as the source of his information.<sup>46</sup> Irenaeus seasons his account with occasional references to other Valentinian teachings and with his own often ironical and sometimes distasteful remarks and musings about his opponents’ teachings.<sup>47</sup> However, it cannot be assumed that once such asides have been removed we would be left with a relatively faithful reproduction of a Valentinian source text. At the beginning of his work, Irenaeus says that he “came across the commentaries of, as they themselves claim, the disciples of Valentinus.” He also had a chance to speak with some of them.<sup>48</sup> Given that Irenaeus’s purpose was to provide his addressee with a general outline of Valentinian theology, I prefer to approach his presentation of that theology as his own summary based upon selective use of the sources available to him.<sup>49</sup>

Two other summaries of Valentinian teaching are available in Hippolytus’s *Refutation of All Heresies* and in Clement’s *Excerpts of Theodotus* (chapters 42–65). It is striking that Hippolytus, who knew Irenaeus’s account, did not choose to follow it as his main source for Valentinian theology but drew upon another source of information, usually designated as “System/Version B.” It can be inferred from Irenaeus’s references to alternate Valentinian teachings that he was also familiar with a Valentinian theology similar to that in Version B. It is equally noteworthy that, in his account of Marcosian theology based upon Irenaeus, Hippolytus, as Niclas Förster points out, “left out all Irenaeus’s polemical additions and asides.”<sup>50</sup> Hippolytus’s caution was probably attributable to the fact that he had met in Rome Marcosian Christians who protested Irenaeus’s portrayal of them. Hippolytus tells: “When some of them read these [i.e., Irenaeus’s description of them], they, being taught to always deny, refused to accept that (what Irenaeus had told) was (really) so.”<sup>51</sup> This reaction shows that the

Marcosians in Rome did not recognize themselves in the polemical picture Irenaeus drew of their teaching and lifestyle. Hippolytus obviously felt the need to tone down overly excessive aspects of Irenaeus's work.

These three accounts are the most important systematic summaries of Valentinian theology written by outsiders. It is a matter of regret that Tertullian, who obviously knew some important primary materials, such as Alexander's collection of Valentinus's psalms, chose to slavishly follow Irenaeus in writing his treatise *Against Valentinians*. Only occasionally does Tertullian provide any new information that goes beyond what Irenaeus had said previously. Epiphanius is significant because he quotes two primary sources (Ptolemaeus's *Letter to Flora* and the Valentinian *Letter of Instruction*) and because he offers lengthy quotations from the original, now lost Greek text of Irenaeus's work.

Concerning the new evidence provided by the Nag Hammadi Library, the following texts in this collection are usually classified as Valentinian:<sup>52</sup> *The Prayer of the Apostle Paul* (NHC I, 1), *The Gospel of Truth* (NHC I, 3; XII, 2), *The Tripartite Tractate* (NHC I, 5), *The Treatise on the Resurrection (Letter to Rheginus)*, (NHC I, 4), *The Gospel of Philip* (NHC II, 3),<sup>53</sup> *The (First) Apocalypse of James* (NHC V, 3), *The Interpretation of Knowledge* (NHC XI, 1), and *A Valentinian Exposition* (NHC XI, 2). None of these texts contains any account of the history of the school of Valentinus. Instead, they are theological treatises from which historical deductions can be made only with caution. Nevertheless, these texts do indeed change our picture of Valentinian Christianity. Perhaps the most significant addition to what was already known is the orientation toward moral exhortation in these texts, an aspect we hear very little of in the hostile sources. Some of these texts confirm the claim found in the hostile sources that Valentinians were interested in mythmaking. Nevertheless, in some of these texts, such as the *Gospel of Truth* and the *Treatise on the Resurrection*, this aspect is either entirely absent or referred to only in passing. These texts show that Valentinian teachers were not merely mythmakers, as they are portrayed in the hostile sources, but also had something else to offer to their students.

## OUTLINE OF THE STUDY

One consequence of the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library has been that the term "Gnosticism" itself has become problematic. The library offers such a diversity of opinions that most features by which Gnosticism has thus far been defined have proved one-sided. Moreover, the discussion has moved from essentialist definitions of Gnosticism ("what Gnosticism is")

to a critical appraisal of how this term functions as a category. In using the term “Gnosticism,” scholars have often perpetuated positions characteristic of the discourse of orthodoxy and heresy. Michael Williams and Karen King have clearly shown these problems with the use of this term. In light of their work, it is no longer tenable to try to explain Valentinian teaching as arising from a distinct “Gnostic” spirit. What we need in the present situation is an alternate approach that takes the school of Valentinus beyond Gnosticism. This is what I attempt to do in chapter 1. Based upon Williams’s and King’s critical reviews of the category of Gnosticism, I delineate an approach that connects Valentinian mythic discourse more closely with the intellectual and social milieu from which it originally emerged.

The first main part of this study is devoted to Valentinus’s interpretation of Genesis. His teaching about immortality, discussed in chapter 2, was probably based on the Genesis story of the creation of humankind. I seek to argue that this part of Valentinus’s teaching was not merely theological reflection but also had a more practical dimension. Jewish and early Christian assessments about immortality were in general inseparably connected with lifestyle: those who had chosen the right way of life, and lived according to it, already achieved immortality on earth.

While Valentinus’s teaching on immortality was relatively conventional, his account of Adam’s opposition to the creator angels betrays a more peculiar twist. A distinctive feature in Valentinus’s interpretation is the idea that the divine seed bestowed upon Adam expressed itself in the form of free speech (*parrhēsia*). This issue was a topos often addressed by ancient philosophers, and it is my purpose to show in chapter 3 how Valentinus’s teaching could be better understood in light of these discussions. The first part will conclude with an analysis of Valentinus’s eloquent poem *Harvest*. Although it is not an interpretation of Genesis, as are the other two fragments mentioned above, it needs to be discussed in this connection, since it bears witness to a much more positive view of the world than might be inferred from Valentinus’s teaching about Adam’s creation. Thus it raises the question of how the negative aspect in Valentinus’s teaching about Adam and his confident attitude toward the present world fit together.

In the second part of this book, I turn from Valentinus to other Valentinians. Chapter 5 is focused on Ptolemaeus’s *Letter to Flora*, which presents itself as an introductory treatise written to a novice. Ptolemaeus is often portrayed as an untrustworthy Gnostic teacher who kept his “hidden agenda” back from an orthodox Christian woman. My suggestion, however, is that he approached Flora (and perhaps her circle) on a much more egalitarian basis. In addition, this text shows that in Ptolemaeus’s teaching

theory and practice went together. His treatise not only offers proof of the existence of an inferior Creator-God but also contains a substantial amount of moral instruction.

Chapter 6 deals with the Valentinian myth of Wisdom's fall. My analysis of this myth is focused on the description of Wisdom's entanglement in emotions after her expulsion from the divine realm. This aspect connects the entire story of Wisdom with the discussion on emotions in the ancient schools of philosophy. The therapeutic assuagement of excessive emotions by means of reasoning was one of the most important practical benefits the teachers of philosophy promised their students. I suggest in this chapter that Valentinian teachers were engaged in the discussion of the diagnosis and healing of emotions. They promoted the idea of Christ as a physician of the soul, curing not only the emotions of Wisdom but also those of Christians.

In chapters 7, 8, and 9, I discuss in more detail other Valentinian views about the Creator-God, his relationship with humankind, and the social ramifications of these views. While some Valentinians emphasized the negative aspects of the Creator-God, some of them were confident that they were especially loved and protected by this god. It also seems likely that Valentinians understood their tripartite division of humankind in a less deterministic way than Irenaeus's account of their theology indicates. This analysis also puts into question his allegations of the moral indifference of Valentinians. It seems, rather, that most of them were seriously concerned with the moral improvement of their students. The final chapter in this part offers a case study on how the distinction between different classes of Christians were thought to be relevant to the social structure of the Christian community. This chapter discusses the way the author of the *Interpretation of Knowledge* argued for the bestowal of certain privileges on the spiritually advanced members of the church.

The third main part is dedicated to the links drawn between myth and society in the *Tripartite Tractate*. The author of this text establishes an intrinsic connection between myth and the political world in which early Christians lived. While it was often claimed in the hostile sources that Gnostics en bloc sought to avoid persecution, this text depends upon the idea of the persecuted church, which was part of early Christian collective memory, and employs myth to account for the coercive power Christians were faced with from time to time in Roman society. Moreover, I show how the author of this text used myth to lend justification to a distinctly Christian self-understanding over against Jews and Greeks.

In the concluding chapter, I return to the suggestion I have already made elsewhere that Valentinian esotericism is best understood in the context of ancient schools of thought. Valentinians obviously drew a distinction between novices and more advanced students and offered instruction adapted to the student's stage of development. This educational strategy was by no means unusual in ancient schools of thought. In fact, it is quite easy to trace other instances of scholastic esotericism similar to that found in Valentinian sources.

THE SCHOOL OF VALENTINUS  
AFTER GNOSTICISM

IN THIS chapter, I outline my approach to the Valentinian myth. First, I bid farewell to the discourse of orthodoxy and heresy, which can be seen in the ways scholars have used the term “Gnosticism.” In my view, the criticism leveled at the use of this term by Karen King and Michael Williams has not been mere quibbling over a problematic G-word that could be replaced with some less problematic not-G-word. Rather, this discussion has dramatically changed our understanding of what we are after in examining the materials traditionally classified as Gnostic.

Second, I draw a distinction between an intellectualist-doctrinal mode of explanation, which has dominated much of the scholarship done on the school of Valentinus, and the more pragmatist approach that I have adopted. This latter approach does not neglect the intellectual background of Valentinian teaching but builds upon the insight that in ancient schools of thought theoretical reflection and moral instruction went hand in hand. Teachers in these schools were first and foremost concerned with the moral advancement of their students; the theoretical philosophical discourse was only one way of “doing philosophy.” If Valentinian teachers shared this concern, as I believe they did, hints at lifestyle issues in their mythic discourse must be taken more seriously than they have been. This part of my argument goes together with my attempt to move from an essentialist approach to myth (“what myth is”) to paying more attention to what is done with myth.

GNOSTICISM, ORTHODOXY, AND HERESY

One of the most hotly debated issues in present scholarship on Valentinianism is Valentinus’s relationship to Gnosticism. The basic alternatives are

(1) that he was not a Gnostic (Christoph Marksches),<sup>1</sup> (2) that he was a Gnostic (e.g., Jens Holzhausen, Paul Schüngel, Gilles Quispel),<sup>2</sup> and (3) that he was not a Gnostic in the proper sense but “a Christian reformer of the classic Gnostic tradition” (Bentley Layton).<sup>3</sup>

The discussion about whether Valentinus was a Gnostic is largely self-generating, since assessments about this issue are entirely dependent on how the scholars define “Gnosticism.” Once you have a definition, you have the answer to the question of whether Valentinus was or was not a Gnostic. Marksches compared the teaching in the fragments of Valentinus to a definition of Gnosticism that was made in the concluding statement of a congress of specialists held in Messina in 1966, and he showed that Valentinus’s teaching does not fit in with this definition. Rather, Marksches argued, Valentinus was a biblical theologian who represents “an intellectual intermediate stage between Philo and Clement of Alexandria.”<sup>4</sup>

The Messina definition of Gnosticism, which Marksches discussed in his work, is very specific: it basically presupposes a cosmogonic myth in which Wisdom’s fall is mentioned.<sup>5</sup> The Valentinian myth no doubt was taken into account in creating this definition and thus fits well with it. However, it is not only the fragments of Valentinus that do not offer a perfect fit with this definition. There are a number of Valentinian texts in which Wisdom’s fall is not mentioned: Ptolemaeus’s *Letter to Flora*, the fragments of Heracleon, the *Gospel of Truth* (which mentions a primordial “error” but offers a very vague picture of how the visible world emerged from it), the *Treatise on the Resurrection*, the Valentinian *Letter of Instruction* (“*Lehrbrief*”),<sup>6</sup> and the account of Valentinian theology in Methodius’s *On Free Will*.<sup>7</sup> It is possible that authors of some of these texts presuppose a myth of Wisdom’s fall, but this story does not seem as essential to their teaching as the Messina definition implies.

In consequence, if the lack of references to the Wisdom myth show that Valentinus was no “Gnostic,” the same can be said of many of his followers. Therefore, I find problematic the dramatic gap Marksches postulates between Valentinus and his followers, who “plunged into the mythological heresy of the Valentinian gnosis.”<sup>8</sup> The clear division Marksches draws between non-Gnostic Valentinus and his “Gnostic” followers is of limited value if our goal is a better understanding of the school of Valentinus in its historical context.<sup>9</sup> What Marksches managed to show was that Valentinus was no Gnostic (while some of his followers were)—*if* we understand Gnosticism the way the scholars in Messina defined it. As soon as the definition changes, the estimation as to whether Valentinus and/or his followers were Gnostics or not changes also.

The highly circular reasoning inherent in *all* such attempts can be further illustrated with Bentley Layton's designation of Valentinus as a "reformer" of "classic Gnosticism." This view derives from Layton's suggestion that the term "Gnosticism" should be reserved for a relatively small group of early Christians who called themselves "Gnostics." According to Layton, Irenaeus describes such Christians in *Against Heresies* 1.29–30.<sup>10</sup> Since teachings similar to theirs can be found in the Sethian texts of the Nag Hammadi Library, Layton expands the category "Gnosticism" to apply to these texts as well. Hence Layton coins the term "classic Gnostic" to denote what most other scholars would designate as "Sethian."<sup>11</sup> The consequence of this definition as regards the Valentinian Christians is a matter of course: if Gnosticism is Sethianism, and if Valentinus and his followers were not Sethians, they were obviously not Gnostics,<sup>12</sup> at least not in the proper sense of the word. This conclusion is no less a truism than Markschies's view of non-Gnostic Valentinus and his Gnostic followers.

The problems with the term "Gnosticism" itself are now well known. It does not appear in ancient sources at all, unlike "Judaism" (*ioudaismos*) or "Christianity" (*christianismos*). The term "Gnosticism" was coined in the seventeenth century by Henry More, who used it for the theological position denounced in the Book of Revelation!<sup>13</sup> Although there were probably some early Christians who used the term "Gnostic" as a self-designation, as Layton suggests,<sup>14</sup> their number seems to have been very limited. Notably, this self-definition is *not* attested in the Sethian texts Layton includes in his corpus of "classic Gnostic" texts. This absence considerably weakens his case for a more historical definition of Gnosticism.

Despite these caveats, the emphasis on salvific knowledge in a number of early Christian texts usually called "Gnostic" could lend some historical warrant for labeling these texts and the people behind them as representing a movement that could be called "Gnosticism."<sup>15</sup> However, Michael Williams's and Karen King's critical reviews highlight the ill-grounded images scholars have created by using the term "Gnosticism." This raises the question of how useful this category is for analytical purposes in the first place.

Williams shows in detail that none of the characteristics by means of which "Gnosticism" has been identified as a distinct movement or even as a religion of its own<sup>16</sup> holds true for all of the relevant evidence. All traits that have been portrayed as distinct signs of Gnostic thought and practice, such as rejection of the world, determinism, elitism, hatred of the body, and moral extremism (either in the form of asceticism or of libertinism), prove to be sweeping generalizations. They may find some support in some parts

of the evidence but fail to do justice to the variety of positions expressed in it.<sup>17</sup> Thus Gnosticism as a category creates a misleading impression of a relatively unitarian movement. Although it may be unrealistic to hope that scholars will be ready to drop entirely the problematic term “Gnosticism,” as Williams suggests, his study shows that this term is much less helpful as an analytical tool than is usually assumed.

Karen King’s critique is not so much related to scholars’ views about what ancient Gnosticism is as it is related to the question of what scholars *do* with their definitions of Gnosticism. King maintains that the use of the term Gnosticism is basically apologetic; it presupposes and perpetuates the discourse of orthodoxy and heresy: “the problem of defining Gnosticism has been primarily concerned with the normative identity of Christianity. . . . Indeed, it is largely apologetic concerns to defend normative Christianity that make Gnosticism intelligible as a category at all.” King goes on to argue that scholars have constantly portrayed “Gnosticism” as the “other” of true Christianity: “Gnosticism has been classified as a marginal, sectarian, esoteric, mythical, syncretistic, parasitic, and Oriental religion, in contrast to mainstream, authentic, ethnic, rational, or universal religions, such as orthodox Christianity.”<sup>18</sup> Moreover, King demonstrates that the apologetic and marginalizing tendency inherent in using the term “Gnosticism” pervades the scholarly literature from von Harnack to Jonas and from Baur to Rudolph. In fact, Markschie’s division between Valentinus, who was not a Gnostic, and his followers, who became Gnostic heretics, has the same bias. What differentiates Markschie from previous scholars is his attempt to rehabilitate Valentinus’s reputation, but this happens at the cost of other Valentinians, who are depicted as representatives of a “mythological heresy.”

The apologetic concern is not restricted to theologians or historians of religions, whose opinions King discusses in detail, but it also becomes visible in the assessments by historians of philosophy. John Dillon, a leading authority on ancient philosophy, presents Valentinianism as one of the “loose ends” of Middle Platonism (together with Hermetic and Chaldean traditions) and as belonging to the “Platonic underground.”<sup>19</sup> He also speaks of “the Alice-in-Wonderland world of the Gnostics,” and considers “the Gnostics . . . the magpies of the intellectual world of the second century, garnering features that take their fancy both from the Jewish and Christian scriptures, and from the metaphysics of contemporary Platonism. . . .”<sup>20</sup> These designations are not merely amusing metaphors; they are used to demarcate a clear line between orthodoxy and heresy. It is striking that Dillon does not use the same metaphors for other early Christians (like Clement and Origen) who, in a similar fashion, selectively picked pieces

from scripture and ancient philosophy. In fact, Dillon shows great admiration for “mainstream Christianity,” which evolved “as a masterly combination of monism and pluralism.”<sup>21</sup> The discourse of orthodoxy and heresy seems so self-evident that Dillon does not even bother to detail which aspects in the teachings of Clement and Origen, to whom he largely attributes the “masterly combination,” made them seem less “magpies” than the Gnostics. At face value, the theologies of Clement and Origen were building upon the very same elements and, to some degree, similar “magpie” methods of interpretation as those by which Dillon characterizes his “Gnostics.”

King also points out that terms, even if carefully defined, are not neutral but create meanings. As soon as we talk about Gnosticism, we talk about something that is not part of *our* religious and cultural tradition, but something alien to it. Therefore, it indeed makes a difference whether we approach Valentinian or other similar texts as bearing witness to *Christianity*—which is related to *us* and our cultural heritage—or as bearing witness to “Gnosticism”—which is alien to us and not part of our heritage. This point is well captured in King’s suggestion that instead of identifying certain traditions as Gnostic (and thus making them alien) we could simply call them Christian: “Might we just as well regard Valentinianism, Thomas Christianity, or some of the Sethian works as subcategories of Christianity as of Gnosticism?”<sup>22</sup> I have experimented with this suggestion here and there in writing this study by replacing the term “Gnostic,” which I used in earlier versions of my texts, with the word “Christian.” I was surprised to see how much difference this little technical detail made as to what I as an interpreter take these sources to be: I no longer primarily approached them as witnesses to a distant theological battle between orthodoxy and heresy, but as having a place as *part of* the Christian tradition.

The essentialist approach to Gnosticism (“what Gnosticism is”), which has dominated the field until recently, has directed scholarly attention to those features that have been considered distinctive of Gnostic thought. What is held to be “distinctive,” in turn, is based upon views about how Gnostic thought differs from what is regarded as more “ordinary,” or normative, Christian theology. Thus Gnosticism has been defined in terms of what makes it different from “orthodox” Christianity. This perspective leads to a view of Gnosticism that not only perpetuates the heresiological approach of Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, and others but also steers our attention away from many issues that loom large in the evidence itself but are not considered essential to Gnosticism.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, it needs to be emphasized that the problems outlined above cannot be resolved by switching to other terms that are ostensibly less loaded

with theological meaning, such as replacing “orthodoxy” with “mainstream Christianity” and “heresy” with terms like “sect,”<sup>24</sup> “splinter group,” or something similar. These designations may create the impression of greater neutrality and scholastic precision, but in fact they carry with themselves the same basic idea that makes the traditional discourse of orthodoxy and heresy problematic. “Mainstream” in the new jargon means pretty much the same thing as “orthodoxy” in the older one, that is, the form of Christianity that assumed a normative position in the Roman Empire at the beginning of the fourth century. Like “orthodoxy,” “mainstream” denotes the form of Christianity that seems more familiar to *us*, whereas the forms that are alien to us are designated as “sects,” creating the impression that these forms were on the fringes of Christianity from the beginning.

In consequence, the distinction between “mainstream” and “sectarian” forms of early Christianity is none other than the old discourse of orthodoxy and heresy in a new disguise. The images created by this new, ostensibly neutral jargon are suspect both historically and sociologically. While rough estimates can be made regarding the number of Christians in the first four centuries,<sup>25</sup> it is impossible to say with any certainty how many people belonged to which early Christian group during this period. Thus there is no statistical foundation for the term “mainstream.” For example, it is hardly possible to tell which group was more popular in the surroundings of Lyons in the second century, the Marcosians or that led by Irenaeus. Irenaeus, in any case, found alarming the increasing popularity of the Marcosian faction in his neighborhood. For him, this group was obviously no longer an insignificant “sect” of the lunatic fringe (although this is the picture he wants to paint of it). Nor is it easy to say which Christian current was the mainstream in second-century Rome—unless we “know” in advance that this “mainstream” is the form of Christianity that established itself as the Christian orthodoxy in the fourth century. Early Christians in Rome were split into smaller groups that gathered in private houses. It is probable that the owners of the houses assumed leadership in these groups and could relatively freely invite teachers of their choice to these meetings. This accounts for the multiplicity of factions in the early church in Rome, which makes it difficult to identify any distinct “mainstream” there.<sup>26</sup>

In addition, as Michael Williams has clearly demonstrated, the designation of “Gnostic” groups as “sect movements” (versus mainstream Christianity as a “church movement”) is sociologically ill-founded. If “sect” is defined as a group tending toward sociopolitical resistance and “church” as a group tending toward sociopolitical accommodation, it is far from clear that all “Gnostic” groups fit in the sect category. In the axis between

sect movements and church movements, some “Gnostic” groups are closer to the latter pole. Depending on what criteria are used to measure accommodation to society, they may even show a more conformist attitude toward the surrounding society than Christians in general.<sup>27</sup>

Thus there is no solid historical or theoretical basis for sustaining the language of “sects” and “the church” in describing the social outlook of “Gnostic” and other early Christian groups in the first three centuries c.e. Instead, the use of these categories seems to be motivated by the need to sustain a master narrative of how one form of Christianity (designated as “orthodoxy,” “mainstream Christianity,” or “*the* Christian church”) won the day in the Roman Empire, whereas some other forms (designated as “heresies,” “sects,” or “splinter groups”) gradually lost ground and disappeared. In other words, the new terminology does not offer any substantial change to the way the story of early Christianity has been traditionally told.

In conclusion, I see little value in the attempts to put some Valentinians into a pigeonhole labeled “Gnosticism” and taking some other Valentinians out of it. Now that the definition of Gnosticism itself has become a vexing problem, the question of whether Valentinus and his followers were Gnostics or not has lost much of the significance it had in 1990s.

Nevertheless, the discussion of whether Valentinus was a Gnostic or not has not been a complete waste of scholarly energy. It has resulted in some noteworthy byproducts that now seem more relevant than they originally did. What I consider to be the remaining value of Layton’s distinction between “classic Gnosticism” and the school of Valentinus is that it alerts us to the fact that we should be careful in recognizing different strands in the traditions usually identified as “Gnostic,” which are often treated as bearing witness to a unified, heterodox Christian theology. The significance of Markschie’s study, in turn, no longer lies so much in its conclusion that Valentinus was no Gnostic as it does in the way Markschie carefully located Valentinus in the intellectual milieu of second-century Alexandria, colored by Platonism and Hellenistic Judaism. In my view, this aspect, which in fact forms the main part of Markschie’s analysis, still forms a solid basis for all subsequent study of Valentinus’s theology.

## FROM DOCTRINE TO PRACTICE

The emphasis I put on the interaction between mythic discourse and practice distinguishes my approach to Valentinian myth from the traditional approach, which can be designated as “intellectualist” (*geistesgeschichte*)

or “doctrinal” (*theologiegeschichtlich*). The traditional method is “intellectualist” insofar as it seeks to establish Valentinian systems of thought (and their precursors in ancient philosophy)<sup>28</sup> and is “doctrinal” insofar as the major concern in such analysis has often been to show how this system was distinct from the early Christian “rule of faith” (*regula fidei*).<sup>29</sup>

The prevalence of the doctrinal approach can be clearly seen in the aforementioned Messina definition of Gnosticism, where the essence of Gnosticism is simply equated with its particular theology/myth. An obvious flaw in this definition is that it does not show the slightest interest in the interaction between myth and practice. The Messina definition is strikingly silent about any issues pertaining to moral philosophy, practice, and society in the sources labeled as “Gnostic.” The Messina definition clearly operates with a modern, theoretical understanding of “systems of thought” that would have made little sense in the context of ancient philosophy, where such “systems” mainly served as lending support to particular lifestyles.

One more recent illustration of what I mean by the intellectualist-doctrinal mode is David Dawson’s *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision* (1992), which devotes one chapter to Valentinus. Dawson’s analysis of Valentinus’s teaching also illustrates the problems connected with the usage of the term “Gnosticism” as an analytical tool. Although Dawson aims at disclosing “social functions of Valentinus’s allegorical reading as composition,”<sup>30</sup> the explanation he offers for Valentinus’s teachings (among which he includes the *Gospel of Truth*) remains largely within the intellectualist-doctrinal mode. It becomes visible in the way Dawson seeks to show how the fragments of Valentinus form a coherent theological system and in the way Dawson explains Valentinus’s theology as resulting from his Gnosticism.

Like Layton, whose student he was, Dawson portrays Valentinus as a reformer of the Sethian cosmogonic myth attested above all in the *Apocryphon of John* and in the *Hypostasis of the Archons*.<sup>31</sup> An heir to this tradition, Valentinus represents, according to Dawson, the “revisionary freedom toward one’s precursors that marks the presence of an authentically ‘Gnostic’ spirit.”<sup>32</sup> This presupposition becomes a major analytical tool in Dawson’s analysis. For example, he explains “free speech” (*parrhesia*), mentioned in Valentinus’s interpretation of Adam’s creation (fragment 1), as “Valentinus’s assimilation of the Gnostic spirit and the Gnostic voice.”<sup>33</sup> Although this view is based on an adequate comparison between Valentinus’s teaching and Sethian accounts of Adam’s creation, the terms “the Gnostic spirit” and “the Gnostic voice” do not get us very far in understanding Valentinus

within his historical context. If this is our goal, we need a closer analysis of the theme of free speech in ancient philosophical discourse. This step is necessary to discover the associations this term evoked for the original recipients of Valentinus's teaching. This analysis, which I will undertake in chapter 3, will show that the "Gnostic spirit" falls short of explaining Valentinus's intentions, and it gives a wrong impression that his teaching would have been revolutionary. The "revisionary freedom toward one's precursors," by which Dawson characterizes Valentinus's "Gnostic spirit," was in fact an ideal embraced by philosophers throughout the Roman Empire.

Another illustration of the intellectualist-doctrinal mode in the study of Valentinus's fragments is the way scholars have interpreted his peculiar teaching about Jesus's digestion.<sup>34</sup> Valentinus maintained that Jesus ate and drank but did not defecate: "He was firm, enduring all things. Jesus practiced divinity. He ate and drank in his own manner, without excreting food. The power of his continence was so great that not even food was destroyed in him since he did not have that which is perishable."<sup>35</sup> This fragment of Valentinus's teaching is often seen as a statement in the ancient debate about christology.<sup>36</sup> It is assumed that Valentinus proposed a mediating position between the orthodox theology of incarnation and the docetic position that Christ had only an ostensible body that needed neither food nor drink. Seen from this perspective, Valentinus's idea may even seem less docetic than Clement of Alexandria's ingenious suggestion that Christ "ate not because of his body that was sustained by the Holy Spirit"—but only because he wanted to root out the docetic heresy in advance!<sup>37</sup>

Yet, can we be really sure that Valentinus began to speculate about Jesus's digestion in order to clarify his own position in the early Christian debate about docetism? Not necessarily. His argument seems, rather, to point in another direction. Valentinus was not alone with his theory about Jesus's extraordinary digestion; similar ideas were attached to famous Greek sages such as Pythagoras.<sup>38</sup> Against this background, it seems that Valentinus wanted to make Jesus look like one of the renowned philosophers and/or to present him as their replacement. In addition, Valentinus's argument for Jesus's continence, which may seem odd or even offensive to us, was well founded in ancient physiology.<sup>39</sup> These analogies suggest that Valentinus's purpose was not so much to make a statement in the debate between docetic and antidocetic christologies as it was to elevate Jesus to the level of the legendary ancient philosophers. This, in turn, implies a competitive situation not among different Christian theologies but between Christian philosophy and other forms of philosophy.

## ANCIENT PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE AND PRACTICE

Whereas scholars have been at pains to detect Gnostic ingredients in the teaching of Valentinus and his followers, there has been astonishingly little discussion about the functions of their mythmaking in the context of ancient schools of thought. This sociohistorical setting, however, deserves to be taken more seriously than it has been thus far, if the designation “the school of Valentinus” and other school terminology used by their opponents was a fair description based upon the social outlook of this group. In the context of ancient schools of thought, it is untenable to assume that Valentinian teachers created myths for myths’ sake alone.

In his recent synthesis of ancient philosophy, Pierre Hadot has effectively argued that, in all traditional Greco-Roman schools of thought, philosophy required a choice of a way of life. One ancient definition of a “school” was “a way of life which follows a specific rational principle, in conformity with what appears to us.”<sup>40</sup> Philosophical discourse, which for us may seem “philosophy” proper, was only one part of the way of life recommended in a particular school of thought.<sup>41</sup>

Early Christian philosophers shared this view. As Hadot points out, “like Greek philosophy, Christian philosophy presented itself both as a discourse and as a way of life.”<sup>42</sup> In a similar vein, Judith Kovacs maintains that, for the Christian teachers in Alexandria, “pedagogy is not a matter of intellect alone; it also addresses the heart and soul of the student and seeks to form his character.”<sup>43</sup>

I think we are entitled to see in the school of Valentinus, in addition to the schools of Basilides in Alexandria and of Justin the Martyr in Rome, one of the earliest groups developing the idea of Christian philosophy.<sup>44</sup> This recognition should make us more sensitive to the issues pertaining to social reality present in Valentinian mythic discourse than has been the case thus far. As I will detail below, such issues loom larger in the sources on Valentinianism than is usually recognized. Regrettably, the view offered in our sources as to what kind of a school Valentinians formed is limited. Not only were the opponents of Valentinians more concerned about refuting their teaching than giving reports of their school practice, but also the new Valentinian texts in the Nag Hammadi Library are theological treatises and collections of teachings, which supply us with little information about the social outlook of the school. The early opponents of the Valentinians commented upon their lifestyle, but their portrayal is undeniably

biased. If we leave aside these polemics, our picture of what could have happened in the school of Valentinus is largely dependent upon moral exhortation in Valentinian texts, upon hints at the social world and ideals of behavior in Valentinian mythic discourse, and on a more general picture of ancient schools of thought.

However, as Michel Desjardins and Philip Tite have especially clearly shown, moral reflection and exhortation are not marginal issues in Valentinian texts but assume a central place in them.<sup>45</sup> (This aspect is often dismissed since it does not fit the traditional picture of what is essential to Gnostic thought.)<sup>46</sup> This lends further justification to the assumption that Valentinian teachers were, like ancient teachers of philosophy usually were, concerned about offering a way to moral improvement to their students. Hence my hypothesis that when these Valentinian teachers mention in their texts, even in the context of mythic discourse, issues pertaining to social reality and lifestyle, their statements are indicative of their attitudes toward society and the forms of behavior they considered ideal.

Given that we have little evidence for the organization of, and the everyday practices adopted in, the school of Valentinus, it goes beyond our knowledge whether, and to what extent, the students of Valentinian teachers lived up to such principles. It would be inconceivable, however, that moral instruction given in the school of Valentinus would have been completely ignored. Even Irenaeus, the harshest critic of Valentinians, had to admit that there were some people in this group whose conduct was exemplary.<sup>47</sup> For Irenaeus, such Valentinians were especially pompous and arrogant, but this claim probably says more about Irenaeus than about Valentinians.<sup>48</sup>

### WHY ALL THIS MYTHMAKING?

While the intellectualist-doctrinal explanation has dominated much of the previous scholarship on Valentinianism, there have been some attempts at a social interpretation of Gnostic myth in general and of the Valentinian one in particular. Hereby myth is sometimes understood in a reductionist manner as arising from certain political developments that took place in the Roman Empire in the second century c.e., or as a response to the situation within the Christian church during that time. In other words, mythmaking is understood as a *reaction* to something.<sup>49</sup> In the same vein, the classicist John Gould has defined myth as a mode of “religious *response to experience* in a world in which ‘chaos’, the threat posed by events which seem to be unintelligible or which outrage moral feeling, is always close.”<sup>50</sup>

My perspective on mythic discourse differs from this approach, in which

myth is reduced to an answer to questions posed by the human experience of one's own liminality and the irrationality of the surrounding world. The starting point of my alternative view is that the Valentinian myth was meant to be enlightenment leading to awakening. This myth presented itself as a vision of the world and its structure that the addressees had not yet known. The goal of this myth was to show the world in a new light. Valentinians, thus, used myths to *construct* a certain kind of picture of this world and humankind in order to *change* the way the audience perceives the world and, accordingly, the way they act. What was expected from the audience was that they adopt a lifestyle connected with this new perception of the world.

The Valentinian myth certainly contains elements that *resonate* with human experience of liminality, alienation, being threatened and left alone, etc. However, I think that this myth did not arise as an attempt to respond to such dismal feelings, which most humans are now and then subject to. Rather, the Valentinian myth takes advantage of these feelings. They create resonance, which was needed to make the myth appealing to the audience.

An analogy from the Book of Revelation may help to illustrate this understanding of myth. It is no longer historically tenable to assume that John wrote his vision in response to an acute persecution of Christians in Asia Minor under Domitian's rule. Rather, the problem addressed in this book was the increasing accommodation of Christians to the Roman Empire.<sup>51</sup> It can no longer be assumed that John used the eschatological myth in order to help his readers to cope with their experience of being persecuted. What he aimed at, instead, was to *change* their view of the world and the way they act: they should understand the dangers lurking in increasing security and withdraw from the Roman society. With his eschatological vision, John evoked the threat posed by the Roman Empire to early Christians. This threat must have found some resonance among John's original audience; otherwise, his text would not have gone into circulation. It is easy to imagine reasons for such resonance. Although John's recipients were not subject to acute persecutions in Asia Minor, their situation in society was constantly insecure. Anyone, for whatever reasons, could raise charges against them in front of officials. If they confessed to being Christians and refused to offer sacrifices to gods or to show reverence to a picture of the emperor in front of officials, that was a sufficient reason for capital punishment. This certainly generated among early Christians a feeling of being threatened. Although John did not respond to a situation of acute persecution, he took full advantage of this feeling and created an eschatological myth in which this potential threat grew into cosmic dimensions.

In the same manner, it is conceivable that early Christians were able to identify their feelings in the Valentinian myth, and the Valentinian teachers formulated this myth in a way that made this identification easier. Yet I am no longer convinced that the feeling of being alienated and alone in the universe, often regarded as the basis of Gnostic theology,<sup>52</sup> is the only feeling evoked by this myth. In fact, a much broader variety of emotions that may evoke resonance are present in the Valentinian myth.

Like Gnosticism, myth can be defined in a number of ways, depending upon what scholars consider to be its essence. One can distinguish between a broad definition and a narrow definition of myth. The broad definition is that myth is sacred history. In other words, myths are defined as tales that belong to the foundational story of a given group of people. This is how, for example, Michael Fishbane understands “myth” in his study on rabbinic mythmaking: the myth Jewish rabbis elaborated is the biblical master narrative in its entirety, including the stories of “the creation; exodus; revelation at Sinai; destruction of the temple; exile of the people; and national restoration.”<sup>53</sup> In the same manner, the New Testament scholar Gerd Theissen has defined “myth” as explaining “in narrative form what fundamentally determines the world and life.”<sup>54</sup> The myth that was essential to the formation of primitive Christian religion was the foundational story of Jesus in the gospel traditions. What is noteworthy in Theissen’s model is his emphasis on two other aspects, rite and ethics, as practical dimensions of religion: they show that myth is not only important as intellectual reflection but also because of the forms of behavior based upon it.

Insofar as myth is understood as “sacred history” or “the foundational story,” it can easily be expanded to include all other stories that have political and cultural significance in a particular context and, thus, affect how “we” think of ourselves. Thus, this understanding of myth comes close to what other scholars have called “collective memory,” a category that denotes stories that remain culturally significant since they are stored in social memory by means of education and constant repetition in religious or other contexts.<sup>55</sup> Ongoing interpretation of such stories is socially acceptable and culturally relevant because of the importance these stories have gained in society and/or in communities of the faithful.<sup>56</sup>

Another, narrower definition is that myths are stories of the primordial past (or the eschatological future), for which there is no verifiable information. Their subjects are, to quote Luc Brisson, “gods, daemons, heroes, inhabitants of Hades, and men of the past.”<sup>57</sup> Such stories are often cosmogonies, accounts of the origin of the world. Defined in this way, myths may or may not have a foundational meaning, depending on for what purposes

they are used in each particular case.<sup>58</sup> This narrow definition of myth is sufficient for my present purposes, since my study is focused on Valentinian myths of origin. The question whether they were part of the Valentinian collective memory, reinforced by constant repetition in the instruction given by Valentinian teachers, or whether they were new stories created for pedagogic purposes, can be left open at this point. As I will argue later, both these approaches are historically possible and probably had their own advocates in Valentinian groups.

There is a plethora of theories of what makes myths so significant and persistent a part of human culture.<sup>59</sup> It is neither possible nor reasonable to here offer an appraisal of all these explanations, ranging from the idea that myth is the first step toward science (“from myth to reason”)<sup>60</sup> to the argument that myths are needed for the purposes of cultic practices, in which myths are ritually enacted (“the myth-and-ritual theory”).<sup>61</sup>

The latter perspective is no doubt significant in analyzing Marcosians, the cult branch of Valentinianism devoting special attention to rituals. However, since some other Valentinians formed social bodies similar to schools of thought, it is necessary to take a brief look at how myths were used in ancient philosophical discourse. In addition, I take some examples from non-Valentinian texts of the Nag Hammadi Library to show what kinds of questions were answered with myths. What is surprising in the latter evidence is that these answers are much less “existentialist” than one may expect.

Anyone familiar with Plato’s works knows that he often used myths for didactic purposes. The dialogues of Plato were probably exoteric works addressed to larger audiences.<sup>62</sup> Exoteric works were publicly sold as books, while esoteric treatises were delivered as lectures in front of carefully chosen audiences.<sup>63</sup> In the cultural market, exoteric philosophical works had to compete with other forms of literature. In this situation, myths were used to attract the attention of readers who had no training in philosophy. It may be that mythic discourse was absent in Plato’s more advanced instruction, as it is lacking in Aristotle’s extant works that probably bear witness to his esoteric teaching.<sup>64</sup> In the exoteric works, myths had an entertaining aspect. In the dialogues of Plato, some of Socrates’ conversation partners wanted him to relate myths because they were considered pleasant to hear.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, myths served the didactic purpose of the exoteric texts, which was to convince the uneducated audience of the value of the philosophical lifestyle. Myths were often used for other purposes as well, such as for etiology, that is, to explain the origins of a number of phenomena, including political communities, writing, and sexuality. Myths were also

used to motivate certain forms of behavior in society and discourage other forms.<sup>66</sup>

While Plato probably invented a number of the myths in his dialogues, philosophers also interpreted the classical Greek stories of gods allegorically, as referring to deeper philosophical truths.<sup>67</sup> Whereas myths belonged to Plato's exoteric teaching, later on they became part of a more esoteric instruction, delivered orally to advanced students.

A broad array of the functions of myth becomes visible in the works of Plutarch (c. 45–125), who was only a few years earlier than Valentinus.<sup>68</sup> Plutarch offered interpretations of myth for the purposes of etiological inquiry,<sup>69</sup> as rhetorical ornament,<sup>70</sup> and to lend support for advice related to practical issues such as an ideal marriage and the correct attitude toward ritual practices.<sup>71</sup> For Plutarch, myth belonged to both ends of an educational process. As Pierre Hardie points out, Plutarch shared Plato's idea that myths generate pleasure and that this pleasure can be used as an enticement "to lead young minds towards philosophy."<sup>72</sup> On the other hand, myths involved a deeper spiritual meaning, which formed the ultimate goal of education. Plutarch's works *On Isis and Osiris* and *On E* were, writes Hardie, "concerned . . . with the final mysteries of *theologia*."<sup>73</sup> Plutarch deciphers the myth of Osiris "as the image of a reality which refracts our mind toward belonging to another realm."<sup>74</sup> Interpretation of myth was essential to "instruction in the mysteries concerning the after-life."<sup>75</sup> Such instruction was no doubt not made widely accessible and not offered to novices but was reserved for a chosen few who had shown serious commitment to this side of Plutarch's instruction.

In light of these analogies, the accusation, often heard in the hostile sources, that Valentinians kept their mythic teaching secret from novices and revealed it only at a subsequent level of their instruction is not entirely implausible. However, as I will argue in chapter 12, the traditional picture of Valentinian esotericism, including the idea of the suspicious "hidden agenda" of Valentinians, needs to be reconsidered in the light of what we know of similar practices in other ancient schools of thought.

If we take a closer look at Sethian texts, which stand in some proximity to Valentinian theology, the ways they are introduced show a number of functions attached to mythic discourse. I take four examples:

(1) In the narrative framework of the *Apocryphon of John*, John, the recipient of the Savior's revelation, is pondering a number of questions: How did the Savior get his position? Why was he sent to the world? And of what kind is the eternal realm to where the Savior's followers are heading?<sup>76</sup> The

cosmic myth, thus, is offered as an answer to questions pertaining to one's salvation. (A quite similar picture of the function of a cosmic myth arises from Hermetic tractates, especially from *Poimandres*, CH 1.)

(2) The *Nature of the Rulers* (the *Hypostasis of the Archons*), which contains a cosmic myth similar to the *Apocryphon of John*, presents itself as a letter answering to the question of the nature of the "authorities of the darkness" (Colossians 1:13), and "the authorities of the universe and the spirits of wickedness" (Ephesians 6:12).<sup>77</sup> This implies that the author aims at elucidating what "Paul" really meant with these powers.

(3) The *Apocalypse of Adam* makes the promise of supplying the audience with no less than the "knowledge of eternal God," which Adam bestowed on Seth, his son.<sup>78</sup>

(4) The *Wisdom of Jesus Christ* begins with an account, added to an earlier version of this text called *Eugnostos*, of the disciples who were uncertain about the structure of the cosmos and the nature of the powers. Philip is especially preoccupied with the former issue: "The Savior laughed and said to them: 'What are you thinking about? (Why) are you perplexed? What are you searching for?' Philip said: 'For the underlying reality of the universe and the plan.'" <sup>79</sup> Other questions follow later in this text, but its opening scene shows that the disciples initially wanted to squeeze from the divine revealer the right answers to the vexing problems connected with *physics* in ancient philosophy. Having a divine revelation about what is the real truth in this field would certainly have meant a major advantage in comparison to, and competition with, philosophers who were developing theories about these issues as well.

Already this sample shows the variety of views about the purposes of mythic discourse in the Sethian corpus. This variety should caution against too readily assuming only one distinctly "Gnostic" understanding of myth, which could then be transposed upon the Valentinian usage of myths as well. While a number of functions Valentinians attributed to myths will be discussed in the subsequent chapters of this study, a passage in the *Excerpts of Theodotus* needs to be discussed here since it is customarily used as a textbook summary of the essence of Gnosticism. This passage runs as follows: "It is not baptism alone that liberates, but also the knowledge of who we were, what became of us, where we were or where we have been cast, where we hasten to; from what we have been freed, what is birth, what is regeneration."<sup>80</sup>

In contrast to the usual interpretation of this passage, it needs to be pointed out that neither posing questions like these nor the idea of

liberating knowledge are distinct features of “the Gnostic spirit.” Similar questions and similar approaches to knowledge appear in other contexts as well. For example, in the Jewish rabbinic tradition, too, “knowing one’s origin and destiny has a redemptive purpose.”<sup>81</sup> This approach to knowledge can be illustrated with the following quotations:<sup>82</sup>

Know whence thou comest; and whither thou art going; and before whom thou art about to give account and reckoning. Know whence thou comest: from a fetid drop, and whither thou are going: to worm and maggot. . . .

Whence did he come? From a place of darkness; and whither is he going? To a place of darkness and gloom. Whence did he come? From an impure place; and whither is he going? To defile other people. . . .

What distinguishes these teachings from the Valentinian one is not the “gnostic” approach to knowledge, but the answers. In the *Excerpts of Theodotus*, baptism and knowledge are understood as liberating Christians from fate. Affirming that “until baptism . . . fate is real but after it astrologists are no longer right” precedes the passage.<sup>83</sup> Fate, in turn, is “guiding the course of the stars and governing through them.”<sup>84</sup> Thus, the liberating knowledge is related to astral bodies, and one who has the right knowledge about them is free from fate.<sup>85</sup>

The idea that knowledge about the structure of the universe, that is, physics, provides freedom is not an expression of a distinct Gnostic spirit either. In the same way, knowledge of physics was considered liberating in other schools of thought. Epicureans were especially active in discussing physics, since they thought that knowledge about this field releases their students from the fear of death. The Epicurean physical theory was squarely opposed to that of Valentinians, but the approach to physics as liberating knowledge is the same.<sup>86</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The approach I have delineated above, I hope, not only offers a less biased perspective on Valentinians than most previous studies but also helps us locate them better in their historical context. Instead of taking over any existing theory of how myth and lifestyle are generally connected to each other, I direct my attention to the existing sources themselves and try, by means of a close reading of them and with analogies derived from other

ancient schools of thought, to disclose how and for what purpose mythic discourse is used in them.

It should be clear by now that the goal of my study is not to clarify the relationship of the school of Valentinus to Gnosticism. I shall discuss at several points the relationship of Valentinian teachings to other currents usually labeled as Gnostic, but I prefer to use more specific, and ideologically less loaded, designations for these currents, such as “Sethian” and “Ophite,” in order to avoid the impression that there existed a unified Gnostic ideology that Valentinian teachings also represent.

Given the misleading images created with the terms “Gnostic” and “Gnosticism,” I have avoided using them in my own interpretations of the texts discussed in this book. As I said above, using these terms would add little to my reading of these texts. Nevertheless, it may be unrealistic to hope that the term “Gnosticism” would completely disappear from scholarly usage. There are contexts in which its use can still be justified. While specialists of second-century Christianity are well familiar with the groups associated with Gnosticism and can easily use their specific names, to scholars of other related fields (such as the New Testament, church history, the history of philosophy) and broader audiences, who can have some inkling about Gnosticism (“a second-century Christian heresy”), exotic ancient names such as “Ophites” or “Barbeliotes” can be totally alien. There may still be some pedagogic value in retaining the term “Gnosticism” in some contexts despite the “what-you-see-is-what-you-get” problem inherent in this term. Moreover, it seems to me justified to use the term “Gnosticism” as an indication that the traditions of the Valentinians, Sethians, Ophites, and Barbeliotes are more closely related to one another than to some other representatives of biblical demiurgy, such as Marcion and Philo.<sup>87</sup> In comparison to these “cousins,” Ophite, Sethian, and Barbeliote cosmogonic traditions, in spite of all their differences, still seem more like siblings to the mythic teaching of Valentinians. It is only in this sense of indicating “siblingship” of certain traditions that I think the term “Gnosticism” should be used, if at all.



# PART I

## ◆ MYTH, LIFESTYLE, AND ◆ THE WORLD IN THE FRAGMENTS OF VALENTINUS



## IMMORTALITY AS A WAY OF LIFE

VALENTINUS'S FRAGMENT 4 contains a brief excerpt stemming from his sermon in which he addresses his audience as those who "are immortal from the beginning" and "rule over creation and the entire corruption."<sup>1</sup> Although Valentinus does not renarrate the creation of humankind as told in Genesis 1–2 in this fragment (as he does in fragment 1, dealing with Adam's creation),<sup>2</sup> the way he addresses his audience recalls the biblical story. Valentinus must have been aware that the themes of immortality and ruling were often connected with interpretations of Adam's creation in Hellenistic Jewish and Christian literature.

In previous scholarship, fragment 4 of Valentinus has been weighed on the scales of Christian orthodoxy and heresy. Scholars have been occupied with the question of whether Valentinus's view in this passage betrays Gnostic tendencies or not, whereas little attention has been paid to the ethical ramifications of his teaching. Nevertheless, analogies derived from other Jewish and Christian texts, discussed in the latter part of this chapter, show that reflections about immortality were inextricably connected to issues pertaining to lifestyle. The ethical aspect is an essential part on the cultural matrix to which Valentinus's teaching on immortality belongs.

### A GNOSTIC TEACHING?

Fragment 4 of Valentinus runs as follows:

You are immortal from the beginning, and you are children of eternal life.  
You wanted that death will be bestowed upon you in order that you use it

up and waste it, so that death would die in you and through you. For when you, on the one hand, nullify the world, but, on the other, will not be dissolved, you rule over creation and the entire corruption.

This excerpt poses an unusually large number of interpretive difficulties. How is it possible that Valentinus speaks about immortality in the present (“you *are* immortal”) instead of the past (“you were immortal”) or the future (“you will become immortal”) tense?<sup>3</sup> And in which sense were his addressees expected to understand their designation as rulers? Does this designation reflect an elitist self-understanding ascribed to Valentinian Christians by their opponents (and occasionally by modern scholars too)? Or does the reference to ruling lend a political edge to Valentinus’s teaching? In ancient as well as in modern interpretations, much is dependent on the choice of a framework in which the fragment is read.

Clement of Alexandria presented this quotation from Valentinus as part of a larger section describing early Christian opposition to martyrdom. In this setting, Clement explained the fragment as reflecting two Valentinian ideas. First, Clement claims that Valentinus referred in this passage to the “race saved by nature” that came from above to destroy death. Second, Clement inferred from the fragment that Valentinus attributed the origin of death to the inferior Creator-God.<sup>4</sup> It seems likely that neither of these interpretations is based upon what Valentinus himself had said, but on Clement’s knowledge of Valentinian theology in general. The “race saved by nature” is not attested in the fragments of Valentinus, whereas it appears in other Valentinian sources known to Clement.<sup>5</sup> In fact, it is not at all clear that all other Valentinians subscribed to this idea either.<sup>6</sup>

The more recent scholarly debate related to fragment 4 revolves around the question of whether Valentinus intended in it a distinctly Gnostic sense. Christoph Marksches resolutely denied this possibility and interpreted the fragment in the light of Pauline and Johannine views.<sup>7</sup> Other scholars, however, have been at pains to show the Gnostic constituent in the fragment. Jens Holzhausen maintains that “Valentinus criticizes a theology that promises man that he will overcome death through suffering martyrdom.”<sup>8</sup> Instead of adopting Clement’s interpretation of the fragment, however, Holzhausen builds his case on the fiscal imagery he traces in the fragment itself.<sup>9</sup> Holzhausen maintains that, by using this terminology, Valentinus referred to, and rebutted, an ecclesiastical view that martyrdom is a price that must be paid for salvation. Accordingly, Holzhausen paraphrases Valentinus’s teaching as follows: “Although human beings are already immortal, they want to use death as payment to inherit eternal life.”<sup>10</sup> In my view, however, the terminological affinities between Valentinus’s fragment 4 and

the early Christian texts praising martyrdom do not seem close enough to prove this reading.<sup>11</sup>

Paul Schüngel, in turn, suggests that Valentinus criticized the Christian eucharist. While Paul taught that Christians “proclaim the Lord’s death” (1 Cor. 11:26) as they participate in the eucharist, Valentinus wants to say that they only divide death among one another by doing so. This suggestion, however, is at odds with the unanimous evidence to the effect that Valentinians valued the eucharist.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the assumption that Valentinus himself denounced the eucharist seems very unlikely.

Both Holzhausen and Schüngel assume that Valentinus *contrasted* the immortality of human beings to the attempts of human beings to divide and destroy death. Their readings presuppose that the fragment begins with two adversative statements: “you are immortal from the beginning, and you are children of eternal life, *but* you wanted death to be bestowed upon you.” In my view, Valentinus’s fragment 4 presupposes the opposite logic. In the latter part of this passage, a consequence is drawn from what was said in the former part: “*For [gar]* when you nullify the world . . . you rule over creation and the entire corruption.” The sentence “when you nullify the world” is, thus, best understood as a recapitulation of what Valentinus had said above about consuming death and the perdition of death “in you and through you.” If this is the correct reading, Valentinus did not condemn the attempts of his addressees to “use up” death. Instead, these attempts lead to a *positive* outcome: this is the way through which death will perish and the addressees will become rulers over creation.

In sum, positing a distinctly Gnostic theology as opposed to a more ecclesiastical view for Valentinus has not yielded convincing explanations of his teaching in fragment 4. What Valentinus says about immortality cannot be explained as being due to his alleged “Gnosticism.” Rather, he seems to hold a relatively conventional view about immortality as bestowed upon all humankind at creation.<sup>13</sup>

#### GENESIS EXEGESIS IN FRAGMENT 4

It seems certain that Valentinus’s teaching in fragment 4 should be approached as an interpretation of Genesis 2–3. The sentence “you wanted that death will be bestowed upon you” (*ton thanaton êthelete merisasthai eis eautous*) hints at Genesis 2–3, in which death is allocated to Adam and Eve as a threat and then, after the fall, as a punishment (Gen. 2:17, 3:19). Valentinus applies the situation of Adam and Eve to that of his audience. Instead of speaking about what Adam and Eve did, he speaks of what his addressees do:<sup>14</sup> *you* wanted death to be bestowed upon you.<sup>15</sup> This

actualizing interpretation may seem odd at first sight, but it is congruent with other Jewish and early Christian interpretations of Genesis to be discussed below.

The fragment also contains several other allusions to Genesis. The expression “from the beginning” (*ap’ archēs*) that Valentinus employs in the opening statement is used to refer to the creation of the world in the Book of Sirach (16:26)<sup>16</sup> and to the creation of human beings in the Gospel of Matthew (19:4), which Valentinus certainly knew.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Valentinus’s statement that his addressees will rule over creation recalls allegorical interpretations of the dominion of humankind over animals affirmed in Genesis 1:26–28.

What is exceptional in Valentinus’s interpretation of Genesis is the positive value attached to the distribution of death among human beings. This event ultimately leads not to their destruction, but to the destruction of death. In this connection, Valentinus employs a passive expression “to be bestowed [*merisasthai*] upon you.”<sup>18</sup> It can be understood as referring to what God has done (*passivum divinum*). It is possible that Clement already understood the passive in this sense, as he deduced from the fragment that Valentinus attributed the origin of death to the creator-God, who was not mentioned in the fragment itself.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, given the positive purpose attached to death in this fragment, it seems more likely that Valentinus used the passive voice to refer to the *supreme God*. This interpretation is consistent with Valentinus’s description of death as serving positive goals for his addressees: death exists in order to be wasted by them, and when they do this, they also annihilate death.

Valentinus’s argument implies that there is a *pedagogical* reason for the existence of death.<sup>20</sup> Although his addressees are already immortal, they need to become subject to death, destroy it, and bring the world to naught. This is the method they need to use to become lords over creation.<sup>21</sup> A link can be seen between this teaching and the pedagogical emphasis in the views of later Valentinians, who considered the visible world as a place of education and thought that the believers must descend from the divine realm before they can reach the final salvation.<sup>22</sup> In the *Tripartite Tractate*, death is valued positively since it offers a way leading to the eternal bliss.<sup>23</sup>

In fragment 4 of Valentinus, attempts at destroying death and at nullifying the world appear to denote one and the same thing. There is no indication that Valentinus would speak of a postmortem state of his addressees, nor does it seem likely that Valentinus would have encouraged his audience to a concrete destruction of the world. Rather, he invites his audience to take the right attitude toward the *present world*—an attitude that makes

them masters of it. That Valentinus speaks of “nullification” in this context indicates that he recommended to his audience detachment from the world. Detachment from the world, however, did not have to mean radical asceticism or withdrawal from society. This can be seen, for example, in the teaching of Philo, who, despite his great admiration of the ascetic lifestyle, approved of wealth, public honors, drinking, and eating—given that the right attitude toward them was involved.<sup>24</sup> It may be that Valentinus was no more demanding in this respect than Philo. Rather than encouraging his audience to escape from this world, Valentinus advises them as to how they can become masters of it here and now.<sup>25</sup>

### IMMORTALITY AND LIFESTYLE

As can be seen in his affirmation “you *are* immortal from the beginning,” Valentinus presupposes that immortality belonged to the original state of humankind. His view differs from what is said in the Book of Genesis, but it is in line with Jewish interpretations of Genesis. James Barr points out that Yahwist, the author of the original story in Genesis “nowhere says that Adam, before his disobedience, was immortal, was never going to die.” In Yahwist’s story, Barr writes, “the problem that Adam’s disobedience created . . . was . . . that he brought near to himself the distant possibility of immortality.”<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the story in Genesis was not about the origin of death to begin with, as it came to be understood later. God’s warning that Adam shall die *on the day* he eats from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17) shows that the threat posed to Adam was premature death, not losing his original immortality.<sup>27</sup>

Hellenistic Jews, however, interpreted this story in Genesis as bearing witness that immortality was part of the original human state. It is said in the Book of Wisdom (2:23–24, NRSV): “For God created us for incorruption, and made us in the image of his own eternity, but through the devil’s envy death entered the world and those who belong to his company experience it.”<sup>28</sup> In the Book of Sirach, the origin of death is attributed to Eve and her fall (25:24). An heir to these traditions, Paul maintained that death came into existence only after, and because of, Adam’s fall (Rom. 5:12, 6:23; 1 Cor. 15:21).

While all these authors presupposed that immortality was lost in the fall, Valentinus speaks of immortality as a present quality (“you *are* immortal,” *athanatoi este*). Yet such a statement is in line with other contemporary interpretations of Genesis emphasizing the responsibility of each individual human being. Justin the Martyr, a Christian teacher roughly contemporary

to Valentinus, argued that each human can be immortal in the same way Adam and Eve were in the beginning. All people created in the image of God are immortal and free from suffering like God, Justin maintained, but they *have become* like Adam and Eve and thus brought death upon themselves.<sup>29</sup> A similar view is also attested in a rabbinic midrash: “I said: You are godlike beings (Ps. 82:6),’ but *you have ruined yourselves like Adam*, and so, ‘indeed, you shall die like Adam.’”<sup>30</sup> Another midrash explains Psalm 82:6 as demonstrating that human beings were originally “like the ministering angels, who are immortal,” but adds: “Yet, after all this greatness, *you wanted to die!*”<sup>31</sup> The latter sentence bears a striking similarity in phrasing to what Valentinus says (“you wanted that death will be bestowed upon you”). Yet the rabbinic teaching emphasizes the negative consequences of death, whereas Valentinus attached a positive value to it.

Justin and the two rabbinic passages have in common the idea that an option of immortality was not only available to Adam and Eve but has also been offered to all humans. Yet they all have failed to realize this potentiality just as Adam and Eve did. This teaching emphasizing one’s own responsibility for her or his fallen state becomes understandable if we take into account the ethical dimension of reflections concerning immortality. In Jewish Wisdom literature, immortality is connected to the keeping of the law (Wis. 6:18).<sup>32</sup> Although death brings all people together (Sir. 14:17, 17:2, 40:1–2; Wis. 7:1), human beings can choose between life and death (Sir. 15:17; cf. Wis. 1:12). Death is associated with the ungodly, who “by their words and deeds summoned death” (Wis. 1:16), whereas the hope of the godly is “full of immortality” (Wis. 3:4). Immortality does not exclude physical death of the godly (Wis. 4:16), yet their death is merely ostensible: “In the eyes of the foolish they seem to have died” (Wis. 3:1).<sup>33</sup>

Since Valentinus was a representative of the Alexandrian exegetical tradition,<sup>34</sup> it is also necessary to take into account Philo’s views about immortality.<sup>35</sup> Philo distinguished between the human being made of clay (Gen. 2:7), who is “by nature mortal,” and the one made after the divine image (Gen. 1:27), who is “by nature incorruptible.” The divine breath is the soul supplied by the Father of all. It is this soul that makes alive the human being made out of clay. Hence “the human being is the borderland between mortal and immortal nature . . . mortal as to the body, but immortal as to the mind (*kata de tēn dianoian*).”<sup>36</sup>

In *Allegorical Interpretation*, Philo casts a more complex and dualistic picture of the human mind.<sup>37</sup> He identifies the earthly Adam not with body, but with the mind (*nous*) that is “made out of matter.”<sup>38</sup> The “material” mind is “earthly and perishable”<sup>39</sup> and ignorant of itself.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, this mind as such would not understand the nature of God “had not God himself drawn

it up to himself.”<sup>41</sup> The earthly mind, thus, needs to be made a living soul by means of God’s breath. Philo’s phrasing is notable at this point: “But this mind is earthly and in reality corruptible, *if* God would not breathe into it the power of true life.”<sup>42</sup> It is clear that, as Gerhard Sellin writes, Philo “does not speak here at all, or not only, about creation in the past but about inspiration which is always possible . . . the human being (more precisely the *nous*) is immortal only insofar as it is inspired by *pneuma*. . . .”<sup>43</sup>

Philo’s definitions of life and death are as ethical as in Wisdom literature. He associated immortality with a lifestyle rather than with a postmortem state of human beings. He distinguishes “the death of a human being,” which is “the separation of the soul from the body,” from “the death of the soul,” which is “the decay of virtue.”<sup>44</sup> The latter aspect was far more important to Philo than the former. He maintained that the servants of God “live immortal life” already, while the ungodly are already dead in their souls.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, immortality means to Philo that invisible things are preferred to the visible ones.<sup>46</sup> Immortal life involves spiritual inspiration, detachment from the world and from visible things through ascetic behavior and the heavenly ascent of the mind.<sup>47</sup> The most concrete example of Philo’s view about how immortality can be acquired already in this life on earth is his idealizing account of the Jewish group of Therapeutae.<sup>48</sup> They “considered that their mortal life has already ended” (*teteleutēkenai nomizontes ēdē ton thnēton bion*). What this immortal lifestyle meant in practice can be seen from the fact that these people abandoned their property, which they left to their children and relatives.<sup>49</sup> They preferred a life of simplicity,<sup>50</sup> and withdrew themselves from big cities, their families, kin, and home countries in order to seek wisdom in solitude and praise God in weekly gatherings of the likeminded.<sup>51</sup>

Valentinus was most likely closer to Philo’s understanding of immortality than to a number of early Christian views. Valentinus does not hint at a concrete hope of immortality linked with the expectation of Jesus’s immediate parousia, which is implied by Paul’s correspondence with Thessalonian Christians, who had expected Jesus’s return to take place in so near a future that they did not reckon with the possibility that some members of their community may die before it (1 Thess. 4:12–15). A similar expectation of concrete immortality also becomes visible in the tradition of Jesus’s sayings: “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power” (Mark 9:1, NRSV).<sup>52</sup>

Valentinus’s teaching about immortality does not contain clear allusions to sacraments either, though they were associated with immortality by other early Christians. This understanding took the most concrete form

in the teaching of Menander, who maintained that his baptism grants to his followers eternal youth and immunity to death.<sup>53</sup> Similar views are visible in the baptismal teaching of deutero-Pauline authors. Paul himself had drawn an analogy between baptism and the death of Christ (Rom. 6:4), but he was careful not to claim that resurrection has already taken place with baptism. Instead, he emphasized an ethical linkage between resurrection and the Christian way of life.<sup>54</sup> The author of Colossians, however, argued that the believers not only have been buried with Christ in baptism but are already raised with him by God as well (Col. 2:12). In a similar manner, the author of Ephesians maintained that believers have already been raised up with Christ (Eph. 2:6; cf. Eph. 5:14).<sup>55</sup> In the Gospel of John, immortality is connected to the eucharist (6:51–58). This view was shared by Ignatius, who considered the eucharist “the medicine of immortality, a remedy against dying” (*pharmakon athanasias, antidotos tou mē apothanein*).<sup>56</sup> In John, however, the sacramental association of immortality appears only in the aforementioned passage. More prominent in John is the affirmation that the believer already has “life” (10:10, 20:31) or “eternal life” (3:15–16, 3:36, 5:24, 6:40, 6:47, 6:54). In John, too, immortality is defined ethically: it is associated with believing in Jesus and keeping his words. The Johannine Jesus promises that “whoever keeps my word will never see death” (8:51) and that “everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (11:26).

Although Valentinus certainly knew some of the Pauline letters and may have known the Gospel of John, he does not make any use of the idea that sacraments, either baptism or the eucharist, provide immortality. It is possible that the Johannine view, that immortality can be acquired already in one’s lifetime, contributed to his teaching. Yet the original immortality of humankind, which Valentinus presupposes, is mentioned nowhere in the Gospel of John. This gospel speaks, rather, of a transformation of the believer “from death to life” (5:24) that results from hearing and believing in Jesus.

## RULING OVER CREATION

In fragment 4, Valentinus juxtaposes immortality and dominion over all things. The latter aspect had also received attention in Jewish exegeses of the Book of Genesis.<sup>57</sup> The dominion of humankind over animals in paradise is recalled, for example, in Sirach (17:4) and the Book of Wisdom (9:2).<sup>58</sup> In Wisdom 10:2, the story of Adam in Genesis was understood in the sense that Wisdom gave him “strength to rule over all things” (*kratēsai hapantōn*). Ruling over nations also looms large in this body of literature.

In the Book of Wisdom, this topic is linked with God's future judgment of the ungodly: "Love righteousness, you judges of the earth" (Wis. 1:1).<sup>59</sup> The godly will receive from God signs of royal power (Wis. 5:16), and they will reign together with God, when the ungodly and the nations will be condemned (Wis. 3:8, 4:16).<sup>60</sup>

Valentinus, however, does not explain the dominion over all things in terms of the believers' co-reigning with God at the final judgment, as the Book of Wisdom does. It is likely that Valentinus, like other Alexandrian Jewish and Christian philosophers, combined such ideas derived from Jewish scriptural interpretation with a well-known philosophical tradition that a wise person is the real ruler of all things.<sup>61</sup> Philo offers a convenient summary of this tradition: "the sage alone is a ruler and king, and virtue a rule and a kingship whose authority is final."<sup>62</sup> Philo's interpretation of Genesis 12:1 (NRSV: "Now the Lord said to Abraham, 'Go from your land and your kindred and your father's house.'") shows that what is at stake in this tradition is human beings' control over themselves.<sup>63</sup> "Make yourself a stranger to them (body, sense perception, and speech) in judgment and purpose; let none of them cling to you; rise superior to them all; they are your subjects, never treat them as sovereign lords; you are a king, school yourself once and for all to rule, not to be ruled; evermore be coming to know yourself." Philo understands "ruling" in terms of one's escape from body and its pleasures, from reliance on the senses, and from speech.<sup>64</sup> This idea of dominion as self-control, which goes back to Plato,<sup>65</sup> was common coin in antiquity.<sup>66</sup> For Philo, being a ruler over all things involves first and foremost escape "from pleasures and desires [*hēdonas kai epithumiai*] that act as [the body's] jailers."<sup>67</sup>

The combination of immortality and ruling in Valentinus's fragment 4 brings his teaching close to the interpretation of the Book of Genesis in the *Gospel of Thomas*. Many specialists have highlighted the importance of Genesis traditions in the Gospel of Thomas.<sup>68</sup> Most recently, Elaine Pagels has argued that an extensive use is made of Genesis 1:26–27 in *Thomas* "to show that the divine image implanted at creation enables humankind to find . . . the way back to its origin in the mystery of the primordial creation."<sup>69</sup> Fragment 4 of Valentinus seems to presuppose a tradition of Genesis exegesis that is very similar to this view.

The bottom line of Genesis exegesis in the *Gospel of Thomas* is, according to Pagels, that the divine image given at creation is present in, and enables salvation for, humankind. In the *Gospel of Thomas*, this interpretation involves a striking contrast between Adam and the recipients of the gospel.

The description of a person who, after seeking and finding, will “rule over all things” (*Gos. Thom. 2*) recalls, as Pagels points out, “the birthright of Adam” described in Genesis 1:26–28. Nevertheless, it is presupposed in the *Gospel of Thomas* that Adam lost his immortality. Although he stemmed from “great power and wealth,” he “was not worthy of you. If he had been worthy, [he would] not [have tasted] death.”<sup>70</sup> A contrast is thus created between Adam, who lost his original immortality, and the addressees of the *Gospel of Thomas* to whom it is promised that they “will not taste death” if they discover “the interpretation of these sayings.”<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, the *Gospel of Thomas* shares with Valentinus and the Hellenistic Jewish traditions the idea that immortality is a present state: “The dead do not live, and those who live will not die.”<sup>72</sup> Valentinus’s interpretation is also consonant with the idea in the *Gospel of Thomas* that the divine image was not lost in the fall but is still present in humankind. This idea is presupposed in Valentinus’s insistence that his recipients are “immortal from the beginning” and “children of eternal life.”

Could it be, then, inferred from the affinities between Valentinus’s teaching and the *Gospel of Thomas* that Valentinus knew this text? Could it be assumed that, as Bentley Layton suggests, Valentinus brought together Sethian and Thomasine traditions in his teaching?<sup>73</sup> While I was earlier inclined to this view,<sup>74</sup> it seems to me now that the textual basis remains too narrow to substantiate this possibility, and there are some important caveats speaking against this hypothesis: (1) Had the authors of hostile sources known that Valentinus or his followers made use of the *Gospel of Thomas*, they would have certainly mentioned it, for this would have served their anti-Valentinian polemics. Irenaeus insisted that Valentinians read apocryphal works,<sup>75</sup> and mentioned that they used a text entitled the *Gospel of Truth*,<sup>76</sup> but he does not mention that they used the *Gospel of Thomas*. (2) There is little evidence for the use of extracanonical texts in the fragments of Valentinus and in the writings by other Valentinians, while there is abundant evidence that Valentinians employed the texts of the New Testament.<sup>77</sup> Valentinians, thus, mainly relied upon the very same writings as most other early Christians. (3) In the fragments of Heracleon and Theodotus, there is one passage that could stem from the *Gospel of Thomas*, the saying about a woman changing into a man.<sup>78</sup> Yet neither text identifies the *Gospel of Thomas* or any other apocryphal gospel as the source of this quotation. (4) The only Valentinian text bearing witness to a considerable number of possible allusions to the *Gospel of Thomas* is the *Gospel of Philip*, and even this text does not contain any direct quotations from the *Gospel of Thomas* (as it does from the Gospel of John).<sup>79</sup> In light of these

caveats, it seems safer to conclude that Valentinus did not know the *Gospel of Thomas* but drew upon traditions of Genesis exegesis that were very similar to those in the *Gospel of Thomas*.

## CONCLUSION

I have argued above that fragment 4 of Valentinus deals with the ideal relationship of his addressees to present reality. The fragment may also reflect a characteristically Valentinian view of the world as a place of education for the immortal ones. Moreover, Valentinus recommends detachment from the world (“when you nullify the world”), but how radical a change in lifestyle he expected is unclear. Valentinus does not demand that his audience escape from the world, but adopt the right attitude toward it. In this way they can become rulers over creation and realize their original immortality here and now.

This insight was probably not merely theoretical but also involved restructuring one’s lifestyle in accordance with the moral guidelines recommended by Valentinus. The “kingly” attitude, to which he refers, is most likely to be understood in terms of self-control. Valentinus’s ancient addressees could have also understood his teaching about the dominion over all things as referring to release from, or control over, emotions. Valentinus himself touched upon this issue in another fragment, contending that Christ must cleanse the human heart from “improper desires” (*epithumiais ou prosēkousiais*) by which evil spirits torture it.<sup>80</sup> This teaching suggests that nullification of the world and dominion “over the entire corruption” meant first and foremost taking care of one’s inner life and adopting the right mental disposition—characterized by stability, inner freedom, and the peace of mind—toward the impulses springing up from one’s heart and from what happens in the world outside. This interpretation helps us see the continuity between Valentinus and the later Valentinians, who were occupied with the analysis and therapy of emotions in their interpretation of myth.<sup>81</sup>

## ADAM'S FRANK SPEECH

VALENTINUS'S TEACHING about immortality and dominion over all things was not dramatically different from other contemporary Jewish and Christian views. It was only his opinion that death serves a positive purpose (as part of the educational process of his addressees) that his contemporaries might have regarded as really exceptional. A less conventional side of Valentinus's interpretation of Genesis becomes visible in his interpretation of Adam's creation (fragment 1). In explaining this story, Valentinus posited the existence of malevolent creator angels who proved inferior to, and became angry at, Adam.

The closest analogy to this interpretation can be found in the *Apocryphon of John*, one of the most important witnesses to Sethian theology.<sup>1</sup> The close affinity between this text and Valentinus suggests that he drew upon distinctly Sethian traditions about the creation of humankind. Valentinus's teaching in fragment 1 is relevant for my study also because similar views of Adam's creation are preserved in the *Gospel of Philip* and in the *Tripartite Tractate*.<sup>2</sup> At least the former text possibly bears witness to the reception of Valentinus's views.

What I find most intriguing in Valentinus's interpretation, however, is his insistence that the divine essence deposited in Adam expressed itself as *parrhesia*. This aspect is absent in the Sethian tradition. Thus it is likely that this is Valentinus's own contribution to the interpretation of Adam's creation. Derived from the Greek words *pas* and *rhēsis*, *parrhesia* basically means "saying everything." The usage of the term displays a broad spectrum of different aspects associated with free speech: bold speaking, freedom of speech, frankness, frank criticism, and reproach. My assumption is

that it was this entire web of connotations attached to *parrhesia*—rather than one or another singular aspect of it—that Valentinus evoked in using this term.

What makes this point especially significant is that the theme of *parrhesia* belonged to the recurrent topics (*topoi*) discussed in ancient schools of thought. Teachers of philosophy regarded *parrhesia* not only as the most important sign of friendship but also as a characteristic trait of the philosopher's role in society. What is more, *parrhesia* was an indispensable part of the therapeutic practices adopted within the schools of thought. Submission to being reproached by a teacher belonged to the philosophical way of life to which the students in these groups were expected to adhere. This culture of *parrhesia*, which has gone unnoticed in previous analyses of Valentinus's fragment 1, deserves to be discussed more closely, since it suggests that Valentinus's interpretation of Adam's creation is not only an instance of creative mythmaking but also shows an important link with the philosophical discourse and practice of his own time.

### ADAM AND MALEVOLENT ANGELS

In fragment 1, Valentinus draws an analogy between the creation of Adam by angels and the manufacturing of idols by human beings:<sup>3</sup>

Just as the angels were afraid of that moulded being, as it spoke [words] that surpassed its formation because of the one who had invisibly deposited in it the seed of the essence from above and spoke frankly, in the same manner human artifacts, such as statues, images and everything manufactured in the name of God, cause fear in their creators among earthly generations. For Adam, who was formed in the name of the human being, caused fear of the preexistent human being who had evidently settled in him. So the angels panicked and quickly destroyed [or: concealed] the artifact.

This passage forms the most serious obstacle to Markschie's view that Valentinus was independent from traditions that could be labeled as "Gnostic." Markschie downplays as "a distant motif parallel"<sup>4</sup> what I consider to be very close similarities between this fragment and the *Apocryphon of John*.<sup>5</sup> Markschie also leaves unexplained some other details that speak in favor of such a background for Valentinus's teaching. For example, Markschie does not address the question of why the seed of higher essence had to be given to Adam in secrecy or, as Valentinus puts it, "invisibly" (*aoratōs*). Does this not imply that there was something valuable in

Adam that was *hidden* from his creators to begin with and became public only as he began to speak? As an alternative to a “Gnostic” interpretation of Valentinus’s exegesis, Markschiefs suggests that “by this fragment Valentinus explains the origin of evil.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Markschiefs maintains that Valentinus wanted to describe how “fear came into the world,” and that it was “the affects of angels” that “already then destroyed the earthly human being.”<sup>7</sup> Finally, Markschiefs argues that Valentinus made a reference to “the rise and fall of the human being near to God,” which made God and the angels “terrified because of the human being, who rises above his position as an earthly being (or an image being).”<sup>8</sup> However, I fail to see in the fragment itself any interest in explaining the *origin* of fear, nor does Valentinus attribute the damage done to Adam to the *affects* of angels but to the angels themselves.

Fragment 1 shows that Valentinus ascribed to the angels a crucial role in Adam’s creation. Although they are not called “creator angels,” their role as creators can be inferred from the manner in which Valentinus equates their fear in front of Adam and the fear artisans show in front of the idols they have produced. This comparison between angels and artisans functions only if it is assumed that the angels had first manufactured Adam and then became afraid of him.<sup>9</sup>

The equation between the creator angels and the manufacturers of idols raises the question of whether Valentinus attributed some superior quality not only to Adam but also to idols. Is there something “real” in idols that makes their manufacturers stand in awe of them, as there is the divine seed in Adam that startled the creator angels?<sup>10</sup>

Valentinus’s fragment 5 may help us understand better his equation of Adam and idols.<sup>11</sup> In this excerpt, Valentinus compares the relationship between the present world and the divine abode, which he calls “the living realm” (*ho zōn aiōn*), to that between portrait and model.<sup>12</sup> He argues that a portrait does not carry “perfect fidelity” to the model and is thus inferior to it. Yet the portrait’s imperfection is completed by the authority of the one who stood as a model. A portrait is, thus, superior to its maker by virtue of what it represents. It seems possible that Valentinus conceived of idols in the same way: they are superior to their manufacturers because they stand for something that human beings consider to be superior to themselves. If this was Valentinus’s view, it does not yet mean that he believed that idols are real. As for the preexistent human being in Adam, Valentinus adds an emphatic sentence: “it had evidently [*dē*] settled in him.” A similar sentence is lacking in Valentinus’s description of idols. This suggests that he made

a distinction between the divine seed, which was *really* in Adam, and the divine essence that people *imagine* to be in idols.<sup>13</sup>

### BACKGROUND: VALENTINUS AND THE APOCRYPHON OF JOHN

In describing Adam's creation, Valentinus does not mention the Creator-God at all. This is a major deviation from the teachings of other Valentinians, who attributed the creation of the world and human beings to the inferior Creator-God. If Valentinus ascribed the creation of the world to the supreme God, as I shall suggest in chapter 4, then he could have assumed that the malevolent creator angels worked at their own instigation—as did many of the alleged predecessors of the school of Valentinus (Simon the Magician, Menander, Saturninus, Basilides, and Carpocrates).<sup>14</sup>

The idea of angels involved in the creation stems from Platonic Jewish theology. Philo maintained that angels assisted God in creating the world.<sup>15</sup> This idea went back to Plato, who had described in *Timaeus* how the Creator-God used “young gods” as his assistants in the creation.<sup>16</sup> Philo saw scriptural proof for this Platonic idea in the plural address God uses in Genesis 1:26 (“Let *us* make”).<sup>17</sup> The theory of assistant angels helped Philo account for the existence of evil things that could not be attributed to God, who is “the cause of only what is good.”<sup>18</sup> Hence Philo's distinction between God and angels: “the truly good gifts, which nourish virtue-loving souls, are referred to God alone as their cause, but on the other hand the province of things evil has been committed to angels . . . that nothing which tends to destruction should have its origin in Him whose nature is to save.”<sup>19</sup>

In addition to being responsible for creating evil things, Philo considered the angels responsible for carrying out God's punishments.<sup>20</sup> It might appear only a minor step from such assistant angels doing God's “dirty work” to the malevolent creator angels in Valentinus's interpretation. Yet Philo never took this step. Instead, he affirmed that even these powers of God are good and merciful beings, although it is their task to punish the impious.<sup>21</sup>

While the opinions of Philo and Valentinus clearly differ from each other at this crucial point, the *Apocryphon of John* describes Adam's creation in a manner strikingly similar to Valentinus. Valentinus described how (1) the angels recognized that Adam was superior to them, (2) the angels were struck with terror and awe in front of Adam, and (3) the angels either destroyed or concealed Adam.<sup>22</sup> Each of these points can also be found in the *Apocryphon of John*. What we have in this text is, first, an account of how

the evil Creator-God Yaldabaoth, assisted by his angels, prepared for Adam a “psychic body.”<sup>23</sup> It, however, remained motionless until Yaldabaoth transmitted into it the divine power stemming from his mother, Wisdom. After receiving the divine power, Adam not only began to move, but he also showed an intelligence that was superior to that of his creators. When they noticed this, “they took him and cast him down into the lowest region of all matter.”<sup>24</sup> Shortly after this account follows another story repeating the same sequence of events: The supreme God provides Adam with a hidden spirit that made “his thinking . . . superior to all those who had made him.” As Yaldabaoth and his assistant angels recognized this quality in Adam, they began to envy him, brought him “into the shadow of death” and created him anew from earth, water, fire, and material spirit. In this manner, they remodeled Adam’s body and he “became a mortal man.”<sup>25</sup>

The two stories in the *Apocryphon of John* show a striking resemblance to Valentinus’s interpretation: Adam’s creators recognize his superiority, and this recognition leads to either his deportation (the first account) or to the transformation of his body into what is called “the tomb” and “the fetter of forgetfulness” (the second account). The reason for what the angels did to Adam, however, is explained in different ways. While according to Valentinus the angels destroyed (or concealed) Adam because of their fear of him, the *Apocryphon of John* explains their reaction as being due to their jealousy.<sup>26</sup> Assessments of what made Adam superior to the angels are also different. In the *Apocryphon of John*, the jealousy of the angels was aroused by Adam’s better *understanding*.<sup>27</sup> Valentinus, however, maintained that it was Adam’s *parrhesia* that caused their fear.<sup>28</sup>

Both these differences can be explained as Valentinus’s modifications, which may go back to the Book of Wisdom. It is affirmed in Wisdom 5:1–2 (NRSV, with modifications): “The righteous will stand with great confidence [*en parrēsiai pollēi*] in the presence of those who have oppressed him and despised his sufferings. When they see him, they will be shaken with dreadful fear [*tarachthēsontai phobōi deinōi*], and they will be amazed at the unexpected salvation.” In light of this passage, it seems that Valentinus juxtaposed the Sethian tradition of Adam’s creation with the Hellenistic Jewish tradition of the vindication of the righteous. Both the motif of *parrhesia* and that of fear come from the latter tradition. It is easy to understand the association between the two traditions at this point. In the Book of Wisdom, the unrighteous are described as those who have “erred from the way of truth” to “the paths of lawlessness and destruction” and are characterized by their arrogance and empty boasting (Wisdom 5:6–8)—just as the Creator-God and his assistants are portrayed in the Sethian tradition.

The affinities between Valentinus and the *Apocryphon of John*, however, are close enough to suggest that Valentinus was familiar with a tradition of Adam's creation similar to that in the *Apocryphon of John*.<sup>29</sup> But can we be more specific? Perhaps. For it seems that, within the Sethian corpus of texts, it is only in the *Apocryphon of John* that Adam's opposition to the creator angels is described in a way similar to Valentinus's interpretation. Other Sethian texts do not provide us with parallels as close to Valentinus's view as the *Apocryphon of John*.<sup>30</sup> The Sethian *Apocalypse of Adam* describes both Adam and Eve as being superior to their creators because they "resembled the great eternal angels." This resemblance is the original androgynous state of Adam and Eve, because it was the Creator-God and his powers who "divided us in wrath."<sup>31</sup> The idea of Adam's deportation does not appear in this text. In the *Hypostasis of Archons*, the creators do not recognize the divine essence in Adam at all. In consequence, they are neither afraid nor jealous of him.<sup>32</sup> An account of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from paradise follows later in the text, but it is told in accordance with what is said in Genesis.<sup>33</sup> The *Trimorphic Protennoia* is similar to the *Hypostasis of Archons* at this point: the Creator-God ("the Archigenetor of ignorance") created the human being but did not "recognize the power in him."<sup>34</sup> In the *Gospel of Egyptians*, there is only a very brief allusion to Adam's creation, and his relationship to the Creator-God is not raised at all.<sup>35</sup>

Hence, what Valentinus says about Adam's creation was *not* a commonly held opinion in Sethian texts but rather a feature specific to the *Apocryphon of John*. This could suggest that Valentinus was familiar with this text.<sup>36</sup> This one case of a close contact, however, is hardly sufficient for demonstrating literary dependency with certainty. Another explanation for the specific affinity between Valentinus and the *Apocryphon of John* is that he and the author(s) of this Sethian text made use of a similar tradition about Adam's creation independently of each other. At the end of the day, this possibility may be more probable than the former, since other fragments of Valentinus do not lend any further support for assuming a more close literary contact between him and the *Apocryphon of John*.<sup>37</sup>

In some recent studies, it has been suggested that the *Apocryphon of John* is dependent on the teachings of Valentinus and his followers.<sup>38</sup> However, I find this theory a less likely explanation for the affinities between Valentinus's view on Adam's creation and the *Apocryphon of John*. It would be difficult to explain why the author of the *Apocryphon of John* would have omitted the theme of *parrhesia* if he was familiar with Valentinus's interpretation of Adam's creation. In addition, although the *Gospel of Philip* may show traces of Valentinus's interpretation of this issue, his view never

established itself as *the* Valentinian opinion about Adam's creation but was surpassed by other interpretations. If Valentinus's teaching of Adam did not prove very popular among his own followers, it is very unlikely that this teaching would have been widely known outside this group.

It is true that the idea that Adam was superior to the angels occurs in Jewish writings too. It is, however, affirmed in a way that differs both from Valentinus and the *Apocryphon of John*. In some Jewish writings, Adam is portrayed as an object of angelic veneration. In the *Life of Adam and Eve* 13–17, it is told how the chief angel Michael commanded the angels to venerate Adam since he was the image of God, and that the devil and his angels were thrown onto the earth because of their refusal to do so.<sup>39</sup> The purpose of such stories was most likely “to convey human superiority over angels.”<sup>40</sup> A similar idea is expressed in the interpretations of Adam's creation of Valentinus and the *Apocryphon of John*, but neither of them describes angelic veneration of Adam. Rather, they posit antagonism between the creator angels and Adam, which ends up with the angels' hostile action toward Adam.<sup>41</sup> This feature is opposite to the Jewish idea of angelic veneration of Adam.

### CONTEXT: FRANK SPEECH IN PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE

What Valentinus added to the earlier tradition of Adam's creation was the notion that the divine essence deposited in Adam expressed itself as *parrhesia*. As I mentioned above, Valentinus may have borrowed this idea from the Book of Wisdom. What is significant is that *parrhesia* is the only recognizable quality Valentinus mentions in connection with Adam, who, as the first human being, represents the whole of humankind. In other words, *parrhesia* constitutes humanity.

The Greek term *parrhesia* was used in a variety of different contexts. In the classical period, “speaking all” denoted a citizen's uninhibited freedom of speech in a city-state. In Hellenistic society, however, *parrhesia* turned into a private virtue associated with friendship. *Parrhesia* became to be understood as frankness, which was considered to be possible only among friends on equal footing. The opposite of *parrhesia* was no longer tyranny but flattery. *Parrhesia* became “that personal candor which was prized between true friends, as opposed to the political liberty to declare openly one's opinions in the civic space or assembly.”<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, the political stance connected with *parrhesia* was never completely lost. Free speech was regarded as the most important sign of

freedom (*libertas*). Loss of the liberty of speaking under tyranny was a source of bitter complaint.<sup>43</sup> *Parrhesia* also meant “provocative freedom of speech,” for which the Cynic philosophers were especially well known.<sup>44</sup> It was the philosopher’s moral freedom, based upon self-control, that, as Glenn Holland puts it, “allows him to speak frankly regardless of circumstances.”<sup>45</sup> Hence the continuing political relevance of *parrhesia*. Opposition to tyrants was, in fact, one of the things expected from philosophers.<sup>46</sup> The story of a philosopher who with his uninhibited speaking irritates a tyrant was already a topos in classical literature.<sup>47</sup> In the subsequent centuries, the picture of philosophers in opposition to emperors persisted in the popular imagination.<sup>48</sup> Such philosophers were considered courageous, since they risked being executed by the irritated ruler.<sup>49</sup> This topos was also known to educated early Christians in Alexandria.<sup>50</sup> Therefore it can be assumed that Valentinus was familiar with the political aspect of *parrhesia*.

An important aspect of *parrhesia* is that of “frank criticism” practiced in the schools of thought.<sup>51</sup> Reproof by a teacher was part of the therapy of the soul, a cure the student needed when he or she had committed an error. Since people react to reproach in different ways, one issue teachers of philosophy had to consider was how much reproach is useful for a given student. For this purpose, they developed subtle categorizations of different forms of frank criticism, varying from harsh (*sklēros*, *pikros*) or severe (*sphodros*) reproach to milder, “mixed” (*meiktos*) approaches in which praise and criticism were combined.<sup>52</sup>

The therapeutic use of *parrhesia* is best attested for Epicureans. The Epicurean philosopher Philodemus (c. 110–c. 40/35 B.C.E.) wrote an entire treatise entitled *On Frank Criticism* (*Peri Parrhēσίας*). This text gives a vivid impression of how *parrhesia* was applied and what problems it caused in a community of philosophers.<sup>53</sup> First, Philodemus’s treatise shows that frank criticism was usually offered to students by a sage (*sophos*) or philosopher (*philosophos*); however, sages can also offer frank criticism to one another.<sup>54</sup> Second, Philodemus’s text shows that *parrhesia* was understood as a reproach of “error” or “sin” (*hamartēma*) committed by a student.<sup>55</sup> Third, this text reveals the therapeutic goal of frank criticism. It is offered “for the sake of correction,”<sup>56</sup> and the critical task of the sage is compared to a doctor performing a painful operation.<sup>57</sup> Fourth, Philodemus notes that frank criticism is painful and causes irritation. It is above all passions that prevent a person from heeding a teacher’s frank criticism.<sup>58</sup> In specific, Philodemus points out that frank criticism causes anger.<sup>59</sup> In his treatise, he gives so comprehensive a list of people who have problems with receiving *parrhesia* that it is difficult to imagine anyone who could bear criticism

well; as for those who don't, Philodemus mentions young men, old men, women, the rich, the illustrious—and even those who are “more intelligent” and “teachers.”<sup>60</sup> Philodemus argues for accommodating reproach: a teacher of philosophy should take seriously that students need, and are able to bear, different amounts of *parrhesia*.<sup>61</sup>

If we read Valentinus's interpretation in the context of this ancient moral philosophical discussion about *parrhesia*, it does not seem farfetched to think that he transposed the typical scene of a philosopher arousing with his unhindered speech the hostility of a tyrant into a story of the first human being in opposition to the malevolent creators. Moreover, Valentinus's interpretation presupposes that *parrhesia* causes irritation: as soon as the angels heard Adam uttering *parrhesia*, they wanted to destroy him—like the tyrants sought to destroy their critics. Their irritation, however, is not described in terms of anger, as in Philodemus, but in terms of fear. Given that *parrhesia* was usually understood as critical analysis of error, it is also possible to think that by using this expression Valentinus wanted to say that Adam reproached the creator angels for their being in error.

In Valentinus's exegesis, it is not only the divine seed deposited in Adam that expressed itself in *parrhesia*. In fragment 2, Valentinus designates Christ's divine revelation as *parrhesia* of the supreme God.<sup>62</sup> This designation may echo the Gospel of John, in which the same term is used in connection with Jesus's teaching.<sup>63</sup> However, it is also possible that, by defining Jesus's divine revelation with the term *parrhesia*, Valentinus wanted to link Jesus with the traditional image of an ideal philosopher known for his unprohibited freedom of speech.<sup>64</sup>

Valentinus's view as to what happened to the *parrhesia* bestowed upon Adam remains unclear, but he no doubt assumed that Christ's *parrhesia* is not prevented by any power. One possibility arising from this view is that Valentinus thought that Adam lost the divine gift of *parrhesia* when the angels destroyed him, and that Christ is the new Adam who restores the lost frankness of the first Adam.

There is no direct evidence whether or how *parrhesia* was applied in the school of Valentinus. Given that the practice of *parrhesia* in ancient schools of thought must have been well known, however, it seems unlikely that Valentinus would have invested so much in this issue as he did if it had no connection with practice in his circle. Mentioning frank speech both in the context of Adam's creation and of Christ's message would function as a justification for the practice of *parrhesia* in this group.<sup>65</sup> The fact that Valentinus composed a literary sermon on friendship, *On Friends (Peri Philōn)*,<sup>66</sup> supports the possibility of the practical dimension connected

with frankness. Frankness is not mentioned in the brief fragment of this work, but, given that this theme was so intrinsically connected with friendship in ancient philosophical literature, it is likely that Valentinus addressed frankness in this sermon. However, we are left uncertain as to what this application was and of its exact relationship to the practices adopted in philosophical schools.

### RECEPTION: SIMILAR INTERPRETATIONS IN OTHER VALENTINIAN TEXTS

The fact that the fragments of Valentinus offer only a random selection of his teaching makes it difficult to evaluate his influence on other early Christian teachers linked with the school named after him.<sup>67</sup> Valentinus's interpretation of Adam's creation can be added to the few instances where it seems possible to see connections between the fragments of his works and the views of other Valentinian teachers. Since Adam's creation is discussed in a number of Valentinian sources, it is also possible to ponder how important a part Valentinus's own views played as Valentinian theology gradually developed.

Strikingly, there are only two Valentinian texts that resemble Valentinus's teaching of Adam's creation. These texts are the *Gospel of Philip*<sup>68</sup> and the *Tripartite Tractate*.<sup>69</sup> Although other Valentinian teachers offer a number of interpretations of Genesis 1–3, their views are strikingly unaffected by Valentinus's view. Because these views will be dealt with in chapter 8, I confine my discussion here to the relevant passages in the *Gospel of Philip* and in the *Tripartite Tractate*.

Although the *Gospel of Philip* does not contain any full account of the origin of humankind, it contains a number of interpretations of Genesis. The *Gospel of Philip* not only takes up Adam's creation,<sup>70</sup> it also deals with Eve's separation from him and the descendants of Adam and Eve.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, the text offers allegorical explanations of the trees of paradise.<sup>72</sup> The following passage in the *Gospel of Philip* provides us with the closest parallel to Valentinus's teaching about Adam's creation:<sup>73</sup> "It was by means of a breath that Adam's soul came into being. The spirit was the soul's companion. What was given to him was his mother. His soul was [taken] and a [ . . . ] was given to him to its place. For, as he [or: it] was united, [he spoke] words superior to the powers. They envied him [ . . . ] spiritual partner [ . . . ] hidden [ . . . ] themselves [ . . . ] bridal chamber so that [ . . . ]"

The passage begins with an allusion to Genesis 2:7. The description of the spirit as the soul's companion suggests that both the spirit and the soul

were transmitted into Adam by means of a breath.<sup>74</sup> The latter part seems to recall Valentinus's teaching discussed above:<sup>75</sup> Adam's superiority to the powers becomes visible in what he speaks, and this superiority makes the powers envious of him.<sup>76</sup> The subsequent part is damaged, but it may have contained an account of how Adam's spiritual element was separated from him by the powers.<sup>77</sup> What enables Adam's bold speaking is the union of the soul and the spirit in him ("when he was united"), whereas the "preexistent human being," mentioned by Valentinus, does not appear at all.

The rest of the passage is less clear. The identification of "what was given to him" with "his mother" may seem awkward. Yet the emendations trying to resolve this textual difficulty<sup>78</sup> are not really necessary, for the identification can go back to the use of traditions similar to those attested in the *Hypostasis of Archons* and *On the Origin of the World*. In both texts, Adam calls the living spirit given to him "the mother of the living" (cf. Genesis 3:20).<sup>79</sup>

Another difficulty is that the text says that Adam's soul was replaced with something, but it is not clear what this something is. There is a lacuna in the text at this point. Layton's restoration "spirit" (*pna*) seems to be the most plausible suggestion here. If so, this "spirit," however, cannot be identical with the spirit mentioned at the beginning of the passage. The indefinite article *ou* shows that the author introduces here a new spirit not mentioned previously. Thus this "spirit" most likely denotes an inferior spirit, which the powers gave to Adam.<sup>80</sup> In that case, the whole passage can be understood as follows: the first part describes the union of the spirit and soul and how the powers destroyed this union. The latter part explains why this destruction took place: "For, as he was united, he spoke words superior to the powers." Or the text could also be read: "For, as the spirit was united with the soul, Adam spoke words superior to the powers."

It is noteworthy that this interpretation, which may be an expansion of Valentinus's teaching, is not the only view about Adam's creation in the *Gospel of Philip*. In another passage, it is stated that Adam was born from spirit and earth: "Adam came into being from two virgins, from the spirit and from the virgin earth. Christ, therefore, was born from a virgin to rectify the fall which occurred in the beginning."<sup>81</sup> Three ideas are brought together in this passage. The first one is that there was an "inner" or "spiritual" human being in the earthly human being.<sup>82</sup> Second, the text draws upon the Pauline Adam-Christ typology.<sup>83</sup> As in Romans 5:12–21, the Adam-Christ typology is here associated with the primeval fall. A novelty in this passage of the *Gospel of Philip* is, however, that Adam and Christ are connected to each other on account of their *virginal origin*, a theme

playing no role in Paul's argument. The third idea can be inferred from the manner in which the two previous ideas are juxtaposed. The two elements from which Adam came into being are not only mentioned in order to depict the dual nature of humankind in general (like in Philo or in *Poimandres*). Rather, Adam's dual state is associated with the fall. This association may have been inspired by the Pauline Adam-Christ typology, but the fall itself is understood in a manner different from Paul's. The passage does not speak of Adam's fall, nor does it presuppose that he played any role in the fall. Rather, the fact itself that Adam is a composite being of spirit and earth is a result of a fall. In other words, the fall must have taken place *prior* to Adam's creation.<sup>84</sup> This most likely presupposes a story of Wisdom's fall, which according to other Valentinian sources accounts for Adam's dual nature.<sup>85</sup>

In other parts of the *Gospel of Philip*, separation and reunion are connected with the primordial unity of Adam and Eve. Eve's separation from Adam is considered the beginning of death, while returning to one's original self means that there will not be death anymore.<sup>86</sup> Accordingly, Christ's role is "to repair the separation, which was from the beginning, and again unite the two, and to give life to those who died as a result of the separation and unite them."<sup>87</sup> Both passages portray Eve's creation as being the primeval separation (instead of Adam's separation from his divine essence) that needs to be corrected, and salvation is defined in terms of returning to one's original androgynous state.<sup>88</sup> The latter passage argues, in addition, that only Christ can accomplish this correction and that the reunion becomes possible in the bridal chamber.

In sum, the *Gospel of Philip* is a hoard of quite distinct interpretations of Adam's creation. A possible reminiscence of Valentinus's teaching assumes no special place of honor even in this text, but is only one of the various ideas adopted in it.

I have argued above that Valentinus probably knew Sethian traditions of Adam's creation. The *Tripartite Tractate* (NHC I, 5) supports the conclusion that some Valentinians were familiar with Sethian views of the creation of humankind. The account given in this text of the creation of the first human being contains a number of features that appear in Sethian texts but are absent in other Valentinian sources. What connects the *Tripartite Tractate* to Valentinus's view is its description of the angels involved in Adam's creation.<sup>89</sup> The *Tripartite Tractate*, however, seems to draw more directly upon Sethian traditions than on Valentinus's views. In this text, the angels are clearly assistants of the Creator-God, just as they are in the *Apocryphon of John* and in other Sethian writings.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, the author

of the *Tripartite Tractate* describes, in accordance with Sethian texts,<sup>91</sup> how the Creator-God negotiated with his rulers (*[ef]ji pimeue mn nefarchōn*) as the first human being was created.<sup>92</sup> Finally, it is affirmed in the *Tripartite Tractate* that Word made the first human being able to move. This view is a Valentinian modification of a more traditional idea in Sethian texts that the Creator-God and his assistants created Adam's body from earth but were unable to move him, and that it was only by means of the divine spirit that Adam finally became a living creature able to stand upright from earth.<sup>93</sup> These traits in the *Tripartite Tractate* suggest that knowledge of Sethian interpretations of Adam's creation was not confined to Valentinus; they were more widely known among those in his circle.

Finally, a connection can be drawn between Valentinus's interpretation of Adam and the ritual practice of some of his later followers. In the Marcasian deathbed ritual called the redemption, the dying one was provided with the answers to be given to the Creator-God and his gang in the hereafter. The bottom line of this instruction, to be discussed in more detail later,<sup>94</sup> is that the deceased will humiliate the lesser deities by reproaching them because of their mistaken beliefs regarding themselves and their origin. Although the term *parrhesia* is not used in this connection, the attitude shown toward the lesser gods is very similar to that of Adam toward the creator angels in Valentinus's interpretation. However, unlike Adam, who fell victim to the creator angels' hostility, the deceased will escape from their hands after reproaching them.

## CONCLUSION

Valentinus's approach to the book of Genesis in fragment 1 seems quite different from that in fragment 4. In fragment 4, he presupposes that human beings have not lost their immortality, but in fragment 1 he maintains that Adam was destroyed by the creator angels. Are the two views simply contradictory, or is there a way to bring them together? One solution is that although Adam was destroyed by the angels, his imperfection was not inherited by later generations of humankind. This interpretation would be in keeping with the view, discussed in the previous chapter, that each human being has an opportunity to choose between becoming like Adam or not becoming like him. Those choosing the former option become subject to death, not because of Adam, but because of their own choice. In addition to the passages in Justin and Rabbinic writings, this view is visible also in the *Gospel of Thomas*, in which it is said that Adam was "not worthy of you" (*Gos. Thom.* 85). It may be that Valentinus had something similar in mind:

he wants to say that his audience is in a better position than Adam. This better position goes back to the revelation of Jesus, which reinforces the divine *parrhesia* that Adam lost because of the creator angels.

Valentinus's interest in *parrhesia* may suggest that he regarded frank criticism as the task of a teacher aiming at the students' improvement in virtue. I have suggested above that there was an entire culture behind Valentinus's usage of the term *parrhesia*. Thus, it would be one-sided to explain this term as only referring to the books of the New Testament in which *parrhesia* is mentioned, or as an illustration of "the Gnostic spirit" peculiar to Valentinus's teaching.<sup>95</sup>

The analysis above raises the question of why there is so little evidence for the reception of Valentinus's interpretation of Adam's creation in other Valentinian sources. One reason for the lack of reception might be that other Valentinians, who described the Creator-God in relatively favorable terms,<sup>96</sup> considered Valentinus's view about the creator angels too negative. Supporting this theory is that the picture drawn of the Creator-God in the *Gospel of Philip* is much more negative than in most other Valentinian documents. In fact, all the positive features attached to this god in other Valentinian sources are completely absent in the *Gospel of Philip*. Instead of portraying the Creator-God as the agent of Wisdom,<sup>97</sup> this text affirms that that this God created the world "by mistake." Hence it is no surprise that it is in the *Gospel of Philip* that we find the only similarity to Valentinus's teaching about the hostile angels trying to destroy Adam. The antagonism Valentinus saw between Adam and his creators would be ill-suited in most other Valentinian sources, but it fits strikingly well along with the views expounded in the *Gospel of Philip*.

## { 4 }

### COSMIC SYMPATHY AND THE ORIGIN OF EVIL

THE FINAL passage from the fragments of Valentinus, which needs to be discussed before turning to the teachings of his followers, is his short yet eloquent poem entitled *Harvest* (fragment 8).<sup>1</sup> It describes how the Spirit sustains the entire cosmic system from bottom to top:

I see that all is suspended by the Spirit,<sup>2</sup>  
I understand that all is carried by the Spirit:  
flesh, hanging from soul,  
soul, <depending on><sup>3</sup> air,  
air, hanging from aether,  
fruits borne from the depth,  
a babe brought forth from the womb.

The positive attitude Valentinus shows toward the entire universe in *Harvest* seems to be at odds with his more dualistic interpretation of Adam as opposed to malevolent creator angels. However, as Michael Williams has pointed out, negative features in cosmogonic myths do not necessarily reflect hostile attitudes toward the present world.<sup>4</sup> This can be seen, for example, in the Valentinian *Gospel of Truth*, in which the emergence of the material world is explained as being due to ignorance and confusion that took place in the divine realm.<sup>5</sup> And yet it is true that, as Bentley Layton writes, “the world view of [the *Gospel of Truth*] is Stoic and pantheistic: that is, a universe in which all is enclosed by god, and ultimately all *is* god.”<sup>6</sup> Even in the Valentinian sources describing the primordial fall of Wisdom, assessments of the present world are surprisingly positive.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, Valentinus's view of Adam's creation and his assessment of the universe seem to be two opposing sides of his teaching. This raises the question of how he moved from one side to the other. One source that may help us to answer this question is Methodius's (d. c. 311) dialogue *On Free Will*. This text, written toward the end of the third century, describes a debate between an orthodox teacher and his heterodox opponent. The opponent delivers a lengthy address, which begins with admiration for the beauty of the cosmos but moves on to the question of the origin of evil. His solution is that evil goes back to the preexistent "stuff" (*hulē*) from which the good God created the world.

In the only surviving Greek manuscript of Methodius's *On Free Will*, the abbreviations *Oua.* and *Ou.* are used for this opponent.<sup>8</sup> Thus he was understood to be either a Valentinian or Valentinus himself.<sup>9</sup> Whereas this manuscript is of late date (from the tenth century), Methodius's opponent was already identified with Valentinus in the *Dialogue on the True Faith in God*, written only a few years (c. 290–300)<sup>10</sup> after Methodius's work. The author of this text quotes the heterodox's opening address from Methodius as "the doctrine of Valentinus." Although most scholars reject the identification of Methodius's opponent with the Valentinians,<sup>11</sup> the possibility that this figure represents Valentinus's own teaching, as the dialogue of Adamantius suggests, deserves serious consideration.<sup>12</sup> While the argumentation of the heterodox speaker in Methodius differs from all other forms of Valentinian theology, it is strikingly similar to what Valentinus says in *Harvest*. If this passage in Methodius is a remnant of Valentinus's teaching, it suggests that his affirmation of cosmic sympathy was only one part in a more extensive argument, which led to a theory of the origin of the world and evil.

#### A VALENTINIAN INTERPRETATION OF *HARVEST* IN HIPPOLYTUS

Hippolytus quoted Valentinus's *Harvest* in his *Refutation of All Heresies* to signal the closure of his account of a "standard" Valentinian teaching. After this passage, he provides a lengthy account of deviations from this teaching.<sup>13</sup> Hippolytus also attached to *Harvest* a brief allegorical commentary, which shows how the poem can be understood in terms of the Valentinian theology described by Hippolytus.<sup>14</sup> It is likely, however, that the commentary does not stem from Valentinus.<sup>15</sup> Hippolytus does not introduce it as a direct quotation, but with a less exact phrase "he [Valentinus] thought of these things in this way [*houtōs tauta noōn*]."<sup>16</sup> Moreover,

TABLE 4.1 Valentinus's *Harvest* and Hippolytus's Commentary

Harvest	commentary
flesh	<i>hyle</i> ("matter")
soul	Creator-God (Demiurge)
air	Lower Wisdom
aether	Superior Wisdom and fullness
fruits from the depth	emanation of eternal beings (aeons) from the Father

the interpretation offered in the commentary seems strained. It connects each detail in *Harvest* with the Valentinian myth:

Valentinus's poem does not lend itself to this interpretation without difficulties. For example, Hippolytus's previous account of Valentinian theology does not anticipate the identification of the lower Wisdom with "air"<sup>17</sup> nor that of the higher Wisdom with "aether." The identification of the lower Wisdom with "the spirit outside the fullness" creates additional confusion. It is congruent with Hippolytus's previous account, in which the lower Wisdom outside the divine realm is indeed called "spirit,"<sup>18</sup> but in the poem itself the Spirit is clearly *not* identified with air. Instead, it is a universal principle that is clearly distinct from air. Air is only one link in the cosmic bond, which in its entirety is held together by the Spirit.

Incongruencies of this kind suggest that the commentary was added to the poem secondarily. But by whom? Hippolytus is one possible candidate.<sup>19</sup> He presents much of the whole first major section of his account of Valentinian teaching as stemming from Valentinus himself. Valentinus is mentioned several times by name in this part.<sup>20</sup> This also seems to make Valentinus the logical subject of the short attribution "he says" (*phēsi*), which is scattered throughout this section of Hippolytus's work. This conclusion, however, is less clear than it would seem at first sight. Hippolytus obviously did not make any clear distinction between Valentinus and his followers,<sup>21</sup> but lumps them all together. This can be seen in his manner of using singular and plural attributions side by side in his account of Valentinian theology.<sup>22</sup> In other parts of his work, Hippolytus employs the attribution "he says" in referring to the opinions of groups, such as the Naassenes.<sup>23</sup> Thus it is possible that, in his account of Valentinian theology, Hippolytus does not use the attribution "he says" to refer to Valentinus, but as a less precise device referring to a larger group of Valentinians.

While it is possible that Hippolytus wrote the commentary, it is more likely that it comes from Valentinus's followers.<sup>24</sup> The two last lines of the poem ("fruits borne from the depth, / a babe brought forth from the womb") are explained in the commentary as referring to the emanation of

divine beings. This interpretation coincides with the metaphorical language used in the *Tripartite Tractate*.<sup>25</sup> This text describes eternal beings (aeons) as dwelling in the Father's thought, which is called "the hidden depth" (*pbathos ethēp*; cf. "depth" mentioned in Valentinus's poem).<sup>26</sup> While the "womb" in *Harvest* is associated in the commentary with the emanation of divine beings, it is said in the *Tripartite Tractate* of the eternal beings that they "existed like an embryo."<sup>27</sup> The eternal beings are also compared to an "infant" (*plilou*),<sup>28</sup> which coincides with the interpretation given in the commentary to the "babe" in Valentinus's poem. Finally, the Father is described in the *Tripartite Tractate* as a spring, and it is affirmed that "the Father brought forth the all like a little child, like a drop from a spring."<sup>29</sup> A similar metaphor of depths of the sea in Valentinus's poem is explained in the commentary as referring to the eternal beings.

If the commentary to *Harvest* stems from Valentinians, it shows that they not only preserved Valentinus's texts but also interpreted them. Such homage paid to the founder's works is one indication of the existence of "the school of Valentinus."<sup>30</sup> This does not mean, however, that his students followed his opinions slavishly. Valentinus's *Harvest* lends expression to a conviction that there exists a universal order in which cosmic elements and parts of the human body are all in harmony and have their determined places. There is no sign of any defect in the cosmic order or in any single part of it. This is, as Marksches correctly points out, the most striking difference between the poem and the Valentinian cosmology described by Irenaeus and Hippolytus.<sup>31</sup>

Some other details in the fragments of Valentinus, too, suggest that his teaching of the creation differed from those of his followers. Instead of the complex system of personified eternal beings that is peculiar to the Valentinian cosmogonic myth in patristic accounts, Valentinus spoke of "the living aeon" (fragment 5).<sup>32</sup> This expression denotes the eternal realm in general rather than a group of divine beings. In addition, none of the fragments of Valentinus contain any clear references to the myth of Wisdom's fall. This means that it would be unwarranted to try to interpret Valentinus's *Harvest* in the light of a full-blown Valentinian myth.

### BACKGROUND: FLIRTING WITH HERMETIC STOICISM?

The way Valentinus describes the cosmos in *Harvest* is indebted to the views of ancient philosophers. There seems to be a special affinity between his view of the cosmic chain and the modified Stoicism peculiar to Hermetic treatises.

According to Valentinus, the whole cosmos is supported by the Spirit's providence; it is this Spirit that "carries everything." This recalls the Stoic idea of the all-pervasive, fiery spirit that keeps together the whole universe.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, Valentinus's description of the alliance of the elements resembles the Stoic teaching Michael Lapidge summarizes by saying that "the permeation of *pneuma* held all cosmic parts together in tension . . . and created as it were a cosmic 'bond' or *desmos*."<sup>34</sup> Valentinus, however, divulges from the Stoic idea of the cosmic bond in emphasizing its hierarchical structure. He posits a clear hierarchy from bottom to top (flesh/soul/air/aether). In Stoic analysis, the cosmic bond involved a more reciprocal relationship between the cosmic parts. Stoics distinguished between the light (air and aether) and heavy elements (water and earth), but these elements were thought to be mutually dependent on one another and continuously changing from one form to another. This idea was part of the Stoic theory that the whole universe is controlled by nature: "the fusion of the parts of the universe is maintained by these elements, of which all things are composed, as they journey up and down and to and fro."<sup>35</sup>

Although Stoic cosmology did not belong to the Stoic curriculum,<sup>36</sup> many non-Stoic authors knew and adopted it.<sup>37</sup> Thus the links between Valentinus and Stoic cosmology do not necessarily reveal any especially close contact between him and Stoics.<sup>38</sup> Valentinus does not stand any closer to Philo, in whose exegesis the Word of God assumed the role attributed to spirit in Stoic sources.<sup>39</sup> Philo also uses the language of "hanging" and "carrying" in describing the relationships between the cosmic elements: "In some way earth and water are hung (*ekkreantai*) upon air since air is their vehicle [*ochēma*]."<sup>40</sup> However, he does not connect these terms with the Spirit, as Valentinus does.

Hermetic cosmological views, which were also based upon Stoic physics, provide a number of closer parallels to Valentinus's *Harvest*.<sup>41</sup> The idea of cosmic sympathy, to which Valentinus's poem lends expression, is also characteristic of Hermetic teaching.<sup>42</sup> In addition, the Stoic notion of the all-pervasive spirit is developed in Hermetic tractates in a manner that creates a specific link to Valentinus.

The Hermetic adoption of the all-pervasive spirit of the Stoics can be seen, for example, in the way the author of *Asclepius* maintains that spirit is God's tool for governing the world: all things receive exactly the right amount of spirit, "each according to the nature allotted it by god." The divine spirit, in turn, "supplies and invigorates all things in the world."<sup>43</sup> As for Valentinus's teaching that the Spirit carries everything, it is noteworthy that this idea is *added* in the Hermetic texts to the Stoic distinction

between light and heavy cosmic parts. The prevalent context for the elaboration of this idea is the discussion of how the world came into being: “While all was unlimited and unformed, light elements were set apart to the heights and the heavy were grounded in the moist sand, the whole of them delimited by fire and raised aloft, *to be carried by spirit.*” After this distinction between the light and heavy elements, the heavens and gods, identified with the stars, emerge. Finally, it is described how “the periphery rotated in the air, *carried in a circular course by divine spirit.*”<sup>44</sup> There is a striking similarity in language in this Hermetic passage (*pneumati ocheisthai . . . pneumati theiōi ochoumenon*) and Valentinus’s poem (*panta d’ ochoumena pneumati*). While most cosmological views in the Hermetic passage are of Stoic origin, the affirmation that the universe is carried by the spirit does not come from this tradition.<sup>45</sup>

Another Hermetic passage provides a close parallel to the juxtaposition of the idea that the spirit carries everything and that of the hierarchy of human parts. In *Corpus Hermeticum* 10.13, it is affirmed that “the soul of the human being is carried” (*psuchē de anthrōpou ocheitai*) by means of mind, reason, and soul. This teaching brings together Stoic and Platonic elements. The hierarchical order of mind, reason, soul, and spirit is taken from the Stoic tradition,<sup>46</sup> whereas the idea of the soul being carried builds upon the Platonic idea of the mortal body as the vehicle (*ochēma*) of soul.<sup>47</sup> In addition, it is maintained in this passage that the inferior parts envelop the superior parts of the human being, and that it is by spirit “passing through veins and arteries and blood” that the living being is moved and borne up.

Superior and inferior human parts are also distinguished in other Hermetic tractates.<sup>48</sup> Their hierarchy is sometimes expressed in terms contrasting to those in the aforementioned passage. In *Corpus Hermeticum* 12.14, superior parts are not portrayed as enveloped by inferior parts but as encircling them. This passage describes a hierarchical bond consisting of matter, air, soul, mind, and god: “the finest of matter is air, the finest air is soul, the finest soul is mind and the finest mind is god. And god surrounds everything and permeates everything, while mind surrounds soul, soul surrounds air and air surrounds matter.” Valentinus, however, differs from this Hermetic teaching insofar as he presents soul as being inferior to air; in the Hermetic tractate, soul is “the most subtle essence” (*to leptome-restaton*) of, and thus superior to, air.

While there are differences in details, we have similar mixtures of Stoic and Platonic ideas in the Hermetic tractates and in Valentinus’s *Harvest*. It seems insufficient to explain the close parallels between them as being due to their common background in Platonic philosophy.<sup>49</sup> This explanation

does not account for Valentinus's close affinity with the Hermetic teaching on spirit. It seems, rather, that Valentinus had some knowledge of Hermetic cosmology and cosmogony and leaned upon them in developing his own theory of the structure of the world.

It is also possible that Valentinus alludes to the Homeric golden cord, by means of which Zeus encircled the whole cosmos.<sup>50</sup> Valentinus uses the verb *kremasthai*, which is employed in the *Iliad* in describing the golden cord of Zeus (*seirēn chruseiēn . . . kremasantes*).<sup>51</sup> In Greek literature, the golden cord of Zeus was often explained allegorically. It was usually associated with astral phenomena, such as the sun, the planets, or heaven in general,<sup>52</sup> but, as Pierre Lévêque has suggested, it could also be interpreted as "a general allegory for the bonds of the universe."<sup>53</sup> There may have also been "a common Stoic source which adapted the golden cord of Homer to the theory of four elements."<sup>54</sup> The Stoic interpretation of the golden cord probably forms the background for the Hermetic teaching in *Poimandres*, in which the verb *kremasthai* is employed in an account describing a primeval distinction between light and heavy elements. After having described the escape of fire from below, the author of this text depicts a similar ascent of air, which "followed after spirit and rose up to the fire away from earth and water so that it seemed to be suspended [*dokein kremasthai*] from it."<sup>55</sup> This passage presupposes both the Stoic distinction between heavy and light cosmic elements<sup>56</sup> and the Stoic identification of spirit with fire.<sup>57</sup> Hence the affirmation that it was the "fiery spirit" that air followed and from which it became suspended.

Although Valentinus's contention that *everything* (and not only air) is suspended by the Spirit differs in scope from this Hermetic teaching, his knowledge of Hermetic cosmogonic traditions may have inspired him to make an allusion to the Homeric golden cord. In any case, it is quite conceivable that Valentinus also knew the original source of these ideas, Homer's *Iliad*, and was alluding to it.

### VALENTINUS'S CONTRIBUTION: FLESH IN THE COSMIC BOND

There is one striking point where Valentinus's poem differs both from the Stoic and the Hermetic interpretations of the cosmic bond. In the latter we find no equivalent for "flesh" (*sarx*), which Valentinus mentions as the lowest part of the cosmic bond.<sup>58</sup> Flesh, thus, denotes his modification of earlier traditions related to the cosmic bond. According to Jens Holzhausen, this modification indicates "a bold leap from cosmology to anthropology."<sup>59</sup>

Valentinus was obviously not only interested in the structure of the cosmos as a theoretical issue but was concerned with the position of human beings in the cosmic bond. Whereas the inner self of human beings (“soul,” “mind”) was already mentioned in other descriptions of this bond, Valentinus adds that the human body has also a place in it.

Flesh is also mentioned in another passage that can be included in the fragments of Valentinus. Hippolytus has preserved the following short excerpt of Valentinus’s interpretation: “He [Valentinus] supposes [*thelei*]<sup>60</sup> that flesh will not be saved and calls it ‘the garment of skin’ [Genesis 3:21] and ‘the corrupt human being’ [Ephesians 4:22].”<sup>61</sup> The interpretation that “the garment of skin” in Genesis 3:21 denotes the human body was quite common among Jewish and Christian teachers.<sup>62</sup> It is also attested for Valentinus’s followers,<sup>63</sup> who could have taken it over from him.<sup>64</sup>

If this fragment is authentic, it may seem that Valentinus held a quite negative attitude toward the human body. In his opinion, “the corrupt human being” mentioned in Ephesians 4:22 refers to the human flesh that will not be saved. This does not mean, however, that Valentinus showed hostility toward the body. The view that flesh is perishable was commonplace in antiquity. As such, it does not imply disdain for the body.<sup>65</sup> The fact that Valentinus adds “flesh” to the cosmic chain, which in its entirety is suspended by the Spirit, speaks for approval of the human body rather than for its denunciation.<sup>66</sup> Valentinus clearly held a less negative view about the human body than some of his followers, who thought that this body is of a diabolic nature.<sup>67</sup> There is not a slightest hint at this direction in Valentinus’s poem.

## THE COSMIC ORDER AND THE ORIGIN OF EVIL

While *Harvest* shows that Valentinus’s attitude toward the present world was positive, it says little about his theory as to how this world emerged. From the other fragments of his works, we know that he considered the present world to be a copy of the eternal realm (fragment 5) and that he thought that malevolent angels were involved in Adam’s creation (fragment 1). Yet even these fragments do not contain any accounts of the origin of the world. This, however, is the topic that the heterodox protagonist addresses in Methodius’s dialogue *On Free Will*. At the beginning of this text, this figure delivers a lengthy opening address, which leads to the conclusion that God created the world from the preexistent *hyle* (“matter”).<sup>68</sup>

The latter part of this address is quoted as stemming from Valentinus himself in the *Dialogue on the True Faith in God*.<sup>69</sup> Its author, known

as “Adamantius” (often identified with Origen), introduces Droserius, Valentinus’s uncritical follower, who is convinced that Valentinus has solved the problem pertaining to the origin of the devil and evil in a manner that “is not open to contradiction.” Therefore, Droserius first wants to read a passage from Valentinus’s work<sup>70</sup> and is then willing to defend “the doctrine of Valentinus.”

Droserius is no doubt a fictitious character,<sup>71</sup> and the text quoted as if from Valentinus’s work is the second part of the heterodox protagonist’s address in Methodius’s *On Free Will*. The account of “the doctrine of Valentinus” in Adamantius is, thus, entirely dependent on Methodius.<sup>72</sup> The dialogue of Adamantius, however, was composed not many years after Methodius’s work, and its author may have been one of his students.<sup>73</sup> The easiest explanation for the identification of Methodius’s heterodox speaker with Valentinus in the *Dialogue on the True Faith in God* is that the author of the latter work found this identification in the manuscript of Methodius’s treatise with which he was working.

Scholars, however, are doubtful concerning this identification. The problem is that, in Methodius’s *On Free Will*, the heterodox speaker’s “thesis does not contain anything that would be especially Gnostic or Valentinian: it is Platonic.”<sup>74</sup> This has led scholars to think that this figure was only secondarily identified with Valentinus. Lloyd Patterson maintains that Methodius’s *On Free Will*, “far from identifying specific opponents of the gnostic sort, sets itself in particular opposition to the cosmological scheme of the *Timaeus*.”<sup>75</sup> Most recently, Katharina Bracht has argued that there are “no agreements between Gnostic teachings and the heterodox’s teachings” in Methodius. Her conclusion is that the heterodox protagonist is a Christian Middle Platonist rather than a Valentinian.<sup>76</sup>

The heterodox protagonist’s position in Methodius is no doubt thoroughly Platonic and different from Valentinian theology in general. This does not mean, however, that he could not represent Valentinus’s own views, as the author of the *Dialogue on the True Faith in God* thought. The objection that the heterodox speaker in Methodius is too Platonic and not Valentinian enough loses ground as soon as it is recognized that Valentinus was one of the early Christian Platonists and that his views were different from those of his followers. Moreover, the heterodox speaker’s address contains a number of affinities with Valentinus’s teaching, especially with *Harvest*, and the position ascribed to this speaker links him closely with Platonic Christians of the second century.

The heterodox in Methodius’s *On Free Will* begins his address on God and *hyle* with an account of how he, walking on a seashore, saw and began

to contemplate a number of phenomena in nature: the waves of the sea, the regular movement of the sun and the moon in their orbits, the variety of animals, and the colorful beauty of plants. They all show how reasonably and well the cosmos is ordered. Seeing all this, the heterodox speaker was ready to admit that God is “the source of everything that exists” and began to praise him. The next day, however, the heterodox was faced with a number of examples of how humans mistreat each other: scuffles, grave robbery, desecration of bodies, murder, mercilessness, rape, and seducing another man’s wife. These misdeeds show that humans are obviously not imitators of the good God, as they should be. Their wrongdoings are opposed to the will of God and require explanation. The speaker now feels compelled to modify his former conclusion. Although it first seemed to him that God is the source of everything that exists, this cannot be the final truth. All this evil cannot stem from God, who is “good and the creator of excellent things.”

In seeking a solution to this dilemma, the heterodox speaker has recourse to ancient physics. He takes over the widely accepted idea that God created the world from the primordial *hyle*, “matter” or “stuff,” and argues that evil stems from this substance. It was usually accepted in ancient natural philosophy that active God and passive *hyle* were the two eternal premises of creation.<sup>77</sup> While opinions differed regarding the precise relationship between God and *hyle*, Plotinus says that all philosophical schools shared the view that *hyle* is “a certain base, a recipient of Form-Ideas.”<sup>78</sup>

The heterodox speaker’s conclusion is replete with allusions to Plato’s works, especially to *Timaeus*.<sup>79</sup> In it, Plato maintained that God “was good” and that “envy [*phthonos*] is impossible” for this God.<sup>80</sup> Methodius’s heterodox not only repeats the first idea, which he could have taken from the New Testament (Matthew 19:17),<sup>81</sup> but also the second, affirming that God “showed no envy.”<sup>82</sup> In addition, the heterodox speaker describes *hyle* as being “not made” (*apoiios*), “without form” (*aschēmatistos*), and in a state of disorder (*ataktōs pheromenē*). These definitions call upon Plato’s description of a primordial substance, which was void of form and “moving wrongly and disorderly (*ataktōs*),” before God imposed order upon it.<sup>83</sup> In Middle Platonism, these attributes became standard qualifications of *hyle*.<sup>84</sup>

The heterodox speaker argues that God created the world by separating the best and worst parts of *hyle*.<sup>85</sup> However, God’s working with *hyle* produced hazardous waste. Because he is good, he could only use the better parts of *hyle*, whereas he had to abandon the worse parts, which were unsuitable for his creation. It is from these bad remnants of *hyle*, which the heterodox compares to dregs of wine, that “the evil things stream on and on among human beings.”

The heterodox's opinions are obviously not based upon the earlier summaries of Valentinian theology in the hostile sources. He mentions neither the fall of Wisdom, to which Valentinians traced back the origin of *hyle*, nor the inferior Creator-God who worked with *hyle* to create the world.<sup>86</sup> While these differences set the heterodox interlocutor apart from other Valentinians, his argument coincides in a number of ways with what we know about Valentinus's own teaching:

(1) We have no direct evidence that Valentinus believed in Wisdom's fall or in the existence of the inferior Creator-God.

(2) The first part of the heterodox speaker's address is strikingly similar in spirit to what Valentinus says in *Harvest*. The speaker describes how he began to praise the Creator when he saw "the solid earth, all different kinds of animals, and the blossoms of colorful plants."<sup>87</sup> At the end of *Harvest*, Valentinus describes similar wonders of nature ("fruits borne from the depth, / a babe brought forth from the womb").

(3) The mode of the heterodox's argumentation is similar to Valentinus's. The heterodox bases his argumentation on a narrative of what he has seen and thought ("as I saw . . ." "seeing that . . ." "as I began to look intently at what has come into being in this way . . ." "it seemed to me that . . ." etc.). This style not only resembles Valentinus's self-reflective manner of describing the cosmic order in *Harvest* ("I see that . . ." "I understand that . . ."), but it also recalls the way he expressed his argument concerning the purity of heart ("it seems to me that . . .").<sup>88</sup> Moreover, Valentinus's story of his meeting with a little child who identified himself as the Word of God<sup>89</sup> shows that he, like the heterodox speaker, preferred the form of a narrative in his teaching.

(4) The heterodox hones his argument with references to pagan philosophy and myths. In addition to the allusions to Plato's works, he begins his speech with a quotation from Homer's *Iliad* (9.4)<sup>90</sup> and concludes his narration of human misconduct by saying: "For this reason, I began to believe in tragedies. It seemed to me that Thyestes's banquet has really taken place, I believed in Oenomaus's illegal desire, and I did not doubt the rivalry between brothers settled with a sword."<sup>91</sup> The allusions to Platonic philosophy and the *exempla* derived from pagan myths in the heterodox's address concur with Valentinus's appreciation of non-Christian texts as bearing witness to the same truth as that expressed in the Christian ones: "Much of what is written in the books distributed in public can also be found as written in the church of God."<sup>92</sup> The heterodox interlocutor shows

the same attitude by using pagan and biblical traditions side by side: he also mentions Noah's ark.<sup>93</sup>

In sum, the heterodox speaker in Methodius's *On Free Will* certainly sounds like Valentinus. In addition, the speaker's theory was popular among Christian teachers of Valentinus's time. As Gerhard May concludes, "throughout the second century and the early part of the third the doctrine of the preexistence of matter was firmly held by philosophically educated Christians."<sup>94</sup> Marcion, Athenagoras, Hermogenes, and Clement of Alexandria took over this view from contemporary Platonism.<sup>95</sup>

Hellenistic Jews, including the author of the Book of Wisdom (11:17) and Philo of Alexandria, also adopted the idea of the preexistence of matter.<sup>96</sup> The idea that matter is bad and the cause of evil appears in Philo's works as well.<sup>97</sup> Since Valentinus comes from the same intellectual milieu as Philo and Clement of Alexandria, the idea that he explained evil as originating from matter is entirely plausible. The heterodox speaker's theory points to a theological debate in which Christian teachers of the second century were engaged. Thus it is conceivable that the heterodox Christian described in Methodius's *On Free Will* indeed represents "the doctrine of Valentinus," as the author of the *Dialogue on the True Faith in God* claimed. The affinities with Valentinus's own teaching on the one hand and the absence of any hints at full-blown Valentinian cosmogonic myths on the other indicate that the heterodox's speech in Methodius's *On Free Will* is based upon some specific knowledge about what Valentinus himself had taught. Methodius placed Valentinus's views in the mouth of the heterodox protagonist in the beginning of his *On Free Will*<sup>98</sup> and then subjected them to a subtle inquiry in Socratic fashion, as he did in all his texts known to us.<sup>99</sup>

The heterodox speaker's address gives a plausible picture of what the Valentinian cosmogonic speculation might have been in its initial stage, when the figures of Wisdom and the inferior Creator-God were not yet integrated into it. The solution that evil goes back to matter was quite conventional and could find acceptance among non-Christian and Christian Platonists alike. What is more, this theory leaves room enough for the assumption of malevolent angels, to whom Valentinus attributed Adam's creation. This can be seen in the teaching of Athenagoras, who also subscribed to the theory of preexistent matter.<sup>100</sup> He argued that God originally created the devil to rule over matter. However, this "ruler over matter" became hostile to God, and together with some other angels, he rebelled and neglected the task assigned to him.<sup>101</sup> These demonic powers linked with

matter show hostility toward human beings.<sup>102</sup> Thus, they are similar to Valentinus's malevolent creator angels, who were hostile to Adam.

## CONCLUSION

I have devoted much space to arguing that the heterodox speaker in Methodius can indeed represent Valentinus's teaching. The reasons for this assumption are the following: The heterodox Christian's view is (1) attributed to Valentinus with certainty in one ancient source (Adamantius) and possibly in another (Methodius), (2) the speaker's views concur with those of Valentinus, (3) the building blocks of the heterodox speaker's theory in Methodius were all available to Valentinus, and (4) the historical context of the speaker's theory coincides with that of Valentinus.

I find this overlooked piece of evidence significant for a number of reasons. First, it helps us interpret Valentinus's poem *Harvest*. If the heterodox represents Valentinus's teachings, his address in Methodius suggests that the description of nature in *Harvest* does not have to be interpreted metaphorically, for example, as referring to the ultimate sources of being, the supreme God and his spouse Silence.<sup>103</sup> In light of the heterodox's opinions in Methodius, the concluding lines of *Harvest* can be indeed understood literally, in the way Marksches has suggested: "the divine order can be seen in the fruits of matter and equally in pregnancy of mothers and in fertility of the earth."<sup>104</sup>

However, it is obvious that "the depth" and "a womb" mentioned in *Harvest* opened it to allegorical interpretations. These terms were widely used as cosmic metaphors.<sup>105</sup> The supreme god is addressed as the "womb pregnant with all coming-to-be" in the Hermetic *Asclepius* and as "the source of sources, the womb containing the all" in the *Chaldean Oracles*.<sup>106</sup> The tradition of using the womb as a cosmic metaphor referring to the ultimate source of all things explains why Valentinus's followers so readily associated this term with the personified Silence, into whom the primal Father, called "the depth," deposited "the beginning of all things."<sup>107</sup> It is even possible to hear late echoes of Valentinus's *Harvest* in the way the author of the *Tripartite Tractate* used the words "embryo," "infant," and "spring" as metaphors for the emanation of eternal beings.

The prevalent cosmic interpretation of the terms used in *Harvest* helps us understand the development within the school of Valentinus in terms of continuity instead of assuming a radical break between him and his followers. Although the allegorical interpretation of *Harvest* was not necessarily faithful to his original intention, it is one sign that his texts

enjoyed a place of honor among his followers—an attitude embodied in the fictitious character of Droserius in Adamantius's *Dialogue on the True Faith in God*.

Another noteworthy point in the heterodox's address in Methodius is that his argument is divided into two phases. What is striking is that, in the second stage, he modifies his earlier conclusion. The two phases may reflect two different levels of Valentinian instruction. As I shall point out in chapter 12, esoteric teaching reserved for advanced students was sometimes dramatically different from what was taught to novices at an introductory level.

Finally, the heterodox's address in Methodius seems to provide us with a "missing link" between Valentinus's emphasis on the cosmic harmony and the more dualistic tendencies in the cosmogonies of his followers. The heterodox in Methodius argued that evil goes back to *hyle*, which set a limit on God's creative work. This argument seems to leave no room for a more complex myth of Wisdom's fall or for the distinction between two gods. The absence of these features in both the heterodox's address and the fragments of Valentinus suggest that they are later developments in Valentinian theology. Valentinus probably knew both ideas, since he was familiar with the *Apocryphon of John* or other Sethian traditions, but it seems that he did not adopt them.

The heterodox's argument in Methodius, however, suggests that admiration of the cosmic beauty was not sufficient alone. It would be naïve to assume that there is no evil in the world, though it seems beautiful and reasonably organized. Hence the need for a plausible theory for the origin of evil. Plausibility, in turn, is dependent on the accepted truths, values, and tastes in a given culture. This explains the heterodox's attempt to resolve the dilemma with recourse to Platonic philosophy. The quotation from the *Iliad*, references to pagan mythology, and allusions to Plato's *Timaeus* in the heterodox's address suggest that his explanation was developed to meet the expectations of educated early Christians. In some sense, it probably did so. An echo of the heterodox's theory of the evil remnant of *hyle* in Methodius can be heard in the Valentinian opinion attested elsewhere, that *hyle* is "bad."<sup>108</sup> Moreover, if the heterodox's address is based upon Valentinus's own views, as I suggested above, there must have been people who still knew and circulated them toward the end of the third century.<sup>109</sup>

However, this theory of *hyle* did not appear convincing to all early Christians, and not even to all Valentinians. The heterodox's *ad hominem* argument—that evil becomes visible in what humans do—made his view

open to the criticism voiced by “the Orthodox” in Methodius. He claimed that the only source of the evil, which humans do to each other, is free will, which God bestowed upon them.

The idea of the preexistent *hyle* also proved problematic. Although it was the well-established scientific truth, which a number of prominent Christians accepted in the second century, there were other early Christians who had difficulties with the theory of another eternal principle beside God. Not only did “the Orthodox” in Methodius reject this part of the Valentinian’s theory, but, in the beginning of the third century, Tertullian attacked Hermogenes, whose opinion of God and *hyle* was in many respects similar to that of the heterodox speaker in Methodius.<sup>110</sup> Neither did most Valentinians accept the idea of the preexistent *hyle*, but were at pains to show that *hyle* has an origin and an end; they argued that *hyle* emerged as a byproduct of the fall of Wisdom. This more complex theory can be understood as an attempt at resolving problems posed by the heterodox’s theory of the origin of evil in Methodius. The most burning dilemma this theory raises is whether the good God, who created the world, is omnipotent or not.<sup>111</sup> According to this theory, God’s creation not only resulted in a well-ordered cosmos, but his work with *hyle* also led, though indirectly, to the emergence of evil, which now becomes visible in the wrongdoings of humans. Thus this theory not only brings the good God suspiciously close to *hyle* and the evil inherent in it,<sup>112</sup> but it also implies that God was unable to prevent this evil. In other words, God does not seem to have complete sovereignty over creation.

This implication was doubtless a snag in the heterodox’s theory described in Methodius.<sup>113</sup> Thus, if this theory goes back to Valentinus, there was an obvious demand for a modification of his view. The theory of two gods helped other Valentinians distance the truly good God from *hyle* once and for all. Like Marcion,<sup>114</sup> these Valentinians argued that it was not the supreme God but an inferior Creator-God who worked with this dubious substance.

Ptolemaeus’s *Letter to Flora*, which I discuss in the following chapter, represents what I consider the next stage in the trajectory leading from Valentinus’s teaching to a full-blown Valentinian myth. While the heterodox described in Methodius’s *On Free Will* argues that evil was an unintentional byproduct of the highest God’s work at creation, Ptolemaeus applies a similar explanation to the inferior Creator-God. Despite having the best of intentions, this God was unable to prevent evil, and it is precisely this shortcoming that proves that he is neither good nor the highest God.

## PART II

### ◆ VALENTINIAN COSMOGONY, ◆ LIFESTYLE, AND OTHER CHRISTIANS



## MYTH AND LIFESTYLE FOR BEGINNERS

THE ONLY surviving firsthand document of Ptolemaeus, one of the most renowned Valentinian teachers, is a didactic treatise usually called his *Letter to Flora*.<sup>1</sup> With this text, Ptolemaeus seeks to convince Flora, the addressee, that there exists, in addition to the Father of All, an inferior Creator-God (Demiurge) whose character becomes visible in the biblical law.

Ptolemaeus's treatise must have enjoyed a remarkable popularity among early Christians in late antiquity. The text survives as quoted in Epiphanius's antiheretical compendium *Panarion*, which was written about two hundred years after Ptolemaeus composed his *Letter to Flora*. The mere fact that Epiphanius still had access to this text shows that it was in circulation for a considerable period of time. This suggests that there were people who found Ptolemaeus's views so compelling that they wanted to preserve and promote the text by making or ordering new copies of it.

Ptolemaeus's treatise offers a unique glimpse of the educational strategy of Valentinian teachers. His text concludes with a promise of more advanced teaching, if the addressee proves "worthy of the apostolic tradition."<sup>2</sup> The text, thus, is presented as an introductory treatise that needs to be complemented with additional teaching. This shows that Ptolemaeus adapted his instruction to a student's stage of development.

Another noteworthy aspect of Ptolemaeus's educational strategy is his outspoken concern with a Christian way of life. His text bears witness to the intrinsic connection between philosophical (or "theological," or "mythical," if you like) discourse and lifestyle that was characteristic of both of ancient

philosophers and of early Christian teachers.<sup>3</sup> Ptolemaeus is not only occupied with demonstrating the right opinion about the Creator-God; he also offers moral instruction to which he no doubt expects his addressee to adhere. The ethical aspect is prominent in the allegorical interpretation Ptolemaeus offers on the cultic laws in the Hebrew Bible. Contrary to what one may expect, this interpretation is not connected with any kind of heterodox (“Gnostic”) theology but with moral instruction that is very similar to what we find in other Christian sources. This instruction makes the allegorical interpretation in Ptolemaeus’s treatise strikingly different from the sample of Valentinian allegorical exegesis in Irenaeus.<sup>4</sup>

Ptolemaeus’s text is significant also because it bears witness to a competition among early Christian groups in the second century. Ptolemaeus is apparently well aware of other contemporary positions about the biblical law and engages himself in a discussion with these positions. His treatise shows a specific affinity with the teachings of Marcion. Whereas scholars usually interpret Ptolemaeus’s argumentation as an attack against Marcion and his followers,<sup>5</sup> I believe a more nuanced assessment of his relationship to Marcionite theology is needed. Ptolemaeus’s own position that the Creator-God is neither the supreme God (as some people claim) nor the devil (as other people claim), and the arguments he offers in support of this position, are, in fact, very close to those of Marcion.

Yet another issue that needs to be reconsidered is the question of what Ptolemaeus wanted to achieve with his treatise. The usual explanation is that he attempted to dupe an orthodox Christian woman into Gnostic heresy, the hidden agenda of which was to be revealed to her at a later stage. The “hidden agenda,” according to this interpretation, is the Valentinian doctrine described by Irenaeus in *Against Heresies* 1.1–7,<sup>6</sup> often identified as the “system” of Ptolemaeus.

This approach to Ptolemaeus’s treatise seems utterly problematic to me. Not only does it give priority to the secondhand information derived from Irenaeus over the firsthand information on Ptolemaeus’s views, but it also perpetuates old prejudices derived from the early anti-Valentinian polemicists such as Tertullian, who complained: “They do not even reveal their secrets to their own disciples before they make them of their own, but instead they have a trick by which they persuade them before they teach.”<sup>7</sup> Similar complaints were issued already earlier by Irenaeus,<sup>8</sup> upon whom Tertullian depends in his portrayal of Valentinians. However, Valentinians were probably less secretive about their teaching than Irenaeus and Tertullian want us to believe. Irenaeus himself says that he was able to gather

information on their teachings by conversing with them and that he also had access to their texts.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, to be quite precise, Irenaeus does not attribute the Valentinian theology presented in his work to Ptolemaeus, but to Ptolemaeus's followers.<sup>10</sup> In addition, neither Ptolemaeus's views about the Creator-God nor his allegorical interpretation of the Hebrew Bible are entirely compatible with what Irenaeus says about the teaching of Ptolemaeus's followers.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, the Valentinian teaching referred to in Irenaeus's *Against Heresies* 1.1–7 cannot be identified with Ptolemaeus's "hidden" teaching.

It is, rather, advisable to interpret Ptolemaeus's *Letter to Flora* without trying to read too much developed Valentinian mythology into it.<sup>12</sup> It is true that the subsequent teaching promised by Ptolemaeus deals with the question of how "other kinds of natures, the destructive one and that in the middle" evolved from the Father of the All, who is incorruptible and good.<sup>13</sup> It is possible that Ptolemaeus planned to answer this question by introducing a cosmogonic myth similar to what we have in Irenaeus. However, it cannot be known with certainty whether this was Ptolemaeus's plan, and if it was, we cannot be sure whether the myth he had in mind was identical with what we now find in Irenaeus. It is, therefore, better to refrain from too much guesswork on this issue and concentrate on the text itself.

What makes Ptolemaeus an especially interesting figure is that Justin the Martyr, in his *2 Apology* (possibly written in 152), mentions a Christian teacher called Ptolemaeus, who was put to death in Rome under the prefect Urbicus (144–160). If this Ptolemaeus is identical with the Valentinian Ptolemaeus—an issue subject to debate among scholars—Justin's work supplies us with additional information relevant for the interpretation of Ptolemaeus's text.<sup>14</sup>

### PTOLEMAEUS'S ARGUMENT

Ptolemaeus's treatise stands out in ancient Christian literature because of its unusual clarity. The text was obviously composed with great care. Its arrangement follows the classical Greco-Roman rhetorical tradition of the composition of public speech (see table 5.1). It can be inferred from the careful composition of Ptolemaeus's text that it was written to be persuasive. It can also be assumed that the text was addressed to an audience that had high expectations not only as to *what* was argued but also as to *how* the argument should be built to carry conviction.

TABLE 5.1 Arrangement of Public Speech in Antiquity and in Ptolemaeus's *Letter to Flora*

Arrangement in Greco-Roman public speech <sup>1</sup>	Ptolemaeus's <i>Letter to Flora</i>
1. Introduction ( <i>prooimion/exordium</i> )	Introduction (33.3.1): The topic of the treatise
2. Narration (of the course of events) ( <i>diēgēsis/narratio</i> )	Narration (33.3.2–7): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• two opposite views of the law in the Hebrew Bible (33.3.2)</li> <li>• a brief refutation of both views (33.3.3–6)</li> <li>• conclusion (33.3.7)</li> </ul>
3. Specification of the topic ( <i>prothesis/divisio</i> )	Specification of the topic and of the arguments (33.3.8): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Two questions discussed in the treatise: (a) Of what kind is the law? (b) Who gave this law?</li> <li>• Description of the arguments: “We will demonstrate our claims with the words of the Savior.”</li> </ul>
4. Argumentation ( <i>pistis/argumentatio</i> )	Argumentation (33.4.1–2) <p>(1) Of what kind is the law?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Statement #1: <i>The law in the Hebrew Bible contains not only the divine law, but also human additions</i> (33.4.1–2)</li> <li>• Demonstration (<i>pistōsis/confirmatio</i>) (33.4.3–13)</li> <li>• Conclusion (33.4.14)</li> </ul> <p>Statement #2: <i>God's own law is divided into three parts</i> (33.5.1–2)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstration (33.5.3–13)</li> </ul> <p>(2) Who gave the divine part of the biblical law?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summary of the preceding section (33.7.1)</li> <li>• Statement #3 and demonstration: <i>The divine part of the law was given by an inferior Creator-God</i> (33.7.2–7)</li> </ul>
5. Conclusion ( <i>epilogos/conclusio</i> )	Conclusion (33.7.8–10) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Announcement of the subsequent topic</li> <li>• Concluding words</li> </ul>

1. For this scheme, see Christine Walde, “Rhetoric (I–V),” *Der Neue Pauly* 10.958–978 (971–972). Walde's scheme is a scholarly construct based upon a number of ancient rhetorical handbooks rather than a fixed model that would have been followed in all individual speeches or taught in exactly this form in all handbooks.

Ptolemaeus's treatise begins with a *narratio*, in which two opposite views of the biblical law are briefly described and refuted:

Some claim that the God and the Father passed [the Law of Moses]. Others, however, take the opposite course and obstinately maintain that it was issued by the devil, the destructive adversary. This also means that they ascribe the creation of the world to him, claiming that this one is the Father and the maker of the all. They stutter in every possible way and contend in singing with each other. Both parties, even among themselves, completely miss the truth that lies in front of them.<sup>15</sup>

In introducing the “state of the question,” Ptolemaeus employs the well-known rhetorical technique of *diairesis*, in which “several possibilities are listed and all but one eliminated.”<sup>16</sup> The position Ptolemaeus argues for is that the biblical law—or parts of it, as will turn out later—was given by the Creator-God, who is neither identical with the Father of All nor with the devil. Moreover, Ptolemaeus infers from the biblical law that the Creator-God, who gave this law, can be neither good, like the supreme God, nor evil, like the devil, but just (*dikaios*).<sup>17</sup> Unlike most early Christian theologians, Ptolemaeus therefore makes a distinction between “just” and “good,” regarding the former as an inferior quality.

To prove his point, Ptolemaeus engages in a subtle analysis of the biblical law, in which he shows good command of other contemporary positions (for a comparison, see the section “Analogies to Ptolemaeus's Opinions About the Law,” below). The first step in his argument is the removal of the human additions from the biblical law. Ptolemaeus traces two kinds of human additions, those stemming from Moses and those derived from the elders. As evidence for the additions made by Moses, Ptolemaeus adduces Jesus's teaching, in which the command not to divorce, based upon Genesis 2:23–24, is opposed to Moses's legislation that permits divorce (Matthew 19:3–9). From this opposition, Ptolemaeus infers that the biblical law contains Moses's additions contradicting God's will.<sup>18</sup>

Ptolemaeus does not, however, denounce Moses, but describes him as being between the rock and the hard place: Moses permitted divorce as a concession “because of the weakness of those who were supposed to follow the law.” Ptolemaeus's interpretation is based upon Jesus's words, putting the blame for Moses's command on the hard-heartedness of the Pharisees as representatives of Israel: “It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives” (Matt. 19:8, NRSV). Ptolemaeus explains this position by saying that living together reluctantly would lead

to a greater damage than would divorce. In other words, although Moses's ordinance was against the divine will, its intention was good: this ordinance was needed to prevent "a total destruction."<sup>19</sup>

As for the additions made to the law by the elders, Ptolemaeus calls upon Jesus's teaching that "the tradition of the elders" should not be used as an excuse not to obey the commandment "Honor your father and your mother," as Jesus claims Pharisees and scribes did (Matt. 15:1–9).<sup>20</sup> This argument may not seem persuasive since—as Epiphanius pointed out with undisguised *schadenfreude*—"the tradition of the elders" referred to in this passage does not appear in the Hebrew Bible. Ptolemaeus's interpretation, however, was hardly completely misguided. He probably took Jesus's words as referring to the oral law, which, according to Jewish tradition, was given at Sinai simultaneously with the written Torah and was transmitted to the people of Israel by the elders.

It is indeed striking that Ptolemaeus engages in this discussion related to the oral Torah, since it is not particularly important for his case. Given that his purpose was to demonstrate that there are human additions to the law, it would have sufficed for him to show that the biblical law contains Moses's legislation. A reference to the traditions of the elders is important, however, if Ptolemaeus needed to convince his addressee(s) about his *expertise* as regards contemporary theories about the biblical law.

The second step in Ptolemaeus's argument is the claim that the remaining divine part of the biblical law, purified from human additions, is not entirely perfect either. Ptolemaeus separates the divine law in the Hebrew Bible into three parts, which are (1) the Ten Commandments, "written on two tablets," representing "the pure legislation"; (2) "the laws interwoven with injustice," that is, laws based upon retaliation; and (3) cultic laws. According to Ptolemaeus, the Savior fulfilled the Ten Commandments (by making them perfect) and abolished the laws based upon retaliation. Moreover, the Savior showed that the cultic laws should no longer be understood literally but "spiritually"—as moral guidance of conduct intended for Christians. Now that the "bodily" observance of the cultic laws has come to an end, their "spiritual" meaning for Christians has become apparent.<sup>21</sup>

Ptolemaeus's "spiritual" interpretation of the cultic laws is entirely pragmatic. In his view, the cultic laws correctly understood give instruction about the right Christian way of life. Instead of sacrificing animals, Christians are expected to offer "spiritual sacrifices," which include praise to God, fellowship (*koinōnia*) with other people, and beneficence (*eupoiia*). Moreover, Ptolemaeus contends that circumcision does not mean fleshly circumcision but the circumcision of the heart and that the Sabbath is observed by avoiding evil deeds.

Ptolemaeus applies the latter interpretation to fasting as well: spiritual fasting means abstaining from evil deeds. Nevertheless, Ptolemaeus mentions in this connection that there are “some among us” who practice “visible” fasting. Visible fasting can be beneficial for the soul, Ptolemaeus says, if it is not practiced only because of convention. Visible fasting is advantageous for those who are not yet able to observe the spiritual fast.<sup>22</sup> This argument implies that visible fasting is no longer necessary for those who have correctly understood the spiritual meaning of fasting. Ptolemaeus’s spiritual interpretation of the cultic laws, however, does not mean a lax moral attitude, for which anti-Valentinian authors blamed Valentinian “spiritual” Christians.

It is “the laws interwoven with injustice” that form the most significant proof for Ptolemaeus’s contention that the god described in the Hebrew Bible is not perfect. According to Ptolemaeus, the law that demands “to take an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth and to revenge murder with murder” is incompatible with “the nature and goodness of the Father of the All.”<sup>23</sup> Ptolemaeus had already argued that Moses permitted divorce because of the weakness of those observing the law and in order to prevent greater damage. Now Ptolemaeus repeats the same argument in connection with the divine legislation based upon the principle of retaliation. He contends that this part of the divine law was necessary because of the weakness of those who were supposed to observe the law, that is, the Jews, and that the good intention of these laws was to prevent greater evil.

What makes the laws based upon vengeance problematic, however, is that they contradict the divine commandment “You shall not kill” in the decalogue. In addition, despite their good intentions, these laws increase evil. For if a murder is punished with death as the biblical law orders, Ptolemaeus argues, the same unjust act that was committed is repeated with the result that there are ultimately two murders instead of one. Thus, the one who seeks revenge for an offence acts as wrongly as the offender. Hence Ptolemaeus concludes that the god who issued the law permitting revenge cannot be perfect. Although the intention of this law is to prohibit evil, its consequence is an increase of evil.

For Ptolemaeus, the contradiction created by the *lex talionis* shows that the god who gave it was “fooled by necessity.” He “did not notice” the incongruity between the law’s intention and its factual consequences.<sup>24</sup> However, because of its good intention and because it “destroys injustice,”<sup>25</sup> this law cannot be satanic. Therefore, Ptolemaeus concludes, the divine law in the Bible goes back to the Creator-God, who is righteous—but not good.

Ptolemaeus qualifies the righteousness of the Creator-God in a way that makes this god a being between the good God and the devil. According to

Ptolemaeus, the Creator-God's justice is that of a judge.<sup>26</sup> The justice peculiar to this god is also "minor" because he is born, not unborn like the Father of All. On the other hand, the Creator-God is the image of the Father and more powerful than the devil.<sup>27</sup> Ptolemaeus also enumerates other positive features of the Creator-God: he hates evil and does not cause destruction. Those who attribute the origin of the world to the devil have not understood the *providence* of this god, Ptolemaeus argues.<sup>28</sup>

Ptolemaeus also makes a quite extraordinary statement that, although Jesus abolished the inferior part of the Creator-God's law, Jesus adapted his proclamation to what Ptolemaeus calls "the old opinion" (*hairesis*). This view is based upon the observation that even Jesus accepted the biblical law involving vengeance: "God said: 'The one who despises father or mother must certainly die.'"<sup>29</sup> Quispel suggests that Ptolemaeus refers here to the Christ of the Creator-God, but this cannot be the case.<sup>30</sup> Some Valentinian sources do indeed bear witness to the idea that the Creator-God created his own Christ, but this idea is incompatible with Ptolemaeus's argument.<sup>31</sup> For him, it is obviously the same Son who abolished the inferior part of the law who also accepted vengeance in this one particular case. It seems that Ptolemaeus found the argument based upon making concessions so persuasive that he employed it even in describing the Son of the supreme God. This opinion of the Son also creates an intriguing parallel between Ptolemaeus's educational strategy and the Son's teaching: the Son, too, adapts his teaching to the abilities of his audience.<sup>32</sup>

Although Ptolemaeus regards the Creator-God as "the maker of the whole world," he attributes the origin of all things to the ungenerated Father.<sup>33</sup> This naturally raises the question of the relationship between the two deities and their roles in the creation. This issue, however, is not dealt with in the *Letter to Flora*. It may be that it was supposed to be discussed in the subsequent teaching Ptolemaeus promised to Flora at the end of his letter, but whether this next step was ever taken, and, if it was, what its contents were, is not known to us.

#### BACKGROUND: ANALOGIES TO PTOLEMAEUS'S OPINIONS ABOUT THE LAW

Although Ptolemaeus underlines the importance of the Savior's words as proofs for his argumentation, his interpretation about the biblical law was not only based upon them. Ptolemaeus was obviously aware of, and builds upon, other Jewish and Christian theories about the law.

Those wanting to expose Ptolemaeus's "hidden agenda" argue that his interpretation implies a more complicated Valentinian teaching about the

Hebrew Bible.<sup>34</sup> Irenaeus relates that Ptolemaeus's followers divided scripture into three parts: "one portion they hold was spoken by the mother, another by the offspring, and still another by the Creator-God."<sup>35</sup> In other words, the Hebrew Bible contains teachings of (1) the Wisdom outside the divine realm (the mother), (2) the spiritual beings ("the offspring"), and (3) "psychic" teaching stemming from the Creator-God. These Valentinians applied the same tripartite division even to the words of Jesus; the only difference was that the part stemming from the spiritual offspring in the Hebrew Bible is replaced by the prophecies stemming from the Savior.

Nevertheless, these Valentinian views do not offer any close parallels to what Ptolemaeus says in the *Letter to Flora*. For example, in his account of Valentinian views about the Hebrew Bible, Irenaeus says nothing about a theory of human additions to the law, which is of crucial importance to Ptolemaeus's argument. In fact, Irenaeus does not mention any specific Valentinian theory about biblical law. Had Irenaeus known Ptolemaeus's discussion about this issue, he would probably have written this part of his account in more detail. Thus the information provided by Irenaeus is far less useful in disclosing Ptolemaeus's "hidden agenda" than scholars have assumed.<sup>36</sup>

Closer analogies to Ptolemaeus's teaching about the law can be found in other sources. Francis Fallon has pointed out that certain aspects in Ptolemaeus's argumentation are very similar to that of Philo.<sup>37</sup> Like Ptolemaeus, Philo divided the law into three parts. According to him, only some of the ordinances in biblical law stem directly from God. Another part of the law consists of God's answers to Moses's questions, and yet another part stems from Moses himself.<sup>38</sup> Philo, however, did not use this tripartite division to separate the genuine divine legislation from human additions, as Ptolemaeus did. For Philo, the entire law is perfect; the reliability of the laws given by Moses is secured by his divine gift of foreknowledge.<sup>39</sup>

In addition, both Philo and Ptolemaeus dissociate the supreme God from the punishments ordered in the Hebrew Bible. Philo held it as a special sign of God's goodness that no punishments are mentioned in the decalogue.<sup>40</sup> According to Philo, the good God cannot carry out punishments. Therefore, God assigned the task of punishing evildoers to inferior divine beings.<sup>41</sup> Ptolemaeus's distinction between the inferior god, who promulgated *lex talionis*, and the supreme god is based upon a similar premise: vengeance is not compatible with the goodness of the Father of All.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, Ptolemaeus's conclusion that there are two gods is clearly different from Philo's distinction between the good God and punitive angels.

There are also close early Christian parallels to Ptolemaeus's analysis of the law. Justin the Martyr, too, divided the law into three parts. According

to him, one part of the law was given to ensure pious conduct, another part because of Christ, and yet another because of the hard-heartedness of the Jews.<sup>43</sup> Both Justin and Ptolemaeus probably derived this argument directly from the gospel tradition. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy how eagerly each of them picked up an argument that helped develop a supersessionist Christian attitude toward the Jews. The discussion of the law was apparently part of the Christian boundary drawing against Judaism.

Further analogies strengthen the impression that Ptolemaeus was engaged in an intra-Christian debate regarding the origin of the law. The theory of human additions to the law occurs frequently in the Jewish-Christian *Homilies* secondarily attributed to Clement of Rome (thus the usual designation “pseudo-Clementine” for this text).<sup>44</sup> This text states that the biblical law contains flaws because the way it was transmitted was defective. The Jewish tradition that “Moses delivered the law of God orally to seventy wise men” is sustained in this text.<sup>45</sup> A critical moment, however, was when the oral law was written down. It was during that process that “some false pericopes intruded” into the law.<sup>46</sup> This theory was an attempt to resolve some “scriptural chestnuts,” that is, passages in the Hebrew Bible that, for one reason or another, were discussed time and time again.<sup>47</sup>

The author of the *Homilies* used this theory to explain away not only God’s ambiguous features in the Hebrew Bible,<sup>48</sup> but also those of the righteous ones. It was inconceivable to this author that Adam was a transgressor, that Noah would have been drunken, that Abraham and Jacob were polygamists, or that Moses was a murderer and associated with an Egyptian priest.<sup>49</sup> The negative features attached to these key figures of the Hebrew Bible were obviously a vexing problem that needed a radical remedy: if the Jewish Christians behind the pseudo-Clementine texts censored all aforementioned dubious features of the characters in the Hebrew Bible, they must have considered a really large number of passages of it as human additions.

In the *Homilies*, as in Ptolemaeus’s text, the distinction between better and worse parts of the law is based upon the words of Jesus:<sup>50</sup> “And in saying: I am not come to destroy the law, and yet destroying something, he indicated that what will be destroyed had not belonged originally to the law.”<sup>51</sup> Moreover, we find in the *Homilies* the same anti-Jewish sentiment as in Ptolemaeus and Justin: some laws were ordained by Moses because of the hard-heartedness of the Jews. In the *Homilies*, too, this claim is backed up with Jesus’s teaching on divorce (“Moses gave you commandments according to your hard-heartedness, for from the beginning it was not so”), as it was in Ptolemaeus’s treatise.<sup>52</sup>

Ptolemaeus and the *Homilies* differ from each other in their assessments of what should be inferred from the belief that Christ abolished some parts of the law. In the *Homilies*, this is proof of the “false pericopes” in the law that needed to be abrogated. Ptolemaeus drew just the opposite conclusion: the fact that Christ needed to abolish some parts of the law shows the divine origin of these parts. In addition, Ptolemaeus’s attitude toward the human additions to the law seems more moderate than that in the *Homilies*. Ptolemaeus never repudiated these passages as “false pericopes” but instead voiced sympathy for Moses’s intentions behind these additions.

The fact that there were early Christians who wanted to remove ambiguous passages from the Hebrew Bible explains why Ptolemaeus felt it necessary to devote more attention to the issue of human additions than his own argument would have required. The Jewish-Christian position expounded in the *Homilies* is that all incongruities and offensive features in the Hebrew Bible are due to the corruption of the scripture caused by human additions. In consequence, once these additions are removed, the remaining divine part of the law is perfect. Ptolemaeus obviously disagreed with this solution. Against this background, Ptolemaeus’s discussion of the traditions of the elders, which was otherwise not relevant to his case, becomes reasonable. By referring to the tradition of the elders, he took issue with one current theory he needed to counter to make his own case more compelling. Ptolemaeus admits that the theory of human additions does indeed explain some incongruities in the law but claims that this theory does not solve the whole problem. The divine law purified of human additions (those of Moses and those of the elders) still remains incongruous.

In sum, it seems that Ptolemaeus felt it necessary to be very specific as to what the theory of human additions explains and what it does not explain. This strategy indicates that the implied reader of his treatise was not a novice with little learning, but someone familiar with other Jewish and early Christian theories about biblical law and who expected Ptolemaeus to evaluate them.

### CONTEXT: PTOLEMAEUS VERSUS MARCION

In his edition of Ptolemaeus’s text, Quispel suggested that, when speaking of those who attribute the law to the devil, Ptolemaeus is referring to Marcion and his disciples.<sup>53</sup> What makes this suggestion problematic is that Marcion did not ascribe the law or the creation of the world to the devil, but to the Creator-God. Marcion did not describe this god as “evil” (*kakos*), but only as “imperfect” or “wretched” (*ponēros*).<sup>54</sup> Therefore, Quispel had to

assume that "Ptolemaeus has expressed the opinion of the great heretic in a very inexact manner," offering "an erroneous simplification . . . that Marcion regarded Yahweh as the origin of evil."<sup>55</sup> Given that Ptolemaeus obviously knew the topic about which he is writing, this explanation does not seem very compelling. I am more inclined to agree with another position, also maintained by Quispel, that "Ptolemaeus more or less accepted Marcion's conception."<sup>56</sup> A comparison between the views of Ptolemaeus and Marcion indicates that Ptolemaeus knew well Marcion's teaching about the Creator-God and made use of it in his own argument.

(1) The distinction between a good god and a just god, employed by Ptolemaeus throughout his treatise,<sup>57</sup> is a characteristic feature of Marcionite theology.<sup>58</sup> This distinction can be traced to Cerdo, Marcion's teacher,<sup>59</sup> and it is also attributed to Marcion's followers.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, the suggestion that Marcion himself did not draw the distinction between "just" and "good" does not seem very probable.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, while Ptolemaeus clearly distinguished between "just" and "evil," Marcion and his followers made no clear distinction between these two qualities. For Marcion, the god of the Hebrew Bible was "the maker of bad things and evil,"<sup>62</sup> and his followers argued that nature is evil since the just Creator-God created it from evil matter.<sup>63</sup> In Hippolytus's account of Marcionite theology, Marcion is recorded as having distinguished between a good god and an evil Creator-God.<sup>64</sup>

(2) In accordance with Marcion, Ptolemaeus emphasized the *negative* aspect of the justice peculiar to the inferior god; this justice was "the justice of a judge."<sup>65</sup> Marcion distinguished between the God described in the Hebrew Bible, who judges, and the other god proclaimed by Jesus, who saves.<sup>66</sup> Marcion, however, was much more outspoken than Ptolemaeus in describing the negative connotations inherent in the analogy between a judge and the Creator-God.<sup>67</sup> Marcion portrayed the Creator-God as "a judge, fierce and warlike," opposed to the superior God who is "mild and peaceable, solely kind and supremely good."<sup>68</sup>

(3) Like Ptolemaeus, Marcion emphasized that the god in the Hebrew Bible often contradicts himself.<sup>69</sup>

(4) Ptolemaeus's interpretive method is similar to Marcion's. In a semblance of what Marcion did in his *Antitheses*, Ptolemaeus contrasts Jesus' teaching with the law in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>70</sup> The first instance of this manner of argumentation is Ptolemaeus's discussion of divorce, allowed by Moses but prohibited by God. Marcion used the same argument to show how the Hebrew Bible and Christ's proclamation contradict each other.<sup>71</sup> The

second example is Ptolemaeus's way of pitting the *lex talionis* in the Hebrew Bible and Jesus's teaching that one should not resist evil against each other,<sup>72</sup> something which we also find attested for Marcion.<sup>73</sup>

(5) Despite emphasizing the contradiction between biblical law and the teaching of Jesus, neither Marcion nor Ptolemaeus denounced the law altogether. For Marcion, the law of the Creator-God was neither good nor evil, but just.<sup>74</sup> Like Ptolemaeus, Marcion seems to have accepted the ethical value of the law as preventing evil and sin, though Marcion denied the law's religious value.<sup>75</sup> This theory accounts for the fact that, in his radically abridged edition of Paul's letters, Marcion left some positive statements about the biblical law untouched. One of these statements was Romans 7:12 (NRSV: "So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good"), which Ptolemaeus quotes as testifying to the pure part of the divine legislation.<sup>76</sup>

Although Ptolemaeus makes use of a number of distinctly Marcionite arguments, he does not simply reproduce Marcion's theology; he draws a theological profile of his own. Much of what Ptolemaeus says makes him look like a moderate Marcionite.<sup>77</sup> He obviously found some important elements of Marcion's theology, such as the distinction between a good god and a just god, useful for his own position, but his other comments show that he avoids the most radical aspects of Marcion's teaching. It was already pointed out that Ptolemaeus expressed the idea of the Creator-God as a judge in less negative terms than Marcion. In addition, Ptolemaeus's use of scripture shows that he did not accept the Marcionite canon, which included only an abridged version of the Gospel of Luke and a number of Paul's letters. In referring to the words of the Savior, Ptolemaeus regularly employs the Gospel of Matthew.<sup>78</sup> Ptolemaeus also refers to Paul's epistle to the Ephesians, which was not included in Marcion's canon.<sup>79</sup> While Marcion only saw evidence for the Creator-God's thirst for blood in the ritual laws of the Hebrew Bible, Ptolemaeus interpreted them spiritually, as instruction in the Christian way of life.<sup>80</sup> Moderation in comparison to Marcion's teachings also becomes visible in Ptolemaeus's discussion about marriage and divorce, which in no way indicates that he regarded marriage itself as impure, as Marcion is said to have done.<sup>81</sup>

If viewed from the doctrinal mode of explanation, this all seems as if Ptolemaeus tried to swing the pendulum back from Marcion's radical views to a more conventional Christian position.<sup>82</sup> However, what probably was more significant in the historical context was Ptolemaeus's ability to demonstrate to his addressee that he had a position of his own in the middle of

early Christian views about the Hebrew Bible and that he was capable of arguing persuasively for this particular position.

### THE ADDRESSEE: A NOBLEWOMAN IN ROME?

Scholars usually say that Flora, the addressee of Ptolemaeus's text, is "possibly . . . a member of the catholic church" who found its doctrine somewhat unsatisfactory,<sup>83</sup> "is a female adherent of ordinary Christianity,"<sup>84</sup> or is simply designated as "a church Christian."<sup>85</sup> However, these designations are problematic for several reasons. First, as I mentioned above, they recycle ancient prejudices against Valentinians hiding their "true" teaching from outsiders. Second, while it is clear that Ptolemaeus's text was written for a novice needing further instruction, it is not clear that this text is "exoteric," that is, intended for outsiders. At the beginning of the text, Ptolemaeus addresses Flora as "my honorable sister" (*adelphē mou kalē Phlōra*).<sup>86</sup> The same designation is repeated in the closure of the text ("my sister Flora," *ō adelphē mou Phlōra*).<sup>87</sup> The way Ptolemaeus addresses Flora shows that he approaches her as a member of an *in-group*. He employs fictive sibling terminology, which was used to express membership in different kinds of associations throughout the Roman Empire, from mysteries to guilds of athletes. Members of such groups often called each other "brothers" and "sisters."<sup>88</sup> Another form of familial language employed in the associations was paternal language: the leaders or benefactors of these groups were often called "mothers" and "fathers."<sup>89</sup> The fact that Ptolemaeus prefers sibling terminology to parent-child language<sup>90</sup> shows that he approaches Flora as a fellow initiate rather than from the stance of the leader of the group to which she belongs.

Another noteworthy element in the opening of Ptolemaeus's text is the designation "honorable" (*kalē*). I find it unlikely that Ptolemaeus wanted to say "my beautiful Flora,"<sup>91</sup> although the adjective could be understood in this sense. The adjective *kalos* is used to mean "noble" and "honorable" both in a moral sense and, as a status indicator, for those of higher rank.<sup>92</sup> This brings us to the evidence in Justin, which possibly relates to Ptolemaeus. In his *Second Apology*, Justin mentions an early Christian called Ptolemaeus, who was the teacher of a Roman woman. After her conversion to Christianity, she left her husband because of his debauchery. The husband first filed a complaint against her, and when this proved unsuccessful, he then denounced Ptolemaeus, who was arrested and finally executed because he confessed to being a Christian. Justin describes this Ptolemaeus as "a lover of truth," who with his martyrdom proved to be a "true Christian."<sup>93</sup>

It cannot be said with certainty whether the Ptolemaeus described by Justin is identical with the Valentinian Ptolemaeus. The fact that Justin condemned Valentinians in his later work *Dialogue with Trypho* seems to speak against this identification.<sup>94</sup> On the positive side, however, Justin's description of Ptolemaeus the martyr corresponds to the evidence offered by Ptolemaeus's *Letter to Flora*. Justin's Ptolemaeus was a teacher of a female convert to Christianity who was faced with the difficult decision of whether to divorce her husband or not. The Valentinian Ptolemaeus, in turn, wrote a letter of instruction, which was addressed to a woman and in which biblical legislation on divorce was given significant prominence by being singled out as an example of how human traditions are mixed with divine commands in the law. Ptolemaeus argued that even though divorce is not permitted by God, it is in certain conditions a better choice than staying together. This argument fits well the situation described in Justin and supports the possibility that the two Ptolemaeuses were the same person. In addition, the Valentinian Ptolemaeus dwelled on the issue of how vengeance increases evil. This part of his argument would have a much more concrete background if he was the teacher of the noblewoman whose former husband was seeking revenge.

If the two Ptolemaeuses were identical, however, it must be assumed either that when writing his *2 Apology* Justin did not yet know what Valentinians exactly taught (but learned about this only later) or that Justin did not associate this Ptolemaeus with the school of Valentinus. There is also a third possibility: in his *2 Apology*, Justin avoided mentioning Christian factions, since in this text, addressed to the emperor, he no doubt wanted to construct as unified a picture of Christianity as possible, and a reference to Christian groups in rivalry with each other would have damaged that impression.

In addition, even if Justin did not agree with Ptolemaeus's theology, there could have been other reasons that might have caused Justin to include a reference to Ptolemaeus's case in *2 Apology*. First, the woman involved in this case made a successful petition to the emperor against the complaint issued by her husband.<sup>95</sup> This detail is directly related to the purpose of Justin's text: if the emperor accepted that woman's petition, he should also accept Justin's apology for Christians. Second, Ptolemaeus's unwavering refusal to retract his confession to being a Christian and his martyrdom were undeniable signs of bravery of which even outsiders, the emperor included, could approve.<sup>96</sup> Thus, regardless of his opinions, which Justin would certainly not have accepted, Ptolemaeus's *behavior* could be used as an example. In consequence, it seems to me that there are good grounds for assuming that the Ptolemaeus mentioned by Justin is identical with the

Valentinian Ptolemaeus,<sup>97</sup> and Justin's later condemnation of Valentinians does not necessarily disprove this identification.

Given the similarities between the situation described by Justin and that implied in Ptolemaeus's letter, it is also possible that the woman mentioned by Justin was identical with Flora. This identification, although hypothetical, should be kept in mind in interpreting Ptolemaeus's text. The Roman woman described by Justin was doubtless a member of the upper class, since she addressed her petition directly to the emperor and he granted it. Her former husband also had powerful connections: he was a friend of, and exercised influence on, the centurion who arrested and interrogated the woman's Christian teacher.<sup>98</sup> This information corresponds with Ptolemaeus's addressing Flora as "noble" or "honorable."

The scenario described above stands in contrast to the simplistic and chauvinistic reading of Ptolemaeus's treatise as an attempt by a deceitful Gnostic teacher to seduce into heresy an orthodox—but perhaps a bit bored or dissatisfied?—female Christian of little learning. The actual power relationship between Ptolemaeus and Flora may have been just the opposite: with his treatise, Ptolemaeus may have sought to convince his powerful female benefactor of his theological learning as well as of his argumentative and compositional proficiency.<sup>99</sup> In the light of Justin's account, it is possible to assume that Ptolemaeus was Flora's private teacher, whose task was to instruct her in Christian beliefs. Given that patronage was often a prerequisite for the production of texts in antiquity,<sup>100</sup> it is even possible that she commissioned Ptolemaeus to write the introductory study on the Creator-God we now know as his *Letter to Flora*.<sup>101</sup>

Although none of these hypotheses can be proven with absolute certainty, they are within the range of historically plausible options. In fact, all these options exist regardless of whether the Ptolemaeus mentioned by Justin was or was not identical with the Valentinian Ptolemaeus; Justin's account only enables us to see these options with greater clarity.

## CONCLUSION

In my reading of Ptolemaeus's *Letter to Flora*, I have deliberately tried to avoid a doctrinal mode of explanation, which has been characteristic of most previous interpretations of this text, and to position Ptolemaeus more adequately within the context of ancient schools of thought. The doctrinal mode, which goes hand in hand with the rhetorics of orthodoxy and heresy, has been mainly concerned with identifying Ptolemaeus's theological position, which is then portrayed as representing the "Gnostic" stance (vis-à-

vis the orthodox view). In this approach, Ptolemaeus's nuanced discussion about the law in the Hebrew Bible is understood as an attempt to create a *doctrinal* balance between Christian orthodoxy and Valentinian heresy.

The doctrinal explanation becomes most clearly visible in Quispel's claim that Ptolemaeus's treatise was inspired "by the critique of the orthodox" leveled against "the *audacious* theories of Valentinus."<sup>102</sup> Quispel also stated that in Ptolemaeus's treatise "the entire [Valentinian] system has been remodeled with the intention, it seems, of *making it more like* the doctrine of the church."<sup>103</sup> Ptolemaeus's moral instruction, which "does not seem to differ from the view of the Catholic authors," shows, for Quispel, that "Ptolemaeus is capable of appreciating orthodox opinions and expressing himself in *their* language."<sup>104</sup> Following this line of interpretation, Ptolemaeus's moral instruction is not really his own, but something *adopted* from the orthodox side. Although Quispel emphasized that Ptolemaeus is sincere in his treatise, he also maintained that Ptolemaeus deliberately expressed himself unclearly, in a manner that an ordinary Christian could not correctly understand.<sup>105</sup> Finally, the discourse of orthodoxy and heresy is operative in the interpretation that Ptolemaeus composed his didactic letter to entangle orthodox Christians in his coils and planned to reveal his Gnostic teachings to them only later.<sup>106</sup>

In my view, the use of the discourse of orthodoxy and heresy, or that of "ordinary" and "nonordinary" Christians, in interpreting Ptolemaeus's *Letter to Flora* has not only been unfruitful but also misleading. One of its most alarming consequences is that Ptolemaeus's moral exhortation becomes downgraded to lip service paid to the ethical norms of orthodox Christianity. The discourse of orthodoxy and heresy behind the doctrinal explanation also fails to explain Ptolemaeus's affinities with Marcionite theology. Marcion was one of the few people, or perhaps the only one, who was actually expelled from the Roman Christian community in the second century.<sup>107</sup> Thus, if Ptolemaeus's purpose was to win over converts from among "ordinary Christians"—whatever that designation might have meant in the context of second-century Rome—his flirting with the Marcionite position would have been the worst imaginable strategy.

While I do not see Ptolemaeus's treatise as a statement in the battle between orthodoxy and heresy, the text clearly implies a competitive situation among early Christian groups. In order to be persuasive, Ptolemaeus needed to counter certain arguments that we now know from Jewish-Christian sources, even if they were not integral parts of his own argumentation. It is also clear that Ptolemaeus responded to Marcion's views; some of them he rejected, some of them he accepted. Nevertheless, I no longer

see this response as an attempt to swing the pendulum back from Marcion toward the “orthodox” position. Rather, the affinities with, and the differences from, Marcion’s views in Ptolemaeus’s treatise suggest that it was written for the purpose of *differentiation*. Ptolemaeus needed to show to his addressee that he was capable of developing a position of his own, one different from Marcion’s and from the position that, in subsequent centuries, became established as the orthodox view.

In my reading, Flora is no restless orthodox Christian woman seeking fancy new ideas from heterodox teachers either. In fact, it is entirely possible that she was Ptolemaeus’s benefactor and employer. Ptolemaeus’s approach to the problem discussed in his treatise implies that she (and her circle?) already knew the most important Christian, and possibly Jewish, positions of the biblical law and expected from Ptolemaeus a well-argued response to them.

This reading, in which Ptolemaeus is seen in conversation with his audience, rather than as an untrustworthy Gnostic teacher trying to tempt a naïve woman into heresy, helps to explain why Ptolemaeus did not restrict himself to a discussion about an issue that belongs to the realm of myth or theology (the existence of the Creator-God) but included a number of comments related to Christian lifestyle: he not only discussed divorce and nonretaliation as part of his argument, but also gave moral instruction related to *koinōnia*, fasting, and good deeds, and recommended avoidance of wicked acts, anger, lust, and the taking of oaths. In my reading, these references should not be understood as concessions to orthodoxy. Instead, they bear witness to the educational approach common to all ancient schools of thought: theoretical reflection and practical instruction were considered inseparable. Since this approach was well known in antiquity, ethical instruction was something that could be expected from a Christian teacher like Ptolemaeus. Had he not taken up any issues related to lifestyle in his *Letter to Flora*, his original audience would probably have been disappointed and his treatise would not have been as successful as it was.

## MYTH AND THE THERAPY OF EMOTIONS

WHILE IT remains unknown how Ptolemaeus continued his teaching at a more advanced level and what kind of a myth of origin he may have had in mind, it is clear that his followers, like some other Valentinians, developed mythical accounts to explain how the world emerged. A focal point in these accounts is the tale of personified Wisdom (Sophia). It is her ill-advised action in the eternal realm, called Fullness (*plērōma*), that launches a chain reaction leading to the creation of another, deficient world.

Wisdom is introduced in the Valentinian myths of origin as one of the eternal beings (aeons) issuing from the Father of All. As the youngest member of the divine family, dwelling at the greatest distance from the Father, she disrupts the peace of the divine household acting by herself, without having due permission from her consort, Desired, or from the Father. In this way, Wisdom generates imperfection that needs to be removed from the perfect realm of Fullness. From this point on, two stories are intertwined in the Valentinian myth of Wisdom. One is an account of the cosmic consequences of her action. The most important of them is the emergence of the imperfect Creator-God (demiurge), who creates a defective world outside the divine realm. The other story is that of Wisdom herself. The flawed part of her is expelled from the perfect realm; an account of the repentance, conversion, and restitution of this part follows.

Although similar stories of Wisdom's failure can be found in other early Christian sources, my major concern is not to offer a pedigree for these accounts. Valentinians hardly told and elaborated the tale of Wisdom's fall because of an antiquarian interest in preserving the older traditions.

The main question to be discussed in this chapter is: what made the tale of Wisdom so crucial to Valentinians that it is either told or referred to in a number of their texts and reports of their views? Nevertheless, I will include some discussion related to tradition history, since it helps us see how and to what purpose Valentinians modified the Wisdom myth, which was not their invention.

The clearest indication of the pragmatic value of the Wisdom myth is its recapitulation in a Valentinian deathbed ritual called “redemption” (*apolutrōsis*). For those Valentinians who performed this ritual, the Wisdom myth was salvific knowledge. However, the practice of the redemption ritual, to which I return at the end of this chapter, was not common to all Valentinians. Redemption was probably understood and performed as a ritual only in one Valentinian subgroup.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the aspect of ritual is strikingly absent in the Valentinian Wisdom myth itself. Different versions of this story do not betray the slightest concern for the etiology of rituals. For example, Wisdom is not said to have established the redemption ritual (or any other ritual) during her sojourn outside the divine realm, nor do we have references to what might be even remotely regarded as the foundation of any ritual practice (such as Genesis 2:24, which can be understood as giving a mythic justification for the origins of marriage).

While ritual does not occupy any prominent position in the Valentinian myth of Wisdom, this myth contains other features connected to issues that were of vital importance to ancient schools of thought. The tale of Wisdom contains features that elsewhere appear in stories of the soul’s fate, recounting its fall from and return to the place of its origin. Moreover, the Valentinian myth emphasizes Wisdom’s conversion, which corresponds to the demand for conversion in philosophical schools.<sup>2</sup> These features lend a strongly paradigmatic stance to the Valentinian myth of Wisdom. The addressees of this myth were no doubt expected to take seriously the requirement of conversion and recognize the phases of their own spiritual journey in the story of Wisdom’s sufferings outside, and her way back into, the divine realm.

What I find to be the most noteworthy feature in the Valentinian myth of Wisdom is the keen interest shown toward the emotions she experiences during her temporary exile from the divine realm.<sup>3</sup> Her feelings of love, joy, loneliness, and sadness are connected with the key moments of the story. Emotions account for Wisdom’s action in the divine realm, they characterize her sojourn outside the divine realm, and they are presented as forming the basic material from which the world was created. While there is no eti-

ology of rituals in the Valentinian Wisdom myth, it does offer an etiology of emotions.

This aspect of the Valentinian Wisdom myth is significant for two reasons. First, the discussion of Wisdom's emotions is a distinct feature of the Valentinian Wisdom myth; it does not appear in otherwise similar early Christian tales of Wisdom.<sup>4</sup> Second, emotions were discussed with great intensity in ancient schools of philosophy, since the therapy of emotions was perhaps the most important advantage the teachers in these schools promised to their students. In consequence, what I suggest in this chapter is that Valentinian teachers were engaged in the broader discussion about the healing of harmful emotions and that this engagement becomes visible in their interpretations of the myth of Wisdom. 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."<sup>5</sup> 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 VALENTINIAN MYTH OF WISDOM

### Sources

The summaries of the Valentinian doctrine by Irenaeus and Hippolytus supply us with the most informative accounts concerning the emotions of Wisdom. This theme also occurs in Clement's summary of the Valentinian doctrine (*Excerpts from Theodotus*). Wisdom's emotions are also mentioned in the *Valentinian Exposition*. Unfortunately, this text breaks off in the middle of a description of what Jesus created from the emotions (*npa-thos*).<sup>6</sup> Thus the text confirms that Valentinians discussed emotions as part of their cosmogonic myth, but a more effective usage of this source is prevented by its fragmentary condition.

The *Tripartite Tractate* differs from other Valentinian sources insofar as it describes the fall of Word (*logos*) instead of that of Wisdom.<sup>7</sup> Emotions are occasionally mentioned in this text, even though its author is more concerned with the political consequences of the myth than with the analysis of emotions.<sup>8</sup> The all-pervasive "lust for power" is called "desire" (*epithumia*), and the two groups of cosmic powers are identified with "emotions" (*hnpa-thos*). Moreover, therapeutic language is used in connection

with emotions. Passion (*pathos*) is called “sickness” (*šōne*); it is affirmed that those who originate from passion and division need healing (*tlčō*), and the apostles and the evangelists are portrayed as the physicians of the soul who “heal the sick.”<sup>9</sup>

### Wisdom’s Emotions Inside the Divine Realm

The accounts of Irenaeus and Hippolytus are based mainly upon two different versions of Valentinian teaching. In accordance with the conventional usage, I call the main thread of Irenaeus’s account Version A and that of Hippolytus Version B. However, Irenaeus also knew a tradition similar to Version B, and Hippolytus knew Version A from Irenaeus’s work.<sup>10</sup> The mythic discourse expounded in *A Valentinian Exposition* stands close to Version B;<sup>11</sup> this also holds true for the discussion of Wisdom’s emotions in this text.

Both Version A and Version B describe Wisdom as a female being violating the conventional role expectations connected with women. In keeping with the traditional myth,<sup>12</sup> it is told that Wisdom caused a rupture in the divine realm because she acted on her own, without her consort. One of the most striking differences between the two Valentinian versions is related to the reason for Wisdom’s illicit action. According to Version A, she wanted to understand the Father’s greatness;<sup>13</sup> the same reason is given for Word’s action in the *Tripartite Tractate*.<sup>14</sup> Version B, instead, describes Wisdom as trying to imitate the Father by creating something on her own, an explanation we also find in non-Valentinian traditions of Wisdom’s fall.<sup>15</sup>

In Version A, Wisdom’s action is triggered by her emotions: she “experienced a passion (*epathe pathos*) without union with her companion, Desired.”<sup>16</sup> Her passion is connected with the search for the Father of All, which involved her “love” or “affection” (*storge*)<sup>17</sup> and despair (*agōn*), which was due to her recognition that his greatness cannot be grasped. It is also stated that Wisdom acted “on the pretext of love” (*prophasei men agapēs*).<sup>18</sup> Love, thus, was not the real cause after all; instead, her action demonstrated audacity (*tolmēs de*). Finally, the emotional state of Wisdom is described in terms of movement: she became “stretched out by the sweetness” of the Father.

Love, boldness, and movement also characterize the action of Word in the divine realm described in the *Tripartite Tractate*. The negative qualification of Wisdom’s love, however, is toned down in this text. Although it is said that Word acted “audaciously, out of an excessive love,”<sup>19</sup> love is not

here the pretext for audacity, as it was in Version A. This toning down in the *Tripartite Tractate* is in keeping with the more general tendency of this text to avoid negative evaluation concerning Word's action in the divine realm. The author of this text emphasizes that Word's "purpose was good" and that "the movement [*kim*] which is Word should not be criticized."<sup>20</sup>

According to Version A, Wisdom's affection for the Father led her to "extreme agony," since he turned out to be inscrutable. The fact that a new aeon called "Limit" (*horos*) had to be created to restrain Wisdom implies that she could no longer control the movement the emotions launched. After this follows the first healing of Wisdom's emotions. Limit offers a cure based upon reasoning: he convinces Wisdom that the Father really is unsearchable and thus makes her put aside her "first intention and the passion following it."<sup>21</sup> Limit, in other words, extirpates Wisdom's primeval passion.

One feature peculiar to Version A is the definition of Wisdom's passion as her search for the Father. This aspect strikes one as odd, since she is not the only one with this wish; all other eternal beings have the same longing.<sup>22</sup> The only difference between Wisdom and other eternal beings is that she alone became *active* in pursuing her desire, while the other aeons remained passive. It was only Wisdom who "tried something impossible,"<sup>23</sup> whereas the other aeons were "*quietly* [*hēsuchē*] desiring to see the originator of their seed and to inquire the original root."<sup>24</sup> What sets Wisdom apart from the other eternal beings is not her desire as such but its *excessive* nature, which becomes visible in her uncontrolled movement: Wisdom became "stretched out by [the Father's] sweetness" and she "drove herself exceedingly far [*proēlato . . . polu*] and experienced a passion." The aspects of excess and movement are significant, since ancient philosophers regularly connected them with emotions.

Version B follows another tradition, according to which Wisdom wanted to create something on her own, without having the consent of her spouse or the Father of All.<sup>25</sup> Since no male was involved in her creation, the result was a premature infant or miscarriage (*ektrōma*).<sup>26</sup> In the divine realm, Wisdom's ignorance and her defective offspring aroused "confusion" (*thorubos*), and Wisdom herself is depicted as being overwhelmingly sad, wailing, and weeping because of her creation.<sup>27</sup> When other eternal beings prayed to the Father to provide rest for Wisdom in her sorrow, two new eternal beings were created, Christ and Limit. Unlike in Version A, in Version B it was not Wisdom's emotions that were expelled from the divine realm, but her formless offspring. Limit was needed to set a boundary between Fullness and the outside realm, Deficiency (*husterēma*), whereas Christ concealed Wisdom's

formless offspring. The joint activity of Christ and Limit not only saved the peace and harmony in the divine realm but also gave rise to a new realm on the outside.

Irenaeus's secondary source of the Valentinian Wisdom myth, which is similar to Version B, also contains a description of the emotions that Wisdom experienced, as she saw her formless creation:

She was first filled with *distress* [*lupēthēnai/contristatam*] because of the incomplete manner of birth,

then with *fear* [*phobēthēnai/timuisse*] that she may experience the same end.

Then she was *distraught* [*ekstēnai/expauisse*]

and *puzzled* [*aporēsai/aporiatam*], seeking the cause and some way in which she could conceal that which was born.<sup>28</sup>

A similar list of the four emotions of Wisdom follows at the end of the same passage, but the individual emotions mentioned here are partly different: ignorance (*agnoia*), distress (*lupē*), fear (*phobos*), and consternation (*ekplēxis*).

It is possible that the latter two emotions are also referred to at the beginning of the *Gospel of Truth*. Although Wisdom is not mentioned in this text, its author describes the emergence of Error and the world in a manner that recalls the Valentinian Wisdom myth.<sup>29</sup> The text mentions two emotions resulting from the fact that the Father of All could not be known. One of them is obviously "fear" (*hrte*, used as the translation for *phobos*), and it is possible that the other was originally "consternation," since the Coptic noun used here (*noušp*) could be a translation of the Greek *ekplēxis*.<sup>30</sup>

### Wisdom's Emotions and the Creation of the World

Version A goes on to describe what happened to Wisdom's expelled intention and passion outside the divine realm. They are identified with the lower Wisdom called Achamoth. The name bears witness to a Jewish background for the Valentinian figure of Wisdom. Achamoth is a modification of the plural form *hokmōt* of the Hebrew word *hokmā*, "wisdom." In the Hebrew Bible, the plural form *hokmōt* is often used for the divine Wisdom who assisted God in creating the world (Proverbs 1:20, 9:1, 14:1, 24:7). The name Achamoth is attested in firsthand Valentinian sources,<sup>31</sup> and its original meaning was known to Valentinians.<sup>32</sup> However, the name does not occur in Version B. It speaks of "the Wisdom outside fullness" (*hē ektos*

*plērōmatos Sophia*), who is identified with the offspring expelled from the divine realm. As to her role in the myth, however, the outer Wisdom in Version B is largely identical with Achamoth in Version A.

In both versions, the heavenly Christ visits the expatriated part of Wisdom and supplies her with form, but he then abandons her and returns to the divine realm.<sup>33</sup> According to both versions, his departure kindles the lower Wisdom's emotions.<sup>34</sup> According to Version A, she was left "completely and in every possible way entangled in passion."<sup>35</sup> Again, four emotions are singled out: distress (*lupē*), fear (*phobos*), perplexity (*aporia*), and ignorance (*agnoia*). While perplexity and ignorance are only mentioned, the reasons for distress and fear are explained more closely: her distress was due to her inability to understand the Light, and she became afraid of losing her life.<sup>36</sup> In addition to the four emotions, Version A mentions Achamoth's conversion (*epistrophē*), which is conceived of as a mental disposition (*diathesis*) distinct from emotions.<sup>37</sup>

Emotions and conversion are linked with two different substances: the hylic ("material") substance stems from Achamoth's passion, while the psychic ("soul-ish") substance stems from her conversion.<sup>38</sup> The latter substance explains the capability of conversion, characteristic of the psychic beings including both the Creator-God and the "ordinary" Christians. The story of Wisdom's emotions, thus, forms the basis for the Valentinian theory of the material, psychic, and spiritual essences, and offers justification for the Valentinian division of humankind into three classes (the material, the psychic, and the spiritual).<sup>39</sup>

Wisdom's emotions are also used to explain the origin of natural phenomena: "Moist essences" stem from her tears, "bright essence" stems from her laughter, and "the corporeal foundations of the world" (*ta sōmatika tou kosmou stoicheia*) are derived from her distress (*lupē*).<sup>40</sup> Wisdom's tears and laughter are connected with her brief rendezvous with the heavenly Christ. Weeping and grief are due to his leaving her alone, whereas her laughter is occasioned by her remembrance of the light that had deserted her. In addition, it is said that Wisdom was afraid (*ephobeito*), perplexed (*diēporei*), and bewildered (*existato*).<sup>41</sup>

Irenaeus sees here an opportunity to amuse his audience by ridiculing the etiology of his opponents. In countering the undeniable poetic beauty of their myth, the revered father of systematic theology indulges himself in scatological humor:<sup>42</sup>

I myself want to add something to their fruit-bearing. I see, on the one hand, sweet waters, such as springs, rivers, rain and others of the same sort, and,

on the other, salty water in the seas. Therefore, I think that all waters have not sprung from her tears since tears are of salty quality. It is, thus, clear that salty waters stem from tears. It is likely that she also sweated, as she was in great agony and helplessness. Therefore, according to their theory, it must be assumed that springs and rivers and all other kinds of sweet water stem from her [sweat]. For it would be incredible that both salty and sweet waters come from tears, which are of one quality. It is more credible that the former stem from the tears and the latter from sweat. Because there are also hot and bitter waters on earth, you need only imagine what she (Achamoth) was doing and from what sort of a member they have come forth! Such products fit well with their theory.

### The Therapy of Wisdom's Emotions

Both versions of the Valentinian Wisdom myth referred to above are also concerned with the therapy of emotions. As was already mentioned, in Version A, Limit assisted the pleromatic Wisdom to put her passion aside.<sup>43</sup> This procedure is described in terms of healing: Limit “healed her [*etherapeusen autên*] and separated passion from her.” Valentinians supported this view with an allegorical interpretation of the story of the woman with the hemorrhage (Mark 5:25–34 parr): it was explained as referring to “the cure of the eternal being who was in a state of emotions” (*tên iasin tou peponthotos aiônos*).<sup>44</sup>

Both versions of the Valentinian myth are equally concerned with the therapy of the lower Wisdom's emotions. The cure involves the participation of the eternal aeons, who supply her with a heavenly consort, called Savior in Version A and Common Fruit of Fullness in Version B.<sup>45</sup> He removes Wisdom's emotions and turns them into the substances out of which Creator-God will later create the sublunar world. This procedure is described as healing. To quote from Irenaeus (Version A), the Savior “provided the cure of passions [*iasin tôn pathôn poiēsasthai*] by extirpating them . . . he turned them from incorporeal passions into incorporeal hyle.”<sup>46</sup> Freed from passion, Wisdom now experiences joy (*chara*)—which is one of the three Stoic “good emotions” (*eupatheiai*)—and gives birth to the spiritual offspring.

In his description of the lower Wisdom abandoned by Christ, Hippolytus mentions three emotions that he probably took over from Irenaeus (fear, distress, and perplexity).<sup>47</sup> Hippolytus, however, also provides another list of Wisdom's emotions that probably stems from Version B. According to this version, Christ, descending from Fullness, found the lower Wisdom

“in four primary passions, that is, fear, distress, perplexity, and entreaty” (*en pathesi tois prōtois tetrasi, phobōi kai lupēi kai aporiai kai deēsei*). Entreaty is functionally similar to conversion in Irenaeus, but here it is included in the group of four emotions and not added to them, as in Irenaeus. What Christ did for the lower Wisdom is that he “corrected her emotions” (*diōrthōsato ta pathē autēs*).<sup>48</sup> The expressions used here were probably borrowed from moral philosophical discourse related to emotions; notably, in the Epicurean school, *diorthōsis* (“correction”) was a technical term describing the therapy of emotions.<sup>49</sup>

According to Version B, the emotions of Wisdom became the foundation of the world. Wisdom’s heavenly consort turned her passion into four desires (*epithumia*).<sup>50</sup> The connection between the primeval emotions and physical qualities created from them is much more detailed than in Version A: the psychic substance is derived from fear, the material substance from distress, and the demonic substance from perplexity, while from conversion<sup>51</sup> and entreaty emerges “a path of repentance and the power of the psychic substance.”

It is this idea of turning Wisdom’s primeval emotions into cosmic substances that we also find in the surviving parts of *A Valentinian Exposition*: “This Jesus . . . created from the emotions surrounding the seeds, and set them apart from each other. He combined the better emotions with the spirit and the worse with the carnal substance. First from [all] those emotions. . . .”<sup>52</sup> Because the text breaks off here, we are left with uncertainty as to what happened to the primeval emotions mentioned in the text. In any case, it is clear that Jesus extirpates Wisdom’s passion. This recalls Version B, in which Christ has the same role. *A Valentinian Exposition*, however, differs from both Versions A and B in associating “the better emotions” with the spirit and the “worse emotions” with the flesh; in Versions A and B, the distinction was drawn between “psychic” (associated with conversion or entreaty) and “material” (associated with other emotions) substances.

## BACKGROUND: TRADITIONS BEHIND THE VALENTINIAN WISDOM MYTH

The tale of Wisdom’s fall was no innovation of the Valentinians. They took it over from an earlier tradition and expanded certain elements that were already present in previous versions of this myth. The background of the myth of Wisdom’s fall has been approached from several perspectives. First, scholars have traced very ancient traditions in it, such as Egyptian stories of Isis,<sup>53</sup> the Sumerian myth of the descent and ascent of Inanna,<sup>54</sup>

and the related Assyrian myth of Ishtar's descent to the netherworld.<sup>55</sup> It usually remains unclear whether one should understand these analyses as indicating direct borrowing from Egyptian or Assyrian traditions by those who invented the myth of Wisdom's fall or only as denoting the original source in terms of the history of ideas.<sup>56</sup> Either way, these theories say little about the importance of the Wisdom myth to Valentinians—unless we assume that they only preserved it for antiquarian reasons, which does not seem very likely.

Second, scholars have attempted to reconstruct the original version of the Valentinian myth, possibly originating from Valentinus himself.<sup>57</sup> Valentinus's relationship to the Wisdom myth, however, remains unclear, since Wisdom is not mentioned in any of the fragments of his own works.<sup>58</sup> If he was familiar with a Sethian teaching of Adam's creation,<sup>59</sup> it seems possible to assume that he knew the Wisdom myth that also belongs to the Sethian cosmogonic tradition. Nevertheless, there is no positive evidence that Valentinus himself subscribed to this explanation, and it is possible that he, like some other early Christians of the second century, explained the origin of the world as a result of the good God working with dubious *hulē*.<sup>60</sup>

Third, close attention has been paid to the relationship between the Valentinian and the Sethian Wisdom myth.<sup>61</sup> This approach is connected with a debate about which of the two antedates the other, but it has also yielded a better understanding of different versions of the Wisdom myth. It has become clear that, instead of one single account that could be called *the* Gnostic Wisdom myth, there are a number of accounts of Wisdom's fall. In addition to common narrative elements, there are also significant differences, although scholars tend to fuse these different versions into one "Gnostic" myth of Wisdom without being sensitive to their distinct features.

Whereas there is nothing comparable to the systematic Valentinian discussion of emotions in other versions of the Wisdom myth, they do mention some emotions in describing Wisdom's sufferings outside the divine realm. This indicates that the detailed analysis of Wisdom's emotions is a Valentinian expansion of a motif that was already present, but not emphasized, in the more traditional versions of this myth.<sup>62</sup>

The story of Wisdom's fall, expulsion, repentance, and restitution is also available in sources bearing witness to Ophite, Barbeloite, and Sethian views. In them, emotions are mentioned in passing in the story describing Wisdom's repentance and conversion. According to Irenaeus, the Barbeloite version of the myth depicted how Wisdom became *sad* ("Mater Sophia *contristata* refugit . . .") when she saw what the ignorant Creator-God did.<sup>63</sup> The same idea appears in the Sethian *Apocryphon of John*. Here

the Spirit's movement "to and fro," mentioned in Genesis 1:2,<sup>64</sup> is referred to Wisdom, who became aware of her imperfection after realizing the arrogance of the creator-god Ialdabaoth produced by her. The recognition led her to conversion (*asrmetanoei*), which involved much weeping.<sup>65</sup>

In the Ophite version, Wisdom's conversion took place after her imprisonment in the body. After realizing her condition, Wisdom "came to herself again" (*resipisse*) and created the visible heaven because "she succumbed to a *desire* for the superior light" (*accepisset concupiscentiam superioris luminis*).<sup>66</sup> In the Ophite myth, emotions are also connected with Ialdabaoth, who is described as being "sad and desperate" (*constritatum Ialdabaoth et desperantem*).<sup>67</sup> This description is very similar to that of Wisdom in the Valentinian myth, which suggests that Valentinians took references to emotions from other passages of the traditional myth and placed them into their Wisdom myth.<sup>68</sup> The fact that the four basic emotions (according to the Stoic analysis) are mentioned in the cosmogony described in the *Apocryphon of John* (see below) but not in connection with Wisdom points to the same direction.

The story of Wisdom's fall, which Valentinians shared with some other early Christian groups, gave a peculiar twist to earlier Jewish traditions of Wisdom. In them, Wisdom is a personified being active in the creation of the world, like she is in the Valentinian myth.<sup>69</sup> Otherwise, the Jewish picture of Wisdom is very different from the Valentinian one. Whereas the Jewish figure of Wisdom is God's first creation and closest companion taking part in the creation of the world, the Valentinian Wisdom is the youngest of all the eternal beings. Whereas the Jewish traditions portrayed Wisdom as God's closest companion, in the Valentinian myth she not only has another consort in the divine family but also dwells on the fringes of the divine realm. Instead of her Jewish role as God's compliant assistant in creation, the Valentinian Wisdom breaks the rules of the divine household by acting on her own. These characteristics denote a radical re-interpretation of Jewish Wisdom traditions, which Valentinians certainly knew.<sup>70</sup>

George MacRae has suggested that the story of Wisdom's fall was based upon another Jewish tradition, the story of Eve in Genesis: "the fall of man in Gen iii is . . . the real prototype for the fall of Sophia."<sup>71</sup> According to Genesis 3, Eve took the initiative and broke the divine rule; the result was the fall and the expulsion from paradise. This is basically very similar to what is said in the different versions of the myth of Wisdom's fall: she caused a rupture in the divine realm by acting without the permission of her spouse, and was expelled from that realm because of what she did.

This interpretation brings to the fore the gender aspect strongly present in both stories: Eve and Wisdom are described as acting against the prevailing cultural expectations of submission and passivity that were traditionally connected with women,<sup>72</sup> and in both stories female activity leads to severe damage. Nevertheless, the analogy between Eve and Wisdom is not clearly indicated by the sources describing the latter's fall. There are no quotations from, or even clear allusions to, the biblical story of the fall in the Valentinian versions of the myth of Wisdom. There are references to Eve in some other texts bearing witness to the myth of Wisdom, but even these texts do not substantiate the analogy between Wisdom's fall and that of Eve.<sup>73</sup>

Moreover, the use of the biblical story of the fall does not account for the prominent role of Wisdom's emotions in the Valentinian versions, for there is only one passion mentioned in Genesis 3 (Adam's fear, Gen. 3:10). The lack of emotions in Genesis 3 is, however, no reason to reject MacRae's suggestion altogether, but it needs to be modified in light of ancient philosophical discussion, in which *pathos* was usually regarded as a feminine quality.<sup>74</sup> Against this background, Philo interpreted the figure of Eve as representing sense perception and emotions. He regarded these two qualities as the soul's "helpers"—hence the link to Eve, who was created to be Adam's "helper" (Gen. 2:18). Philo, however, also maintained that sense perception and emotions form the irrational part of the human being.<sup>75</sup> Thus MacRae's association of Eve with Wisdom becomes more feasible if one assumes that Philo's allegorical interpretation of Eve, or a similar tradition, functioned as an intermediary between the biblical text and the Valentinian myth.

Finally, the Valentinian myth of Wisdom's fall, like other versions of the same myth, recalls the traditional lore of the soul's fall from the divine realm. Such an account is offered, for example, in the *Exegesis on the Soul* (NHC II, 6),<sup>76</sup> which describes the soul's descent into the body and into the hands of robbers and deceitful lovers. In this text, the pivotal moment is conversion, involving the soul's repentance and entreaty.<sup>77</sup> Like Wisdom's conversion in the Valentinian myth (Version B) and in the *Apocryphon of John*, the soul's conversion described in this text involves weeping.<sup>78</sup> The soul's reunion with its heavenly spouse results in the removal of desire,<sup>79</sup> just as Christ visits Wisdom and removes her passion in the Valentinian myth. The paradigmatic nature of the story of the soul is demonstrated by a subsequent exhortation, voiced in the first-person plural, to prayer, repentance, and the confession of sins.<sup>80</sup> The exhortation is supported by a compilation of scriptural quotes emphasizing the importance of conversion (1. Clem. 8:3; Isa. 1:18, 30:15, 30:19, 30:20).

The soul's fate is also related in a way that bears a close resemblance to the Valentinian accounts of Wisdom in the Nag Hammadi treatise entitled *Authoritative Teaching* (*Authentikos Logos*). The soul's entanglement in, and release from, emotions are major issues in this text. The soul cast into the body became affiliated with "desire [*epithumia*], hatred, envy and the hylic soul [*psuchē nhulikē*]." The body is also described as originating from these substances.<sup>81</sup> Imprisoned in the body, the soul sought to inherit "arrogant emotions" (*nipathos nlahleh*) and "delight" (*hēdonē*) that were alien to it. Thus, "delight and sweet pleasures" brought about by debauchery deceived the soul, and she forgot "her brothers and her father."<sup>82</sup> The paradigmatic aspect of the soul's story becomes explicit in the affirmation that the devil leads "us" astray by emotions. Distress (*lupē*), desire (*epithumia*), envy, fraudulence, ignorance, and ease are all his "poisons."<sup>83</sup> Like the Valentinian myth that portrays the heavenly Christ as the healer and companion created for the Wisdom outside the divine realm, this text describes the divine bridegroom (*nymphios*) of the soul as the healer who "applied the word to her eyes as a medicine."<sup>84</sup> What the soul needs to learn according to this text is that "sweet emotions" are merely transitory. As soon as the soul recognizes this, it is ready to return the body to those who created it.<sup>85</sup>

The description of emotions in the Valentinian myth of Wisdom does not so closely follow the portrayal of the soul's emotions in the *Exegesis of the Soul* or in the *Authoritative Teaching* that we can assume that Valentinians knew these texts; the assumption that they wrote them is even less probable.<sup>86</sup> In fact, we also find references to a similar story in Plotinus. He gave audacity as the reason for why the souls originally forgot God.<sup>87</sup> This coincides with the Valentinian idea (Version A) that Wisdom's action in the divine realm was an expression of audacity. The story of the soul's fall and that of the origin of the all are, thus, intertwined in the philosophical tradition and in the Valentinian myth. The ways in which Plotinus describes the soul's fall and in which Valentinians describe Wisdom's action recall the Neopythagorean theory that the Dyad's separation from the Monad, which ultimately led to plurality, was an act characterized by audacity.<sup>88</sup>

The traditional story of the soul's fate can be seen as a bridge between the earlier myths of Wisdom's fall and the Valentinian version of this story, where the focus lies on the discussion of her emotions. The pre-Valentinian accounts of Wisdom's fall were no doubt already influenced by tales of the soul's fall, but the Valentinian Wisdom is described in a manner that makes the connection of her story to what human beings must go through on their way to enlightenment much more explicit than it was in the earlier versions of the Wisdom myth.

## CONTEXT: EMOTIONS IN HELLENISTIC MORAL PHILOSOPHY

In my reading of the Valentinian myth, I have deliberately emphasized aspects that connect it with the discussion of emotions in Hellenistic moral philosophy. The following three features in different versions of the myth indicate that it was indebted to the discussion of emotions in ancient schools of thought: (1) Wisdom's emotions are divided into four basic emotions. (2) Emotions are considered harmful. (3) Emotions are a disease that needs to be cured.

Scholars of ancient philosophy have in recent years demonstrated that the analysis of emotions loomed large in the three major Hellenistic schools of thought (Epicureans, Sceptics, Stoics). Philosophical discourse in ancient schools was very pragmatic: its goal was *eudaimonia*, human flourishing. The analysis of emotions was intrinsically linked with this goal. Emotions were considered the soul's disease and required a remedy, and philosophers identified themselves as the "physicians of the soul" who could provide this remedy. The therapy of emotions was, in fact, one of the most important advantages these schools promised to offer to their adherents.<sup>89</sup> The situation was no doubt similar in the Antonine age, when Valentinians were most active.<sup>90</sup>

The most prominent theory of emotions in Hellenistic philosophy was the Stoic one.<sup>91</sup> According to it, passion consists of two elements. First, it has a cognitive aspect: it is based upon a belief (either that there is something good or bad at hand, or that there is something good or bad to be expected in the future). The beliefs connected with emotions, however, are mistaken evaluations of what is good and evil. Second, passion involves an excessive impulse (*hormē pleonazousa*) that urges a person to assent to the mistaken belief. In so doing, emotions carry the soul away from what is rational.<sup>92</sup> Emotions are thus understood as the soul's uncontrolled movement. The Stoic philosopher Chrysippus compared the condition brought about by emotions to that of a runner, who, unlike a walker, is not in complete control over the movement of his or her legs but is "carried away" by them.<sup>93</sup> The excessive impulse and movement connected with emotions in turn makes a person unstable and weak.<sup>94</sup>

Some Stoic teachers contended that even a wise person is subject to "affective movements" or "pre-passions." However, being alert and not assenting to them, he or she is able to control them before they develop into full-blown emotions.<sup>95</sup> The theory of such preliminary passions may help us understand the distinction drawn in Version A of the Valentinian myth

between Wisdom and the other aeons who wanted to know the Father of All but did not attempt to satisfy that desire. In philosophical terms, this would mean that the other eternal beings were subject to “affective movements” but did not assent to them, whereas Wisdom was unable to resist this impulse and succumbed to passion.<sup>96</sup>

Stoic philosophers divided *pathos* into four main categories on the basis of the mistaken beliefs connected with them:<sup>97</sup>

1. distress (*lupē*) involves the belief that there is something evil at hand.
2. fear (*phobos*) involves the belief that there will be something evil in the future.
3. delight (*hēdonē*) involves the belief that there is something good present.
4. desire (*epithumia*) involves the belief that there is something good in the future that a person needs to have (but does not have yet).

In the philosophical analysis of emotions, the beliefs connected with *pathos* are mistaken, because they are false estimations as to the value of contingent things, that is, things over which a person has no power. The only thing one can really control is her or his inner attitude toward contingencies. It is this cognitive element in *pathos* that enabled the philosophical therapy of emotions.<sup>98</sup> The mistaken beliefs connected with emotions could be rectified with reasoning, showing that the things one desires or is afraid of are not truly valuable, and with mental exercises, in which reactions to events of everyday life were imagined and practiced in advance.

Whereas emotions were considered a disease of the soul and in need of therapy in all ancient schools of philosophy, opinions on the correct diagnosis and cure differed from one school to another. Stoics saw no advantage whatsoever in the display of emotions and recommended their complete extirpation.<sup>99</sup> The Stoic ideal was complete freedom from emotions, *apatheia*. Accordingly, the goal of the Stoic therapy of emotions was a human being remaining innerly calm and immovable in all circumstances; a wise person is *apathē*, “totally free from passion.”<sup>100</sup> To achieve this goal, a person should learn to replace irrational *pathos* with “good emotions” (*eupatheiai*), which were rational assessments of what is really valuable and what is only contingent.<sup>101</sup> According to the Stoic analysis, there are three *eupatheiai*, which are the counterparts of three aspects of the irrational *pathos* (notably, there is no rational counterpart for distress):

1. joy (*chara*) is the rational opposite of delight;
2. prudent caution (*eulabeia*) is the opposite of fear;
3. rational wish (*boulēsis*) is the opposite of desire.<sup>102</sup>

Other philosophers considered the Stoic ideal of *apatheia* inhuman since it seemed to lead to forms of behavior that did not conform with the usual expectations of society. The refusal of Stoics to show any sign of sorrow for someone's death, even if the deceased was a close relative, was taken as aggravating evidence for their insensitivity.<sup>103</sup> Instead of *apatheia*, the philosophical schools in the Platonist-Peripatetic tradition argued for moderate expression of emotions, *metriopatheia*.<sup>104</sup> Aristotle even saw some positive value in the expression of emotions. In his view, there are situations where it would not be rational not to fear or where it would be offensive not to show pity, and sometimes anger can be a justified reaction to mistreatment of a person's loved ones.<sup>105</sup> Even these schools, however, emphasized control over the emotions and instructed avoidance of overly excessive outbursts.

The influence of the ancient philosophical discussion of emotions becomes clearly visible in the *Apocryphon of John*, in which the Stoic analysis of the four dimensions of *pathos* reappears in the context of a cosmogonic myth. The long version of this text contains an account of four primeval demons with whom is connected a careful description of the fourfold *pathos* and its subcategories:<sup>106</sup>

The four chief demons are Ephememphi who represents delight [*hēdonē*], Yoko who belongs to desire [*epithumia*], Nenentophni who represents distress [*lupē*], Blaomen who represents fear [*hnōhe*]. The mother of them all is Esthensis-ouch-epi-ptoe.<sup>107</sup>

Emotions came forth from the four demons.

From distress stem envy [*phthonos*], zeal, grief, annoyance [*ochlēsis*], pain, callousness, anxiety, mourning and so on.

From delight came many kinds of evil, empty pride, and similar things.

From desire stem anger [*orgē*], wrath, bitterness [*cholē*], bitter sexual passion [*erōs*], unsatedness, and similar things.

From fear stem consternation [*ekplēxis*], entreaty, agony [*agōnia*], and shame.

Both the four main categories of *pathos* and their subcategories mentioned in this passage stem from Stoic analysis.<sup>108</sup> Thus the author of the *Apocryphon of John* must have been familiar with a distinctly Stoic teaching about emotions.

If there were Valentinians who knew the *Apocryphon of John*, it is possible that the linkage between the four primary demons and the four primary emotions had some influence on the Valentinian myth. However, in

this case the Valentinians undertook a radical revision of the Sethian portrayal of emotions. They continued to discuss emotions within the framework of a cosmogonic tale, as was done in the *Apocryphon of John*, but the whole topic was moved from an account of primeval demons to the tale of Wisdom, and the emphasis is now placed on the therapy of emotions, a feature not mentioned in the *Apocryphon of John*.

The traditional fourfold classification of emotions accounts best for the fact that, in Valentinian sources, the number of emotions is always four in the otherwise different lists of Wisdom's emotions. If we compare these lists more closely with the Stoic classification, it turns out that the Valentinian lists of Wisdom's emotions all include the two emotions that are based on the judgment that there is something *evil* either present (distress) or to be expected (fear) (see table 6.1).

However, the Stoic emotions involving the belief that there is something good either present (delight) or to be expected (desire) are not mentioned in any of the Valentinian lists. They are variably replaced with mental dispositions that are more clearly negative (consternation, perplexity, and ignorance) or connected with conversion (entreaty). The fact that there are no uniform Valentinian designations for the emotions that differ from the traditional Stoic classification suggest that there was no fixed scholastic tradition available for this part of their theory of emotions.

## CHRIST AS THE HEALER OF THE SOUL

Adoption of the Stoic categorization of *pathos* in the *Apocryphon of John* and the probable use of this analysis in the Valentinian myth of Wisdom are not the only examples of the impact the discussion of emotions in ancient schools of philosophy had on early Christians; this interpretation is far more widely attested. The therapeutic language was also borrowed from philosophical discourse. Not only did Jesus come to be designated as "the physician of the soul," but the same epithet was attached to his disciples as well.<sup>109</sup> Early Christian teachers from Alexandria were especially interested in discussing emotions and interpreted their Christian faith in terms of the therapy of emotions; these issues loomed large in the teachings of Basilides, Clement, and Origen.<sup>110</sup>

It is no wonder, then, that the therapy of Wisdom's emotions is also a crucial theme in Clement's summary of the Valentinian cosmogony (*Excerpts from Theodotus* 42–65). In keeping with other versions of the Valentinian myth, Clement's account relates the heavenly Christ's visit, during which he took away Wisdom's emotions. The goal of this procedure, described

TABLE 6.1 Fourfold Divisions of Passion (*pathos*) in Valentinian, Stoic, and Sethian Sources

Irenaeus, <i>Her.</i> 1.2.3a (Version B?)	Irenaeus, <i>Her.</i> 1.2.3b (Version B?)	Irenaeus, <i>Her.</i> 1.4.1 (Version A)	Hippolytus, <i>Ref.</i> 6.32.5 (Version B)	5. Stoic Division: SVF III 391–394	6. <i>Apocryphon</i> <i>of John</i> (NHC II, 1) 18.14ff.
1. distress ( <i>lupēthēnai</i> )	1. ignorance ( <i>agnoia</i> )	1. distress ( <i>lupē</i> )	1. fear ( <i>phobos</i> )	1. distress ( <i>lupē</i> )	1. delight ( <i>hēdonē</i> )
2. fear ( <i>phobēthēnai</i> )	2. distress ( <i>lupē</i> )	2. fear ( <i>phobos</i> )	2. distress ( <i>lupē</i> )	2. fear ( <i>phobos</i> )	2. desire ( <i>epithumia</i> )
3. distraction ( <i>ekstēnai</i> )	3. fear ( <i>phobos</i> )	3. perplexity ( <i>aporía</i> )	3. perplexity ( <i>aporía</i> )	3. desire ( <i>epithumia</i> )	3. distress ( <i>lupē</i> )
4. perplexity ( <i>aporēsai</i> )	4. consternation ( <i>ekplēxis</i> )	4. ignorance ( <i>agnoia</i> )	4. entreaty ( <i>deēsis/hiketeia</i> )	4. delight ( <i>hēdonē</i> )	4. fear ( <i>hnōhē</i> )

as “the healing of emotions” (*iasin tōn pathōn*), is *apatheia*: it is said that Christ “made her apathetic” (*kateskeuasen apathē*).<sup>111</sup> In this version, too, Christ turns Wisdom’s passion into a formless substance, from which the Creator-God creates the material world.<sup>112</sup>

Clement’s collection shows well the intrinsic connection between the Valentinian myth of Wisdom and its application to the Valentinian way of life. The Valentinian teacher Theodotus, whose teachings are recorded in Clement’s collection (among other Valentinian teachings), set side by side the view that the cosmos originated in Wisdom’s emotions and the affirmation that the Savior came to deliver *us* from passion:<sup>113</sup> “When the Savior says to Salome that death will reign as long as women bear, he does not reproach of birth. . . . But he is alluding to the Woman on high whose emotions became creation when she put forth those beings that were without form. On her account Lord came down to *drag us out from passion* and to adopt us to himself.”

According to another Valentinian interpretation recorded in *Excerpts*, baptism not only provides freedom from fate (*heimarmenē*) but also from emotions.<sup>114</sup> Moreover, in this collection, freedom from suffering is associated with the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Valentinians referred to by Clement taught that the heavenly Christ abandoned the earthly Jesus on the cross but then “destroyed death and raised up the mortal body that had put off emotions” (*pathē*).<sup>115</sup> In other words, the risen Jesus gained a transformed body from which emotions are completely extirpated.

## THE WISDOM MYTH AND RITUAL

I have argued above that Valentinian teachers used the myth of Wisdom’s fall to justify their particular understanding of the cure of emotions.<sup>116</sup> Alongside this usage, the Wisdom myth is obviously related to the ritual practice of some Valentinian groups.

Irenaeus takes special note of Valentinian rituals because he can call upon them as proof for his case that Valentinians were different from “ordinary” Christians. Above all, he recounts a number of Valentinian views about “redemption” (*apolutrōsis*).<sup>117</sup> His account shows that the performance of redemption as a ritual was confined to some Valentinian groups. Their identity is debated, but I am inclined to believe that these groups belonged to the followers of Marcus.<sup>118</sup> Irenaeus calls this group a cult society (*thiasos*),<sup>119</sup> while he employs school terminology in connection with other Valentinians.<sup>120</sup> Hippolytus alleges that a Marcosian bishop performed the

ritual of redemption,<sup>121</sup> which shows that the ritual of redemption was from early on conceived of as a Marcosian rite.<sup>122</sup>

The Marcosian Valentinians performed the rite of redemption as a deathbed ritual, in which the dying were anointed with oil (or a mixture of oil and water) and supplied with an instruction of what they should say to the otherworldly gatekeepers:<sup>123</sup> “I am a child from the Father, from the preexistent Father. I came to see all things, both those which are my own and those which are alien. And yet they are not entirely alien, but they belong to Achamoth, who is female and who made them for herself. This race, thus, is derived from the preexistent one. And I return to my home where I came from.” These words grant the deceased with the means to escape from the hands of the gatekeepers. After this, this person will meet the Creator-God’s henchmen, to whom she or he is instructed to say:

I am a much more honored vessel than the female who created you. If your mother is ignorant of her origin, I do know myself and I know where I come from. I call upon the indestructible Wisdom, who is within the Father, the mother of your mother having neither a father nor a male companion. A female stemming from a female created you. She was ignorant of her own mother and thought that she alone existed. I call upon her mother.

A close parallel to these two passages in the *(First) Apocalypse of James* shows that this instruction was not Irenaeus’s invention.<sup>124</sup> In this text, however, the ritual of redemption is neither mentioned nor alluded to; instead, the instruction itself is called “redemption” (*sôte*).<sup>125</sup> Moreover, the parallel text in the *(First) Apocalypse of James* is considerably larger than in Irenaeus. Thus it must be either assumed that the Marcosian instruction was abbreviated from a longer teaching, which we now have in the *(First) Apocalypse of James*, or that Irenaeus quoted only parts from this instruction.<sup>126</sup>

The instruction connected, or identified, with “redemption” shows that there were Valentinians who regarded the knowledge of the Wisdom myth as necessary for their salvation. Their deathbed instruction offers a recapitulation of key issues in the Wisdom myth. The name Achamoth is mentioned in it, and the knowledge of the distinction between the higher and lower Wisdom is considered to be of salvific importance. However, this instruction also contains some details that make it different from the conventional Valentinian myth of Wisdom. Some features attached to Achamoth in this teaching are connected with the Creator-God in other Valentinian sources:<sup>127</sup> Achamoth is described as being ignorant, thinking that she

alone existed, and as the creator of the assistants of the Creator-God. These features, which are missing in the systematic accounts of Valentinian cosmogonic teaching, presuppose a developed form of the Valentinian myth.

The Marcosian instruction to the deceased recalls the teaching ascribed to Jesus in the *Gospel of Thomas* 50:

If they say to you, "Where are you from?" say to them, "We are from the light, from there where the light itself emerged. It became [firm] and appeared in their image."

If they say to you, "Are you the light?" say, "We are its children, those who the living father has chosen."

If they ask you, "What is the sign of your father in you?" say to them, "Movement and rest."

It is possible that the Valentinian instruction in the *(First) Apocalypse of James* and in Irenaeus are based upon this tradition of Jesus's sayings. This possibility, however, is impossible to confirm, since there are also other similar instructions, above all those of Orphic origin.<sup>128</sup> An Orphic text, written on a gold sheet (*lamella*), offers a brief account of an interrogation in the underworld that is strikingly similar to what we find in *Thomas* and in Valentinian sources: "Who are you? Whence are you? I am a child of earth and of starry heaven, but my race is from heaven."<sup>129</sup> With these epithets, which were also used of the Greek god Cronos,<sup>130</sup> the initiate claims his or her divine origin, just as one is expected to do in front of the otherworldly gatekeepers in the Valentinian instruction.

The Marcosian ritual of redemption is possibly referred to also in the famous early Christian epitaph dedicated to Flavia Sophe.<sup>131</sup> This double-sided funerary inscription reads as follows:

(A)

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Longing for the fatherly light,  
 my Sophe, sister and wife,  
 anointed in Christ's baths  
 with imperishable and pure oil,  
 you hurried to see the eternal beings' divine faces  
 [and] the great angel of the great council, the true Son.  
 Entering the bridal chamber and  
 ascending to the fatherly [ . . . ]

## (B)

This dead woman  
 had no ordinary end of life.  
 She died, but she lives and sees  
 the light that is truly indestructible.  
 She lives for those who live, but she died  
 as regards those who are truly dead.  
 Earth, what makes you wonder  
 at the race of the deceased? Is it that you are seized with fear?

I have argued elsewhere for the Marcosian provenance of this inscription.<sup>132</sup> In my view, the most natural reading of it is that it refers to a dead woman over whom the rite of redemption was performed prior to her death. It is affirmed in the second line of the inscription that Sophe had been “anointed in the baths of Christ with imperishable, holy oil.” Marcosians conceived of the ritual of redemption, which involved anointing, as the second baptism, and called it a “bath” (*loutron*).<sup>133</sup> The plural form “baths” in the inscription coincides with the expression “baths and redemptions” (*lousmata kai apolutrōseis*), which we find in Hippolytus’s account of Marcosian ritual practices.<sup>134</sup>

Sophe’s funerary text points to a special group identity based on ritual. The inscription not only mentions that she belonged to a distinct “race,” but it is also affirmed that she “had no ordinary end of life,” and she is portrayed as superior to the earth. This attitude toward the hereafter is similar to that found in the Marcosian deathbed instruction, in which the initiated is advised to affirm his or her superiority in front of the Creator-God’s henchmen and to shame them because of their humble background. In this particular case, the claim to a distinguished spiritual status goes together with the claim made through the poem to a distinguished earthly status. The poem’s composition in hexameters and the number of Homeric expressions in it demonstrate the husband’s taste for poetry. In addition, the text is engraved on marble, and the quality of the hand is exceptionally good. These are status indicators that coincide with Irenaeus’s allegation that Marcus sought followers from the upper class.<sup>135</sup>

Though the Flavia Sophe inscription is sometimes quoted as bearing witness to the privileged status of women in Gnostic groups,<sup>136</sup> it in fact says little about that issue. The inscription bears witness to the inclusion of women into a group of initiates, but it does not reveal whether they were also entitled to perform rituals. As Irenaeus states in dismay, prophesying

was allocated both to men and women by drawing lots in Marcosian meetings.<sup>137</sup> However, it remains uncertain whether ritual tasks were assigned in Marcosian groups to both men and women or to men only.

## CONCLUSION

If we look at the practical functions of the myth of Wisdom that made it relevant to Valentinian Christians, the best evidence is related to ritual practice connected with this myth. It is only here that we find detailed accounts of how Valentinians put the Wisdom myth into action. The Marcosian deathbed instruction and the Flavia Sophe inscription remind us that Valentinianism was not confined to school discussions of the learned, but that there were real people who put their trust in Valentinian instruction and expressed their eschatological hopes in terms of it.

The ritual aspect, however, explains the importance of the Wisdom myth only in part. The portrayal of Wisdom's emotions in Valentinian sources is too dominant to be regarded as mere embroidery of a more traditional lore or as an attempt to evoke the audience's sympathy to the sufferings of the myth's protagonist. The articulations of this myth show that Valentinians were engaged in a philosophical discussion about emotions. Different versions of the Valentinian Wisdom myth show equal concern with the therapy of emotions. Valentinians described the therapy of emotions as one of the gifts Christ has to offer to his followers. Thus the myth of Wisdom was told not only in order to account for the physical structure of the present world but also in order to show how it is possible for human beings to get rid of noxious emotions.

The discussion about emotions and their therapy in Greco-Roman schools of thought set the stage for the Valentinian reinterpretation of the traditional tale of Wisdom's fall. Given the pragmatic orientation of philosophical discourse in ancient schools of thought, it is unlikely that Valentinian teachers only speculated about Wisdom's primeval emotions as part of their mythic discourse or about Christ the healer as part of their theology. It is more conceivable that, like teachers of philosophy, they also offered therapy of emotions to their adherents. They competed in the same market as philosophical schools, and, like the philosophers, made to their adherents a promise of healing emotions.

In the ancient controversy between *metriopatheia* and *apatheia*, Valentinians primarily side with the latter, characteristically Stoic ideal. The extirpation of emotions is what Christ offered to Wisdom; this is also what he offers to believers. The Valentinian view was by no means exceptional in

early Christianity; other early Christian teachers, such as the great Alexandrian theologians Clement and Origen, embraced the same ideal of *apatheia*.<sup>138</sup> However, the Valentinian theory of Christ visiting the lower Wisdom contains an element of *metriopatheia* as well: he did not simply do away with her emotions but turned them into cosmic substances.

What distinguishes the Valentinian theory most clearly from the Stoic one is its view of the original cause of emotions. In the Stoic analysis, the beliefs associated with emotions are false, because they are directed to non-valuable and contingent things instead of what is genuinely good or evil. Wisdom's desire to know the Father, which triggered her emotions in Version A of the Valentinian myth, cannot be a nonvaluable from the Valentinian perspective. The problem with this desire is that it cannot be fulfilled since the Father remains unknown. Thus the Valentinian reasoning connected with Wisdom's emotions is inseparably linked with apophatic theology, which is the starting point of the entire cosmic myth for Valentinians.

The Valentinian theory of the cure of emotions, too, was probably different from that offered in philosophical schools. The Valentinian cure does not appear to have involved a critical analysis of the wrong beliefs connected with emotions. (Nevertheless, Limit cured the Wisdom inside the divine realm with reasoning.) Instead, Valentinians portrayed Christ as the healer who removes the emotions after repentance and prayer. This christocentric therapy of emotions of Valentinians was also in keeping with what was taught in other early Christian schools of thought. Justin, Clement of Alexandria, and a number of other early Christian teachers embraced the same idea of Christ as the healer of emotions.<sup>139</sup> While the mythic context, into which Valentinians placed their discussion about the cure of emotions, was exceptional, their views as to the cure itself did not dramatically differ from what was taught in other early Christian schools.

## THE CREATOR-GOD AND THE COSMOS

**A**T THE end of his *Letter to Flora*, Ptolemaeus hinted that he needed to offer a more profound theory of the Creator-God, whose existence he sought to prove. The surviving remnants of the more advanced instruction of Valentinian teachers about this issue and its relationship to the lifestyle they recommended to their students are discussed in this and the subsequent chapter. What is striking, however, is the paucity of firsthand evidence related to this issue. In a number of Valentinian texts, the Creator-God distinct from the supreme deity is either not mentioned at all<sup>1</sup> or is mentioned only in passing.<sup>2</sup> It may even be that Valentinus himself did not presuppose the existence of an inferior Creator-God but attributed the creation of the world to the good God.<sup>3</sup>

Although scattered references to the inferior Creator-God can be found in the fragments of the teachings of Heracleon and Theodotus, the most systematic presentations of the Valentinian opinions about the Creator-God are those found in the works by Irenaeus, Clement, and Hippolytus. Their investment in this issue is no doubt due to the fact that the Valentinian teaching of the second god, who created the world, was the clearest deviation from what they considered to be the true Christian doctrine. However, these accounts supply us with such a profusion of detailed information concerning the Valentinian opinions about the Creator-God and his world that they must go back to the Valentinian sources at their disposal.

As technical as this part of Valentinian teaching may appear, it was hardly created for speculative purposes only. Rather, Valentinian teachers

wanted to create a convincing theoretical basis for their distinction between three classes of humankind, which in turn had direct consequences for Valentinian constructions of social reality. Such reflection served at least two purposes in the context of ancient philosophical schools. First, the way Valentinian teachers established links between myth and advanced discussion related to ancient physics suggests that they wanted to meet the expectations of more demanding audiences, who not only found myths pleasant to hear<sup>4</sup> but also wanted to learn how these stories led to a better understanding of the world.

Second, Valentinian teachers probably aimed at removal of fear, as did their colleagues in philosophical schools. The discussion about physics served this purpose in ancient schools of thought. Epicureans were especially active in developing new theories related to physics, since they wanted to convince their students that there is no afterlife and, in consequence, there is no need to be afraid of death.<sup>5</sup> As Epicurus himself put it, “there is no profit to be derived from the knowledge of celestial phenomena other than peace of mind.”<sup>6</sup> Epicureans would certainly have objected to the Valentinian use of mythic discourse, since they considered myth an impediment to the recognition of truth: “We cannot free ourselves of fear about the most essential things if we do not know exactly what the nature of the universe is, but attribute some hint of truth to mythological stories.”<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, Valentinians shared with Epicureans the view that knowledge of physics, or “the nature of the universe,” is not purely theoretical but is liberating knowledge, since it offers freedom from unnecessary fears.

I will argue in this chapter that there were two major lines in Valentinian teaching about the Creator-God and the world he created. One line was that this god was ignorant in the beginning but shows no particular malevolence toward humankind. Another line was to produce a more negative picture of a scary Creator-God whom humans will meet as a judge in the hereafter. In the former teaching, the Creator-God is ignorant but not incompetent, while in the latter he is incompetent but not ignorant of the divine realm. These lines are obviously distinct versions of Valentinian teaching in Irenaeus and should be approached as such. Pulling together a random sample of details taken from both lines would leave us with an incorrect impression of Valentinian teaching.<sup>8</sup> I begin this chapter by discussing the first, more philosophically oriented version, which we find in Irenaeus’s Great Account, and then move on to more “mythical” Valentinian descriptions of the Creator-God.

## THE VALENTINIAN CREATOR-GOD IN IRENAEUS'S GREAT ACCOUNT

### The Creator-God's Character

In the Valentinian cosmogony described by Irenaeus, the Creator-God is closely associated with the psychic essence (*to psuchikon*), which emerged from Achamoth's conversion. In fact, this god has his origin in her conversion.<sup>9</sup> Thus he is called "Achamoth's psychic son." The Creator-God is also designated as her first creation, as she began to work at the psychic essence stemming from her conversion. This god is no less than "God, Father, and the king of all."<sup>10</sup> What makes him a peculiar character, however, is that he is simultaneously both Achamoth's agent in creating the world and completely ignorant of her: he is "secretly moved" by her.<sup>11</sup> He is characterized by his "false opinion" that it was he who created the world,<sup>12</sup> and by his erroneous belief that he is the only god: "It is I who am god; there is no one else beside me."<sup>13</sup>

This affirmation makes the Valentinian Creator-God not only identical with the Jewish God described in the Hebrew Bible, but it also recalls the Sethian portrayals of the creator-god Yaldabaoth as boasting to be the only god.<sup>14</sup> The Creator-God's vain claim, however, not only recalls the self-designation of the Jewish God in the Hebrew Bible but also the stories in it about *humans* claiming to be God (the Prince of Tyre, in Ezekiel 28; the King of Babylon, in Isaiah 14). In later Jewish traditions, this claim became a recurrent feature in the portrayals of foreign rulers such as Nebuchadnezzar, Antiochus Epiphanes, Pompey, Caligula, and Nero.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the portrayal of the inferior Creator-God, who erroneously boasts of being the only god, is at the same time "anti-Jewish"—in the sense that it identifies this god with the Jewish God—and builds upon a distinctly Jewish tradition of describing lesser rulers who pretend to be gods.

Valentinian views about the Creator-God are generally more positive than the Sethian ones; unlike in the Sethian texts, he is not portrayed as a power hostile toward humankind in Valentinian sources.<sup>16</sup> The more positive image of the Creator-God can also be seen in the fact that his empty boasting, which is an integral motif in Sethian texts, remains in the background in Valentinian teaching. It even remains unclear whether he boasted in front of his assistants or in front of human beings, and no consequences of his boasting, such as being reproached for his claim by a superior divine figure, are mentioned. Irenaeus's account is instead focused on the Creator-God's ignorance of the spiritual essence. Due to his psychic nature,

this god is unable to grasp spiritual things.<sup>17</sup> This makes him inferior even to the devil, who “knows what is above him, for he is a spirit of wickedness.”<sup>18</sup> In particular, the Creator-God is unaware of Achamoth’s spiritual offspring, although it was through his breath that Achamoth implanted the seed of this offspring into the human soul.<sup>19</sup> The spiritual offspring, thus, remain “invisible” to this God.<sup>20</sup> The most curious consequence of the Creator-God’s ignorance is that he does not understand the spiritual essence expressing itself in prophecy and in the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>21</sup> In other words, he does not understand his own book!

Irenaeus not only found offensive the Valentinian view that the god who had created the world was an inferior and ignorant deity, but he also wanted to make this view look as shocking as possible by combining information stemming from various sources and by adding his own remarks. He probably picked up from Version B the teaching according to which the ignorant Creator-God is inferior even to the devil; it does not appear in his main source, Version A.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Irenaeus emphasized the Creator-God’s complete ignorance by creating the following summary based upon an independent tradition of Valentinian teaching: “He created a heaven without knowing the heaven; he moulded a human being, although he was ignorant of the human being, and he brought forth earth without knowing the earth.”<sup>23</sup> It is also possible that the notion that the Creator-God did not know “the spiritual human,” although it was implanted into the soul with his assistance,<sup>24</sup> stems from a separate tradition, since the term “spiritual human” does not appear anywhere else in Irenaeus’s Great Account. These points suggest that Irenaeus selected details from the sources at his disposal to create a caricature of the Valentinian Creator-God.<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Irenaeus found the idea of the Creator-God’s ignorance in his sources. Yet Irenaeus downplays the fact that Valentinians mitigated this feature in a number of ways: (1) They did not consider the Creator-God responsible for his incorrect opinion about himself. (2) The Creator-God’s ignorance does not result in any real deficiency in the creation of the world. (3) Despite his ignorance of the spiritual offspring, the Valentinian Creator-God shows benevolence toward them. (4) The Creator-God’s ignorance is only temporary, after which he becomes a model convert.

(1) Valentinians argued that the Creator-God’s false opinion about himself was not his own fault. Rather, his ignorance was brought about by Achamoth. It was she who “wanted to lead him on to power [*proagagein*] as the head and beginning of his own essence, and as the lord over all affairs.”<sup>26</sup>

This passage not only implies that the Creator-God *must* be ignorant of the superior realm in order to be a powerful ruler, but it also presupposes that such a ruler is needed for the maintenance of the inferior world. Thus, the Creator-God's ignorance has a *positive* function in the cosmic household.<sup>27</sup>

(2) The claim that the Creator-God "was ignorant of the ideas of those things which he did"<sup>28</sup> was no doubt opposed to the Platonic tradition. In *Timaeus*, Plato had described how the Creator-God saw the immutable intellectual realm and used it as his model in initiating the creation of the visible world.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, the Valentinian teaching recorded by Irenaeus takes for granted another conviction based upon Plato's philosophy, that is, that the cosmos is an image of the higher realm. In Valentinian teaching, this opinion was connected with Achamoth's active role. She knew the superior realm;<sup>30</sup> it was her purpose "to make all things in honor of the eternal beings (aeons)," and she, together with the Savior sent to her, made images of them.<sup>31</sup> Hence, most features attributed to the Creator-God in the Platonic tradition are in the Valentinian myth transposed to Achamoth.<sup>32</sup> The portrayal of the Creator-God as her "hand and mouth," in turn, makes him similar to the assisting "younger gods" whom the Platonic Creator-God assigned to create the world.

The Valentinian theory of the Creator-God was thus strikingly different from the Platonic tradition on the one hand, but, on the other, the main ideas of this tradition were kept unaltered. The relationship to Platonicism involved both tension and continuity, just as there was both continuity and tension in the way Valentinian teachers used Jewish traditions in describing the vain claim of the Creator-God. Both aspects were no doubt important: continuity guaranteed that the Valentinian teaching became understood by those who knew philosophy, whereas tension was needed to show that the Valentinians had something new to offer in the philosophical marketplace.<sup>33</sup>

(3) The Creator-God's ignorance remains ineffective both as regards the cosmos and the spiritual offspring. His relationship to the latter involves no hostility, unlike the hostility of Yaldabaoth to humankind in Sethian sources. Although the Valentinian Creator-God does not know the spiritual offspring, he shows special affection, respect, and benevolence toward them. He loves "more than the others" the souls possessing the spiritual seed of Achamoth and has given them special positions as "prophets, priests, and kings."<sup>34</sup> Therefore, the voice of the spiritual offspring can be heard in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>35</sup> In addition, the Creator-God bestows special care upon the church consisting of the spiritual seed.<sup>36</sup>

(4) The Creator-God's ignorance is only temporary. Due to his affection for the spiritual essence from the beginning, he is positively attuned toward the Savior's teaching and becomes his follower.<sup>37</sup> Like Achamoth at the earlier stage of Valentinian myth, the Creator-God is portrayed as a model convert. He demonstrates in an exemplary manner the ability to choose between good and evil, which is the main characteristic of the psychic essence.<sup>38</sup>

### The Creator-God and *Hyle*

The Creator-God's conversion by the Savior is preceded by their close cooperation in creating the world. In fact, the Creator-God only completes the creation initiated by the Savior. According to Irenaeus, Valentinians claimed that the Savior virtually (*dunamei*) acted as the creator.<sup>39</sup> The Savior "fixed" Wisdom's emotions by changing them into "incorporeal *hyle*" and bestowed upon them the capability (*epithdeiotēs*) of becoming structures and bodies, "in order that two substances will emerge, the evil one from the emotions, and the passionate one from the conversion."

The Savior's creation is described in terms of potentiality and determination.<sup>40</sup> The Greek verb *pēgnumi*, used for "fixing," has the connotation of determination: it is often used, mostly in the passive voice, to denote something that is "irrevocably fixed, established."<sup>41</sup> The Greek word *epitēdeiotēs*, by which the Savior's creation is described, also denotes "suitable properties" or "requirements." The statement at the end of this passage, that the Savior acted "virtually" (*dunamei*), points in the same direction: the Greek word *dunamis* denotes "capability of existing or acting."<sup>42</sup>

What is quite striking in the account of the Savior's creation is that he left things in confusion, and it was the Creator-God who brought them into order:

They say that (the Creator-God) became Father and God of those things outside the fullness since he was the maker of all psychic and hyleic things. For he separated the two substances, which were in a state of confusion, and created bodies from incorporeal things. Then he created the heavenly and the earthly things and became the Creator of material and psychic, of those in right and left, of light and heavy, and of ascending and descending things.<sup>43</sup>

This Valentinian teaching is based upon the theory of *diakrisis* ("separation, differentiation"): in the beginning, the Creator-God brought order to the chaotic *hyle* by separating the commingled substances from one another.<sup>44</sup>

A number of early Christian teachers, including the heterodox speaker in Methodius's *On Free Will*,<sup>45</sup> also subscribed to this basically Platonic idea.<sup>46</sup>

In defining the tasks of the Savior and the Creator-God, Valentinians developed a distinct theory about *hyle*: the Savior created this essence from the emotions of Achamoth, and it was this essence that the Creator-God needed to create the world.<sup>47</sup> In the Valentinian usage, the adjectives "hylie" and "earthly" (*choikos*) sometimes seem fully interchangeable. This is probably due to the similar fates of both essences. Both *hyle* and the earthly essence are perishable and incapable of receiving salvation.<sup>48</sup> However, earth and *hyle* are not entirely identical. "Earth" is equivalent to what we would understand as "matter" since it is associated with the visible body (*sōma*). *Hyle*, in turn, denotes a substance called "the fleshy essence" (*to sarkikon*).<sup>49</sup>

The usual translation of *hyle* as "matter" does not grasp the wide array of meanings in which it was employed in antiquity.<sup>50</sup> The qualification of *hyle* as "incorporeal" (*asōmatos*) in the passage describing the Savior's creation warns against an overly materialistic understanding of this substance. Rather, *hyle* denotes the "receptacle," or the passive substance God used in creating the world. As was mentioned above, the distinction between the active Creator-God and the passive *hyle* was shared by most ancient philosophers as well as by a number of early Christian teachers of the second century (Marcion, Athenagoras, Hermogenes, Clement of Alexandria, and the heterodox speaker in Methodius's *On Free Will*).<sup>51</sup>

Nevertheless, there were different opinions about *hyle*. First, the Stoics conceived of *hyle* as the passive element ("that which is acted upon," *to paschon*), which God as the active force pervaded.<sup>52</sup> Thus, as Long and Sedley comment, "any object, or the world as a whole can be analysed as a composite of matter and god."<sup>53</sup> While Platonists shared the distinction between the passive *hyle* and active God, they emphasized that God is distinct from *hyle*.<sup>54</sup> In this debate, the Valentinians obviously take over the Platonist view.

Second, it was debated whether *hyle* has an origin or not. Philosophers in general adopted the former view, but some Neopythagorean thinkers derived *hyle*, associated with the dyad, the principle of plurality, from the monad, the first principle.<sup>55</sup> While Methodius's Valentinian heterodox took it for granted that *hyle* is eternal, Irenaeus's Valentinians thought that the Savior created it from Wisdom's emotions. The author of the *Tripartite Tractate* also disputes the idea that *hyle* has an origin, and derives this essence from the audacious thought of Word.<sup>56</sup>

Third, the philosophers were divided over the issue of whether *hyle* is corporeal or not. While the Stoics regarded both God and *hyle* as corporeal, most Platonists considered *hyle* corporeal and God incorporeal.<sup>57</sup> Yet some Platonists leaned toward a less materialistic definition of *hyle* similar to the Valentinian view. Albinus/Alcinous defined *hyle* as “not body but potentially [*dunamei!*] body.”<sup>58</sup> In a similar vein, Apuleius maintained that *hyle* is “neither corporeal nor incorporeal, but potentially corporeal,”<sup>59</sup> and Arius described *hyle* as “not a body but corporeal in the sense of underlying all the qualities like a mould.”<sup>60</sup> In Hippolytus’s summary of Platonic teaching, it is also said that *hyle* is “potentially body but never actually so.”<sup>61</sup> The underlying logic behind these affirmations is that as soon as the formless *hyle* receives form and becomes a body, it is no longer *hyle* but something else.

Though there was a notable disagreement among the Platonists as to the exact definition of *hyle* in relation to a bodily appearance, the bottom line common to all of them is that *hyle* is associated with potentiality.<sup>62</sup> It was, in Plotinus’s terms, “a potential recipient of spatial extension.”<sup>63</sup> The Valentinian idea that *hyle* has the potentiality to become “structures and bodies”<sup>64</sup> has close analogies in Diogenes Laërtius’s account of Platonic teaching, in which the “structures” (*sugkrimata*) of the world were derived from the formless (*aschēmatistos*) *hyle*.<sup>65</sup> These analogies suggest an especially close relationship between the Valentinian understanding of *hyle* and the Platonic tradition.

Fourth, although *hyle* was basically without any quality, it was often described in negative terms. Irenaeus’s Valentinians subscribed to the well-established physical theory of their time in describing *hyle* as an essence void of form, “invisible,” and “fluctuating.”<sup>66</sup> These features made *hyle* morally dubious. According to Irenaeus, Valentinians regarded *hyle* as “inefficient” or even “bad” (*phaulē*).<sup>67</sup> The Valentinians were not alone in emphasizing the negative aspects of *hyle*. A number of contemporary non-Christian Platonists and early Christian teachers argued in a similar manner. The Platonist philosopher Numenius regarded *hyle* as “wholly bad,” and Origen ascribed the same view to Celsus.<sup>68</sup> Among the early Christians, Marcion taught that the Creator-God created the world out of evil *hyle*,<sup>69</sup> and Athenagoras’s stance toward *hyle* was not much more positive. Although he did not designate *hyle* as evil, he maintained that the “the ruler of *hyle*,” whom God created to take control over this substance, is one of the fallen angels, who now torture human beings.<sup>70</sup>

The Valentinians of Irenaeus thought that *hyle* is perishable,<sup>71</sup> and maintained that it will be destroyed in the final conflagration.<sup>72</sup> This forms a major deviation from the Stoic conception of *hyle* as an everlasting cosmic

element that, like God, is “ungenerated and indestructible.”<sup>73</sup> Stoics thought that conflagrations destroy, from time to time, everything—including the four principles, air, fire, earth, and water—except for God and *hyle*. Their destruction would be theoretically impossible, since they are the two prerequisites for the creation of any new cosmos. Without them, no new world would emerge after a conflagration. The modified theory of Valentinians, that *hyle* is destructible, was needed to justify one part of their theory of the three classes of humankind. They taught that one group of humankind is doomed to perdition, and this group they called “hylics.” Thus the Valentinians created a unique link between the physical theory of *hyle* and their construction of social reality.<sup>74</sup>

In ancient philosophy, *hyle* was also connected with the strongly gendered philosophical discourse emphasizing the polarity between women and men. *Hyle*'s role in creation and women's role in conception were described in terms of a passive recipient, whereas God and men were portrayed as those acting upon the passive party and providing it with form. Aristotle already identified woman with *hyle* (as the receptive) and man with the essence that provides it with form.<sup>75</sup> The distinction between passive/female and active/male elements in generation<sup>76</sup> was also applied to the interpretation of Greek cosmogonic myths. Chrysippus identified Zeus with God and Hera with *hyle*,<sup>77</sup> and Plutarch, employing categories derived from Plato's *Timaeus*, interpreted Osiris as the originating father, Isis as the receptive mother, and Horus as the resulting child.<sup>78</sup>

If compared to the opinions expounded in Greek philosophy and in interpretations of myths based upon it, the way Valentinians use the terms *hyle* and “seed” demonstrates a noteworthy reversal of the conventional rhetoric of male and female. In their myth, the spiritual *seed* stems from a female figure, Achamoth.<sup>79</sup> The manly role attributed to Achamoth in this part of the Valentinian myth is even more intriguing if we recall the traditional sex polarity visible in the accounts of the Wisdom's fall. At this earlier stage of the myth, the ideal role expectation, which Wisdom violated with her independent action, was that of a submissive and obedient woman.<sup>80</sup> At the subsequent part of the myth, however, a more active and “male” role is allowed for Achamoth. This gender bending is not entirely unique in ancient myths either. A similar oscillation between female and male roles in myth can be found in Plutarch's account of the Moon assuming both male and female features: “They also call the Moon the mother of the world, and they think that she has a nature both male and female, as she is receptive and made pregnant by the Sun, but she herself in turn emits and disseminates into the air generative principles.”<sup>81</sup> What is noteworthy in this passage is that the Moon assumes the female role on the superior level—which is

what the Valentinian Wisdom is expected to do—while on the lower level the Moon acts in a manner considered characteristically male (dissemination), just as Achamoth does in the Valentinian myth.

### The Creator-God and the Structure of the Cosmos

In Irenaeus, the relationship of the Valentinian Creator-God to the four cosmic elements (earth, water, air, and fire) remains somewhat unclear. It seems that they came into existence prior to his creation, since they appear to be identical with “the corporeal elements of the world” stemming from Achamoth’s consternation and helplessness.<sup>82</sup> It is, however, nowhere related what the Creator-God does with these elements.

In Irenaeus’s account of the Valentinian myth, the Creator-God dwells above the seven heavens. Above him there is the domain of his mother, Achamoth.<sup>83</sup> This lower heavenly realm, called “the intermediate region” (*ho tēs mesotētos topos*),<sup>84</sup> is not only significant as a theoretical construct, but it is also used as a motivation for good behavior. The Valentinians of Irenaeus taught that, at the end of the days, the Creator-God will enter this place together with the souls of the “just,”<sup>85</sup> that is, those who have shown self-control and good works.<sup>86</sup> This group does not obviously consist of non-Valentinian Christians only. The souls of the spiritual offspring, too, will be left in this place and will receive their salvation there.<sup>87</sup> Other Valentinians, however, found this place less attractive. In the *Gospel of Philip*, the “places in the middle” (*nntopos ethntmēte*), or “the middle place” (*tmesotēs*), are described as locations to be avoided. Here “the middle place” is not regarded as the place of intermediate salvation but as the place of punishment for one’s sins:

And he is in this world, in the resurrection, or in the middle places. Let it not be that I am found these places! . . . It is necessary for us to acquire the resurrection, when we are in this world, in order that, after we have stripped off the flesh, we will be found in the resurrection, and not walking in the middle. For many are deceived on the way. For it is good for the human being to depart the world before sinning.<sup>88</sup>

### TOWARD A MORE MYTHICAL TEACHING: THE VALENTINIAN CREATOR-GOD IN HIPPOLYTUS

The above analysis of the Valentinian Creator-God was focused on four key issues, which were (1) the Creator-God’s relationship to Wisdom, (2) the Creator-God’s relationship to the Savior and *hyle*, (3) the structure of the

world created by the Creator-God, and (4) the relationship of the Creator-God to his creation. Hippolytus's account of the Valentinian doctrine supplies us with a parallel picture of all these issues, but it is often different in details.<sup>89</sup>

(1) In Hippolytus, too, Wisdom is portrayed as the operating cause of what the Creator-God does, while this god remains completely ignorant of her active role. The Creator-God's claim of being the only god shows his ignorance also in this account.<sup>90</sup> Yet his figure is much more negative than in Irenaeus. Hippolytus maintains that Valentinians considered the Creator-God "stupid and silly."<sup>91</sup> This, however, is not necessarily a quotation from Hippolytus's sources; it can also be his own comment summarizing what he considered to be the Valentinian view about the Creator-God.

While in Irenaeus the Creator-God was introduced as Achamoth's first creation and associated with her conversion, in Hippolytus his origin is less directly related to what she does. It is only affirmed that the Creator-God stems from the fear to which the "outer" Wisdom was subject,<sup>92</sup> but he is not portrayed as Wisdom's own creation.

(2) According to Irenaeus, the Valentinians maintained that Christ instructed and converted the Creator-God. In Hippolytus's account, these functions are attributed to Wisdom. It is she who teaches "the great mystery of Father and the eternal beings" to the Creator-God. Because the conversion of the Creator-God is not ascribed to the Savior in Hippolytus, the only link between these two figures is that the Creator-God is involved, in cooperation with Wisdom, in creating Jesus.<sup>93</sup> What is surprising in this connection is the affirmation that Jesus differs from other human beings in that he was created not by the Creator-God alone but jointly by him and Wisdom. This opinion differs from the "standard" Valentinian view, according to which Wisdom was already involved in Adam's creation.<sup>94</sup>

(3) The Creator-God's work receives little attention from Hippolytus. Hippolytus's account of the Creator-God's creation is less concerned with the structure of the cosmos than Irenaeus's report; its focus lies even more clearly on the creation of human beings than in Irenaeus.

As in Irenaeus, the Creator-God god is called "Hebdomad," which refers to his domain, the seventh heaven.<sup>95</sup> The Creator-God is also distinguished from the devil, "the ruler of this world." In this version, however, the devil is not created by the Creator-God, as he is according to Irenaeus's version. Instead, the devil is derived from the "essence of demons," stemming from Wisdom's perplexity.<sup>96</sup>

As to the terminology used for the Creator-God, Hippolytus relates that the Valentinians called this god "Place" (*topos*) and considered him a fiery being (*purōdēs*).<sup>97</sup> While in Irenaeus fire is not directly linked with the Creator-God, the usage of these two designations in connection with this god is confirmed by other Valentinian sources.<sup>98</sup> What seems odd in this context is Hippolytus's remark of the twofold nature of fire.<sup>99</sup> This is obscure since, in the subsequent account, only the destructive quality of fire is mentioned: it is "all-devouring and cannot be quenched." And yet the twofold nature of fire is important insofar as it paves the way for the following description of the soul, which can either find salvation or be destroyed.<sup>100</sup> It is not entirely unexpected that the double inclination of the soul is mentioned at this point, since the Creator-God is, also according to this version, of the soul essence.<sup>101</sup>

The Valentinian understanding of the soul, which inclines either to salvation or to perdition, was already mentioned in Irenaeus. What causes confusion, however, is the way Hippolytus connects this idea with the Creator-God's fiery appearance. This confusion may go back to Hippolytus. It seems that he has borrowed here some distinctly Simonian ideas in order to make Valentinian theology look as alien and suspicious as possible.<sup>102</sup>

(4) Unlike Irenaeus, Hippolytus mentions no positive consequences whatsoever of the Creator-God's conversion vis-à-vis the spiritual race. Instead, Hippolytus points out that the Creator-God preserved *in secrecy* the mystery disclosed to him by Wisdom.<sup>103</sup>

The attitude toward the Jewish scripture, too, is much more negative in Hippolytus's version than it is in Irenaeus. In Hippolytus, the words of "the prophets and the law" are considered completely ignorant and as stemming solely from the Creator-God.<sup>104</sup> This entirely negative conception of the Jewish scripture is clearly different both from the Valentinian view attested in Irenaeus, that the spiritual offspring of Achamoth spoke through the prophets,<sup>105</sup> and from the careful distinction that Ptolemaeus drew in his *Letter to Flora* between the different levels of the law. While this part in Hippolytus's account is incompatible with any other source of Valentinianism, a close parallel to this teaching can be found in his description of Basilides' teachings, in which it is affirmed with reference to the inferior ruler of the hebdomad that "all prophets before Savior . . . spoke from that source" (*ekeithen elalēsān*).<sup>106</sup> This affinity again raises the possibility that Hippolytus brought the Valentinian and the Basilidean theology closer to each other than they originally were.

Although all details in Hippolytus's report are not equally reliable, it suggests that there were Valentinians whose view of the Creator-God was

more negative than the one depicted in Irenaeus's great account. Some details in this version of the Valentinian teaching, such as the designation of the Creator-God as a fiery being, imply a closer relationship to the Sethian views about the Creator-God than in Irenaeus's account.<sup>107</sup>

In sum, the differences between Irenaeus and Hippolytus show that there were at least two different strands of Valentinian teaching about the Creator-God. The more philosophical strand in Irenaeus yields to a strikingly positive picture of the Creator-God and his role in the universe, while the other strand, which Hippolytus describes, offers a more negative assessment of this figure and a less nuanced picture of his role as a creator. The latter strand seems to presuppose a more "mythic" view of the Creator-God, but its exact content remains hidden in Hippolytus, because the information he offers about this issue remains so sparse. The more "mythic" strand of Valentinian demiurgism can also be traced, however, in other sources, for example in Clement's *Excerpts from Theodotus* and, above all, in Marcosian theology.

#### INCOMPETENT CREATOR AND JUDGE: MARCOSIAN VIEWS OF THE CREATOR-GOD

The Marcosians, unlike most other Valentinians, taught that the Creator-God tried to imitate the superior realm but failed. This distinctly Marcosian theory can also be found in the *Gospel of Philip*, according to which the Creator-God wanted to create an imperishable and immortal world but did not manage to do so. In addition, it is maintained in the same passage that the Creator-God is not imperishable.<sup>108</sup> These opinions are clearly different from the aforementioned Valentinian teaching, according to which Achamoth saw and imitated the divine realm while the Creator-God was completely ignorant of it, having "the false opinion that he creates out of himself."<sup>109</sup> Moreover, most Valentinians would have objected to the idea that the Creator-God is going to be destroyed together with his creation. In fact, this is disputed even in the *Gospel of Philip*. It contains another passage affirming that this lesser god will be saved after all: although he will be denied entrance to the Fullness ("the holiest of the holies"), he will be gathered "under the wings of the cross" after the destruction of the world he created.<sup>110</sup>

In the Marcosian teaching, the Creator-God is not so much ignorant as he is incompetent. He is able to gaze at the divine realm but he is unable reproduce it because of his deficiency.<sup>111</sup> In the Marcosian teaching, thus,

the Creator-God's ignorance is not mentioned at all; instead of Achamoth, it is this god who imitates the divine realm, and his attempt to make a copy of this realm proves a failure.<sup>112</sup>

Given that Marcosians formed a cult society, it is no surprise that they connected the negative image of the Creator-God with ritual. The negative assessment of the Creator-God's creation goes together with the likewise negative assessment of his role in the hereafter. Some Marcosians taught that in the hereafter, people will meet the Creator-God as a judge: "Behold, the judge is near and the herald commands me to defend myself."<sup>113</sup> The ritual of redemption, however, offers escape from this god.<sup>114</sup> Participants in this ritual receive from Achamoth "the Homeric helmet of Hades," which makes them invisible, and she will grant them with entrance to the bridal chamber. The picture of the Creator-God is, thus, similar to that arising from the Marcosian deathbed instruction connected with the redemption ritual.<sup>115</sup> In this instruction, too, the Creator-God and his henchmen are cast as the otherworldly threat, which can be overcome only with the knowledge supplied in the ritual of redemption. Thus, although the redemption was performed in a number of ways, its function was similar in different Marcosian groups: it offered protection in the hereafter.

The Marcosian theory of the Creator-God has some aspects in common with other Valentinian theologies, such as the invisibility of the spiritual essence and the Creator-God's designation as a judge, an idea also attested in Ptolemaeus's *Letter to Flora*.<sup>116</sup> Yet Marcosians used these ideas in a way that made their theology different from that of other Valentinians. The Marcosian picture of the Creator-God as a judge only waiting for the opportunity to torture the deceased in the hereafter stands in sharp contrast to Ptolemaeus's view of the Creator-God as the judge who with his legislation tries, even if not always successfully, to prevent evil in this world. Marcosian theology and the ritual practice connected with it are also squarely opposed to the view of other Valentinians that the Creator-God is especially concerned with the well-being of the spiritual offspring and takes special care of them.

## CONCLUSION

I have outlined above strikingly different lines in Valentinian approaches to the Creator-God. Above all, the interpretation given in Irenaeus's *Great Account* and that in his report of Marcosian views are clearly distinct from each other. The former interpretation seeks to explain the structure of the sublunar world, while the latter is concerned with the afterlife. In

the first interpretation, the activities of the Creator-God are described in terms derived from philosophical discourse, while the latter remains more clearly within the boundaries of mythic discourse, offering vivid accounts of frightening divine agents whom humans will meet after death. In the former interpretation, every effort is made to downplay the negative features of the Creator-God, while in the latter every effort is made to emphasize them.

The differences between these streams of Valentinian teaching are closely connected with the different functions attached to myth in them. In one theory, mythic discourse is used in an attempt to pave the way for an understanding of this world as a place where the souls sent from above are educated for full salvation. In another, myth is needed to show the need for a ritual that is promised to make the deceased invisible to the Creator-God in the hereafter. What is noteworthy is that in *neither* model is *this world* understood as a threatening place. The first model sought to convince the students of Valentinian teachers that the Creator-God's ignorance remained ineffective as regards the world as it now stands, since Wisdom used him as her mouth and hands. In addition, these teachers maintained that the spiritual seed is especially loved by this god. In the second model, the view of the Creator-God and his assistants is more negative, but the great threat they pose is not in this world but in the hereafter.

It is not farfetched to assume that one of the most important goals of both models was the same as with the Epicurean discussion about physics: freedom from fear. The first Valentinian interpretation made the students see the world and their place in it in a way that makes this world not seem frightening at all, while in the second the ritual of redemption was performed to remove the fear of death. In addition to the two main lines discussed in this chapter, there was still a third way to achieve this goal: the students in the school of Valentinus were comforted with the idea that after baptism they are no longer subject to fate but are freed from it.<sup>117</sup>

So if Valentinian Christians took any of these teachings seriously, they certainly did not look at the "starry sky" in horror, as Hans Jonas once claimed the Gnostics did: "We can imagine with what feelings gnostic men must have looked up to the starry sky. How evil its brilliance must have looked to them, how alarming its vastness and the rigid immutability of its courses, how cruel its muteness."<sup>118</sup> Rather, they were taught that, of all people, they had every reason to be confident and had nothing to be afraid of either in this world or in that to come.

## WALK LIKE A VALENTINIAN

IRENÆUS DEVOTES much attention to Valentinians' teaching about humankind, which they supported with Genesis exegesis. They taught that three invisible natures were bestowed upon Adam, that of *hyle*, that of the soul (*psuchē*), and that of spirit (*pneuma*). Irenæus describes how Valentinians divided the entire humankind into respective classes. They themselves represented the spiritual race, which will be saved by nature, no matter what they did, whereas those belonging to the second, psychic class must believe and do good works to achieve salvation; for those belonging to the third, hylic class, there is no hope whatsoever: like *hyle* itself according to the Valentinian view, this class is doomed to perdition. The self-understanding of Valentinians as the spiritual class had, according to Irenæus, two consequences: it made his opponents intolerably arrogant and they gave themselves license to every imaginable vice. Their arrogance could even be seen in the way they walked—"with strutting gait and a supercilious countenance, possessing all the pompous air of a rooster," says Irenæus.<sup>1</sup>

Although some early Christian teachers did indeed give detailed instruction as to how Christians should carry their bodies and even how to walk,<sup>2</sup> there is no evidence that Valentinians arranged walking courses as part of their advanced teaching. Irenæus's description of the rooster-strides of the Valentinians was no doubt meant to be an entertaining illustration of their sense of elitism. This indictment was a convenient tool for Irenæus, since he could also level it against those Valentinians whose way of life was blameless. They were, Irenæus grumbles, especially pompous because of their virtuous lifestyle.<sup>3</sup>

Irenaeus's complaints regarding the Valentinian sense of elitism were not entirely ill-grounded. The author of the *Interpretation of Knowledge*, for one thing, argued for the bestowal of certain privileges for the spiritually advanced within the Christian community.<sup>4</sup> It is conceivable that such demands generated an image of snobby Valentinians, which Irenaeus could effectively use in his polemics against them.

Irenaeus also paints an extremely deterministic picture of Valentinian theology, in which neither promotion to nor degradation from the spiritual class seems possible. Irenaeus's message to his audience is clear: if his readers are not yet spiritual ones, they have no opportunity to become such either; hence they would not gain any benefit by joining the Valentinians. Other sources, however, imply that the Valentinian division between three classes of humankind was more dynamic than Irenaeus wants us to believe. It involved an idea of transformation, which implies that all Valentinians did not conceive of the three classes as fixed categories but thought that moving between them is possible. In addition, there were Valentinians who did not use this division to separate Christians into two classes, but in order to demarcate the Christian church from non-Christians.<sup>5</sup>

I find unlikely Irenaeus's claim that Valentinians were not at all interested in the moral improvement of the spiritual Christians. Rather, their distinction between the spiritual and the psychic Christians recalls the distinctions ancient philosophers drew between more and less advanced students. For example, Philo offers a lengthy account of the differences between the perfect one (*ho teleios*) and another one who is making progress (*ho prokoptōn*). According to him, the former shows complete freedom from anger and is thus "ready to face every demand both in act and in word." Moses, whom Philo regards as "the perfect wise man" (*ho teleios sophos*), is also free from other passions, whereas the progressing one has not yet been able "to cut off the passion." Although this person is no longer prone to excessive pleasure, he or she still seeks "necessary and simple delight." Thus this person still needs moderation of passion (*metriopatheia*). Whereas the wise man declines pleasures "without orders," the one making progress does so "with orders." In consequence, while the wise man practices the virtuous life voluntarily, the one who makes progress needs guidance and to practice obedience to do the right thing.<sup>6</sup> The distinction between the sage, who no longer needs the law in order to act in the right way, and the progressing one,<sup>7</sup> who still needs to follow orders,<sup>8</sup> is very much like the Valentinian distinction between the spiritual Christians, who by nature do the right thing, and the psychic Christians, who need faith and good works to achieve salvation.

## VALENTINIAN VIEWS ABOUT ADAM'S CREATION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES IN IRENAEUS

Irenaeus's report gives the impression that the Valentinians held a relatively unitarian view about Adam's creation and its consequences as to social reality.<sup>9</sup> Achamoth and the ignorant Creator-God jointly created the first human being, who is never called Adam in this account. The Creator-God molded Adam from "the diffused and unsettled *hyle*" and breathed into this formation his own soul essence.<sup>10</sup> In this way, the spiritual essence, which Achamoth had secretly planted into the Creator-God, was also transmitted into Adam. This essence is described as a fetus that humans carry along. When it has grown up, it makes them "fit for the reception of what is perfect."<sup>11</sup> The spiritual essence, thus, denotes one's capability of being saved, which needs to be realized.

The spiritual, psychic, and material substances bestowed on Adam had different origins, and their end will also be different. The spiritual and the material substances are opposites of each other. The first will be saved and the second will perish no matter what. The first cannot become subject to corruption, whereas the second will be destroyed in any case. The psychic nature lies in the middle of the two opposites. What is characteristic to this nature is its ability to make a choice: it will "go over to that element to which it has an inclination."<sup>12</sup>

The first human being consisting of the three essences still remains invisible at this point; it is only later that the Creator-God provides the human being with a sensible body, which is called the "garments of skin." Just as the idea of God's breathing into Adam was based upon Genesis 2:7, the "garments of skin" as denoting the human body is derived from Jewish allegorical interpretations of Genesis 3:21.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, Irenaeus describes how his opponents made a subtle distinction between the expressions "after the image" and "after the likeness" in Genesis 1:27. They referred the expression "after the image" to the hylic essence, from which the Creator-God created Adam, whereas "after the likeness" denoted the psychic essence that the Creator-God bestowed upon Adam.<sup>14</sup> Irenaeus describes this theory of Adam's creation as the standard Valentinian teaching. Only some Marcosians differed from it, teaching that both the "image" and the "likeness" of God refer to the pneumatic, androgynous human being,<sup>15</sup> while another human being was created from earth. Moreover, some Marcosians taught that Adam's earthly part and flesh were created on different days, the former on the sixth day, the latter on the eighth.<sup>16</sup> This opinion was probably also based on the interpretation

of “the garments of skin,” which, according to Genesis, God gave to Adam and Eve only after the first seven days of creation, as referring to the human body.

The Valentinian interpretation of the three essences in Adam offered the basis for a tripartite division of humankind into the spiritual ones, the psychic ones, and the hylic ones. Their fates correspond to those of the respective essences: those belonging to the first group can be certain of their salvation no matter what, whereas those in the second can obtain salvation if they believe and live virtuously. Those in the third group are doomed to perdition. Irenaeus maintains that Valentinians used this distinction to separate Christians into two classes. They regarded themselves as belonging to the first group, while ordinary “church” Christians belonged to the second one. Such distinction could, of course, easily lead to arrogance, for which Irenaeus accuses Valentinians. They made claim to “the perfect knowledge of God,” calling themselves “perfect and the elected offspring.” Marcosians, in particular, considered themselves the “most perfect” who “knew more than everybody else,” even more than Peter and Paul, claims Irenaeus.<sup>17</sup>

As a further sign of the audacity of Valentinians, Irenaeus portrays their teaching that the spiritual offspring of Achamoth “were loved more than the others by the Creator-God,” and that he gave them special positions as “prophets, priests, and kings.”<sup>18</sup> In addition, the Creator-God bestows special care upon “the church,” which, in this context, denotes the spiritual offspring of Achamoth.<sup>19</sup> All these affirmations are in keeping with “the providence of the Creator-God,” which Ptolemaeus emphasized in his *Letter to Flora*.<sup>20</sup> However, a striking difference between his teaching and the Valentinian doctrine recorded by Irenaeus is that Ptolemaeus did not connect the Creator-God’s providence with the spiritual offspring in any particular way, but introduced this feature as a general characteristic of this god.<sup>21</sup>

Irenaeus is keen on describing the ethical horrors brought about by the Valentinian tripartite division of humankind. He claims that Valentinians had two sets of moral standards, one for themselves and one for other Christians. While they expected faith and good conduct from ordinary Christians, to themselves they gave license to everything evil: they seduced women, ate meat offered to idols, and attended pagan festivals and even gladiator shows.<sup>22</sup> Irenaeus also insinuates that sexual defilement took place in the bridal chamber ritual, which Valentinians “always have to practice in every way.”<sup>23</sup> According to Irenaeus, sexual misconduct was especially prominent among Marcosians. He relates that Marcus himself managed to seduce and defile even the wife—who happened to be “very

beautiful”—of a deacon “among our own people” in Asia Minor.<sup>24</sup> Things were not much different in Irenaeus’s present location: Marcosians had already deceived several women “on the banks of Rhone near to us.” Some of these women had publicly confessed this after returning from a Marcosian group back to one led by Irenaeus. Some seduced women, however, were either too ashamed to make a public confession or for other reasons “withdrew in silence and gave up the hope of the life of God. Some of them withdraw completely, while some others play a double game and are subject to a suffering indicated by a proverb, being neither inside nor outside.”<sup>25</sup>

Yet one wonders whether Irenaeus tells the whole story of the Valentinian theory of Adam’s creation and its consequences for the lifestyle of his opponents. Mudslinging was commonplace in antiquity, regardless of what philosophical groups were attacked and by whom.<sup>26</sup> Above all, charges of sexual misconduct were leveled against other groups in order to tarnish their reputation. Non-Christians accused Christians of “shameless lustful embraces” and “incest,” which allegedly took place in their meetings.<sup>27</sup> Jennifer Wright Knust points out that Christians were not the only group against whom such claims were raised: “Christian, Jew, Greek, Roman, they were all said to be guilty of sexual excess of one sort or another.”<sup>28</sup> Such accusations cannot be taken at face value<sup>29</sup> since they are mostly malevolent rumors by which boundaries are established between ethnic, religious, or philosophical groups.<sup>30</sup> The fact that even Irenaeus admits that some Valentinians conducted an exemplary life<sup>31</sup> shows that they seriously invested in moral improvement. It is inconceivable that they would have addressed moral exhortation to psychic Christians only.

One gap in Irenaeus’s account is that he does not explain how his opponents turned the idea that all three essences were present in Adam into a theory of three distinct classes of humankind, each of them having only *one* of the three essences. One answer to this problem is offered in Clement’s summary of Valentinian theology,<sup>32</sup> to which I will turn later. Moreover, Irenaeus’s account indicates Valentinians had other theories beside the tripartite division of humankind. He also mentions a *twofold* distinction Valentinians made between those who are good by nature and those who are evil by nature. In this connection, the good are described in the same manner as the spiritual essence bestowed upon Adam: they are “capable of receiving the seed” (*tas dektikas tou spermatos genomenas*), whereas the evil are not.<sup>33</sup> The spiritual seed, however, is here something that the good can *obtain*; it is not a faculty that already exists in them. This suggests that Valentinian theology was less fixed at this point and allowed for more dynamic interpretations than Irenaeus wanted us to believe.

## EQUAL SALVATION FOR SPIRITUAL AND PSYCHIC CHRISTIANS

Clement's summary of the Valentinian view of Adam's creation in *Excerpts from Theodotus* (chapters 50–57) runs largely parallel to Irenaeus,<sup>34</sup> but at some points it offers more detailed information. A significant deviation from Irenaeus is that no role whatsoever is assigned to the Creator-God in sowing the divine seed into Adam. The only agents mentioned in this connection are Wisdom, who had put forth the seed, and the "male angels," whose task is to be servants of the seed created by Sophia.<sup>35</sup> Clement also offers a further example of Valentinian allegorical interpretations of Genesis: Adam's words addressed to Eve in Genesis 2:27 ("this is now bones of my bones and flesh of my flesh") are interpreted as referring to the divine soul ("bone") and the material soul ("flesh").<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, this part of Clement's *Excerpts* explains what happened to Adam's three essences after his creation. Since the spirit and the breath are divine qualities, Adam could only transmit them to later generations without being able to engender them himself. The only thing he himself could produce was the hylic essence. For this reason, there are many hylic beings, but there are not as many psychic ones, and the spiritual ones are few.<sup>37</sup> This argument implies that the hylic essence, which Adam himself was able to beget, has gradually taken a dominant position in his posteriority.

Clement's summary of Valentinian theology ends with a description of the salvation of spiritual and psychic Christians.<sup>38</sup> According to this teaching, the distinction between the spiritual and the psychic humans will ultimately disappear. The two groups, the spiritual beings and the faithful souls (*hai pistai psuchai*), will be summoned to an eschatological "marriage banquet common to all who are saved, until all are equal and know each other." This feast, in which spiritual and psychic beings are unified, takes place in the eighth heaven (Ogdoad). This is also the place of rest reserved to the spiritual beings (*tôn pneumatikôn anapausis*). Thereafter, the spiritual element (*ta pneumatika*) will be separated from the souls and it will leave them. It is this element—strikingly not the spiritual beings (*hoi pneumatikoi*)—that is allowed to enter the "bridal chamber within the Limit," that is, the Fullness, and to see the Spirit.<sup>39</sup> As in Irenaeus's account, it is affirmed here that the souls of the spiritual beings will remain in the Ogdoad.<sup>40</sup>

The salvation envisioned in this passage means that the believers belonging to the psychic class attain the very same salvation as spiritual beings. The expression "the faithful souls" implies, however, that there are also psychic beings who do not remain faithful. Their fate is probably that they

will be destroyed together with the hyllic essence. In consequence, although there are three different essences present in humankind, there are only two destinies for humans: either salvation, reserved both for the spiritual beings and the faithful souls, or destruction, reserved both for the hyllics and the unfaithful souls. What this teaching aims at is the education of the souls so that they will choose the first alternative.

Adam's creation is also addressed in another passage of Clement's *Excerpts*, which may go back to Theodotus himself.<sup>41</sup> This passage offers an interpretation of Genesis 1:27, in which the focus lies on the distinction between male and female. "Male" is identified with "the election" (*eklogē*). This group is not identical with "the elect soul" mentioned in *Excerpts* 2, but denotes the angels of the divine realm. According to Clement, the Valentinians identified themselves as "the females," "the calling" (*klēsis*), and as *to diapheron sperma*.<sup>42</sup> The latter term means either the "superior seed" or the "separated seed"<sup>43</sup>—or it can be a *double entendre* having both meanings. Due to its origin in the divine realm, this seed is no doubt "superior." Yet it now lives in separation from the male angelic beings—just as Eve was separated from Adam in the beginning. Hence, the calling needs some sort of transformation in order to overcome the separation and to achieve salvation.

Theodotus supports the necessity of transformation with a famous saying about a woman becoming a man. This sentence is attributed to Jesus in the early Christian sayings tradition.<sup>44</sup> It may be that Theodotus found the saying especially instructive because he thought that it came from Jesus. However that may be, Theodotus uses the saying in support of the idea that the calling will be saved when it leaves behind what is female. Thus the idea of transformation expounded in this passage seems very similar to that expressed in the aforementioned description of the eschatological banquet in which the spiritual element leaves the souls behind. In both cases, the element that can receive salvation will not be saved as it now stands; it must experience transformation. This is obviously a much more dynamic model of salvation than that ascribed to Valentinians by Irenaeus.

### HIPPOLYTUS'S ACCOUNT OF VALENTINIAN THEOLOGY

Regarding other summaries of Valentinian theology, Tertullian's account (*Val.* 24–25) can be left aside at this point, because it, as usual, adds little to what Irenaeus has already said.<sup>45</sup> Hippolytus, however, offers some significant details that differ from what Irenaeus and Clement have related. In his

account, the Creator-God, due to his psychic essence,<sup>46</sup> casts forth souls.<sup>47</sup> Yet he is also responsible for enveloping the “inner human being” with a body. The body is not simply “the garments of skin,” as in other Valentinian sources, but is drawn together from the material (hylic) and the diabolic essence.<sup>48</sup> In a way recalling Valentinus’s own teaching,<sup>49</sup> this human being is compared to an inn that accommodates either the soul, or the soul and demons, or the soul and “*logoi*.” The *logoi* are divine elements sown into the human being jointly by Wisdom and the “Common Fruit of the Pleroma,” that is, Christ.

According to this version of Valentinian teaching, the divine *logoi* can dwell in the earthly body if no demons are living together with the soul.<sup>50</sup> The soul, thus, is understood as a middle category that hosts either evil or good, depending on whether it attaches itself to the demons or to the spiritual *logoi*. This teaching, too, offers a dynamic picture of Valentinian anthropology: the soul is the locus where the choice between the spiritual and the demonic essence is made. While in Clement’s version the unification of the faithful souls and the spiritual beings takes place in an eschatological feast, in Hippolytus’s version this unification takes place already in this world, in each individual soul making the right choice.

Moreover, in Hippolytus’s version of Valentinian teaching, the Creator-God is identified with Abraham and his descendants.<sup>51</sup> Thus it seems that the psychic offspring is especially associated with the *Jews* rather than with “Church Christians” mentioned in Irenaeus. (On the other hand, it seems that all humans can variably house various combinations of the soul, *logoi*, and demons.)

## TWO MODES OF SALVATION IN HERACLEON’S THEOLOGY?

Heracleon, too, presupposed the tripartite distinction between the spiritual, the psychic, and the material essence. However, he did not use this distinction for different classes of Christians, but interpreted it in terms of ethnic identity. Relying on an early Christian text called *Kerygmata Petrou*, he taught that while pagans worship the material world and the Jews worship the psychic demiurge and his angels, the spiritual ones worship the true Father.<sup>52</sup> This distinction suggests that Heracleon used the designation “the spiritual ones” for all Christians.

It is a matter of debate whether Heracleon considered the three essences predetermined.<sup>53</sup> It is often suggested that Heracleon delineated two modes of salvation, one reserved for the spiritual ones and another for the psychic

ones. According to this theory, the former mode is illustrated by his interpretation of the Johannine story of the Samaritan woman (John 4:1–42) and the latter by his interpretation of the subsequent story of the healing of a royal officer’s son (John 4:46–54).<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, I do not find the strict separation of the functions of the two stories in Heracleon’s exegesis compelling.<sup>55</sup> Given that for Heracleon “the spiritual ones” are Christians in general and the psychics are Jews rather than lower-class Christians, his interpretation of the Samaritan woman can be understood as describing the conversion to Christianity. The Samaritan woman apparently represents a positive response to the Savior: she shows “faith corresponding to her one nature,” which means that she does “not doubt what he said to her.” As soon as she “became pierced by the word she hated everything else, even the so-called place of the living water.”<sup>56</sup>

Heracleon’s subsequent analysis of the story shows that the Samaritan woman does not denote a spiritual awakening without any moral consequences. The Savior shows that the woman has not been aware of her legal husband, who is her companion coming from the Fullness; it is this husband to whom Jesus refers in saying “Go, call your husband” (John 4:16). The six men she has had (cf. John 4:18) denote “the entire hylic evil” in which the woman was entangled. This entanglement is described in terms of sexual behavior: the woman had become a prostitute whom these men had mocked, mistreated, and left behind.<sup>57</sup> So this is the state in which the Savior meets her, and it is this state that she begins to hate after having met with him. Heracleon’s interpretation, thus, implies that conversion to Christianity involves a dramatic change in one’s way of life. Finding one’s divine companion obviously leads to withdrawal from immoral actions.<sup>58</sup>

Heracleon interprets John 4:46–54 as referring to the Creator-God and the human being.<sup>59</sup> Heracleon explains the term *basilikos* used for the royal officer in this story as meaning “a little king.” This interpretation enables Heracleon to see a hint in this story at the Creator-God, since this god is “a little king” whose kingdom is “little and temporary.” Following this lead, Heracleon interprets John 4:46–54 as denoting how the Creator-God realized that the human being he had created had fallen sick: it was in an contranatural condition (*ou kata phusin echōn*), dwelling in ignorance and sins.

Heracleon’s teaching about the Creator-God in this connection coincides with the idea attested in Irenaeus that Christ converted this god.<sup>60</sup> According to Heracleon, the Creator-God asked the Savior for help to heal the human being before it died because of its sins. Moreover, Heracleon identifies

the servants who informed the royal official of the healing of his son (John 4:51) with “the angels of the Creator-God.” The way Heracleon interprets their role shows that he is also occupied with the moral consequences of his scriptural interpretation. He says that it is the angels’ task to keep an eye on “the deeds of the humans in the world,” that is, “whether they, after the arrival of the Savior, conduct their lives as free citizens in good health and sincerely” (*ei errōmenōs kai eilikrinōs politeuointo*).

Heracleon’s interpretations of John 4:1–42 and John 4:46–54 have often been interpreted in light of the claim that Valentinian Christians set different moral standards for themselves as spiritual Christians and for other, psychic Christians. It is pointed out that no moral obligations are mentioned in his interpretation of John 4:1–42, while such obligations are mentioned in John 4:46–54. In that case, the moral consequences of the salvation brought by the Savior would only be relevant to the latter group, while the spiritual Christians could enjoy unprohibited freedom from any moral requirements. As my comments above have already shown, this reading does not take into account the strong moral aspect in Heracleon’s interpretation of John 4:1–42.

But could it be that John 4:46–54 still denotes a different mode of salvation? It is true that Heracleon sees in the sick child mentioned in this story a reference to what he calls “the Creator-God’s *own* human being.” Nevertheless, this sick human being is nowhere explicitly called a “psychic” being. Instead, Heracleon speaks of the *contrary-to-nature condition* (*ou kata phusin*) of this human being. This condition is no different from that denoted by the Samaritan woman in Heracleon’s interpretation: the sick human being is entangled “in ignorance and sins.” This affirmation suggests that the sick child denotes *all* humans whom the Creator-God had created and who have been wrapped in ignorance and sins before the arrival of the Savior.<sup>61</sup> There is no difference between the condition of the Samaritan woman, who lived in sinful relationships, and that of the sick child, whom Heracleon interpreted as denoting humans who are about to die because of their sins and ignorance.<sup>62</sup>

Finally, Heracleon’s view of the soul makes it impossible to think that he sought to develop in his reading of John 4:46–54 a theory of the salvation of the psychic Christians. According to Origen, Heracleon did not believe in the immortality of the soul, but claimed that “both soul and body are destroyed in Gehenna.” Like other Valentinians, Heracleon argued that the soul has the capacity of receiving salvation (*epithdeiōs echousan pros sōtērian*).<sup>63</sup> This does not, however, contradict his view that the

soul is mortal. Rather, Heracleon seems to have considered the soul to be a medium through which the humans can acquire salvation but that will not be saved itself. Since the soul will perish, salvation is possible only if this soul is *transformed* into something else.<sup>64</sup> Leaning on Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians (15:53–54), Heracleon maintains that salvation means that the imperishable is clothed with imperishability and the mortal with immortality.<sup>65</sup>

The possibility of transformation is also emphasized in other fragments of Heracleon. Like Theodotus, Heracleon called upon the famous saying of a woman changing into a man and argued that, in a similar manner, "a voice" can change to "a word."<sup>66</sup> This interpretation, based upon John 1:23, suggests that the psychic essence can, and must, transform into the spiritual essence. The idea that the soul must experience transformation into something else in order to be saved is so dominant in the fragments of Heracleon that it makes any deterministic interpretation of his teaching very unlikely.

Heracleon's opinion about the soul differs from that of other Valentinian teachers, who maintained that the souls of the just will enter a heavenly abode, or paradise, the government of which is assigned to the Creator-God at the end of the days. If Heracleon knew the aforementioned scenario of the eschatological marriage feast of the spiritual and psychic Christians, he probably disagreed with it, since he rejected the idea of the soul's eternal salvation. Thus, his reading of John 4:46–54, in which "psychics" are not even mentioned, should not be interpreted against the background of a more conventional Valentinian distinction between "psychic" and "spiritual" classes of Christians.

To sum up, it seems to me that Heracleon's interpretations of the Samaritan woman and the royal official's child do *not* describe two different modes of salvation preserved for two distinct groups of Christians. Rather, the former story describes conversion to Christianity (which for Heracleon is identical with "the spiritual ones"). The latter, in turn, describes first the condition of all humanity, characterized by sin and ignorance, before the arrival of the Savior, and then depicts the consequences of the salvation offered by the Savior. This salvation provides a cure for the sick soul, which means that "humans of this world" will experience transformation and find the correct way of life as "free citizens." Nothing in Heracleon's interpretation of John 4:46–54 warrants the idea that these qualities would have been preserved only for "middle-class" Christians. It seems more likely to me that Heracleon applied such high expectations and ethical standards to all Christians, both Valentinian and non-Valentinian ones.

## CONCLUSION

From a doctrinal perspective, it may seem difficult to bring the Valentinian tripartite division of humankind and the twofold division between the good and the evil under the same roof. It would be easier to assume that these opinions go back to two strikingly different systems of thought. If viewed from a more pragmatic perspective, however, the difference between the two theories is not so dramatic. The crucial point in both models is that there is an element within humans that makes it possible to choose between good and evil.

In the tripartite division, the soul is the middle term, in which this choice is made. If the soul inclines to the spiritual essence, it will be saved with it; if the soul inclines to the hylic essence, it will be destroyed with it. The twofold distinction is not much different: it basically says that people can decide between good and evil. Those choosing well are described in terms similar to the spiritual beings in the tripartite model: they become capable of receiving salvation. Those who make the wrong choice will suffer destruction just as the hylics do in the tripartite model. In fact, the tripartite and the twofold distinction merge in Hippolytus's version: though there are three factors (the soul, spiritual *logoi*, and demons), there are only two possible combinations: the soul is either inhabited by the *logoi* or by the demons.

The emphasis on the soul and its ability and responsibility to make the right choice in Valentinian interpretations of Adam's three essences indicates that these interpretations were first and foremost developed in order to provide a persuasive basis for an invitation to a correct way of life. Heracleon's interpretation of John 4:46–54 suggests that Valentinians shared with other Christians the view that the Savior offers a cure for the sickness of sin, and they thought the healing brought by him leads to a virtuous life.

Against this background, I find it inconceivable that Valentinian teachers in general taught to one group salvation by nature, which involved no moral progress whatsoever, and salvation by transformation leading to moral improvement to another, *less advanced* group. Not only is such a picture not supported clearly enough by the surviving evidence for their views—and there is a lot of evidence speaking against it—but such an approach would also be at odds with the strong emphasis on moral development in all ancient schools of thought.

Another noteworthy issue is that those Valentinian teachers who embraced the tripartite division of humankind used it for different purposes of demarcation. There is no doubt that some of them divided Christians into

two classes, as Irenaeus complains. Valentinians, however, also used this distinction to show a difference between Christians, Jews, and polytheists. This is how both Heracleon and, as will be seen below, the author of the *Tripartite Tractate* applied the tripartite division of humankind. The same usage was also implicit in the Valentinian theology summarized by Hippolytus. If Irenaeus, too, knew this interpretation, he would not have any use for it. This teaching would have been countereffective for his case, since it would have shown that Valentinians did not always clearly distinguish themselves from other Christians as a superior spiritual class but regarded themselves as part of the community of all Christians.

TWO CLASSES OF CHRISTIANS  
IN PRACTICE

THE DETERMINISTIC picture Irenaeus gives of the Valentinian teaching about the three classes of humankind is no doubt one-sided, and his sweeping accusations against the immoral lifestyle of the Valentinians do not find support in any nonhostile sources. Nevertheless, his complaint that Valentinians seemed arrogant was probably not completely ill-grounded. It is conceivable that the distinction between a superior class of spiritual Christians and a lower class of ordinary Christians was not merely a theoretical construct. Such divisions tend to create social structures as well.

This side of the Valentinian teaching can be seen in the picture drawn of an ideal Christian community in the *Interpretation of Knowledge* (NHC XI,1). The text creates a link between Valentinian myth, retold in the first part, and the structure of a Christian community. The text also offers a unique glimpse of the social reality of its earliest readers. The author of *Interpretation* describes the situation of a conflict between those “who have made progress in the Word” and those who are envious of the advanced ones.

But what kind of conflict was this exactly? Here frustration kicks in, because the only extant manuscript of *Interpretation* is so severely damaged that most of its contents can no longer be reconstructed. In fact, only 7.5 percent of the original text is readable.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, from the least damaged parts of *Interpretation* it becomes clear that the author of this text wanted to exhort the audience toward unity and concord, and that metaphors of the body are frequently used for this purpose.

The usual explanation for the body imagery in *Interpretation* is that the author of this text simply took over this language from Pauline epistles.<sup>2</sup> In my view, however, the use of body metaphors in *Interpretation* is less Pauline than is usually assumed. Although the text builds upon certain Pauline and deuterio-Pauline innovations related to this imagery, the manner in which the metaphor of the body is employed in *Interpretation* is very much the opposite of what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12.

An analysis of the body metaphors in *Interpretation* also contributes to the scholarly discussion regarding the genre of *Interpretation*. Thus far, the text has been variably designated as a community rule, homily, paraenesis, and philosophical epistle. Given the deplorable state of the text, it is impossible to define the genre of *Interpretation* with certainty. What seems clear, however, is that *Interpretation* is replete with features that connect it with deliberative rhetoric. In her significant study on Paul's 1 Corinthians, Margaret Mitchell has examined this genre in detail.<sup>3</sup> In light of her study, a reassessment of the relationship between *Interpretation* and 1 Corinthians is urgently needed. My suggestion in this chapter is that not all of the affinities between these two texts go back to the use of 1 Corinthians by the author of *Interpretation*, as scholars have assumed; some of them are due to the deliberative genre common to both writings. Recognition of the use of deliberative rhetoric in *Interpretation* also makes us more sensitive to the different social values embedded in 1 Corinthians and in *Interpretation*.

#### STATE OF THE TEXT AND EDITIONS OF *INTERPRETATION*

The fragmentary condition of the *Interpretation of Knowledge* forms a great obstacle to any reading of this text. In their respective editions of *Interpretation*, John Turner and Uwe-Karsten Plisch have been very optimistic in restoring the extensive lacunae in the text, but this approach to editing highly fragmentary texts is not without problems. Not only is the reader of these editions not supplied with sufficient justification for the decisions made in each individual case, but differences between the two editions are often considerable. Thus, interpretations of the text would be very different depending on which edition the reader has chosen to follow. Although Turner and Plisch indicate their emendations with square brackets, their editions may lull readers of *Interpretation* into false confidence regarding its contents.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, I agree with Stephen Emmel's petition that we would need "an edition that sought only to present the surviving evidence as accurately as possible (reporting all possible readings of ambiguous

letter traces), restoring lacunas only where effectively certain or highly likely restorations are determinable on the basis of surviving cotext and context."<sup>5</sup>

Most importantly, we must recognize the limits of our knowledge concerning *Interpretation*. For example, the fact that its first eleven lines are missing makes any suggestion concerning its literary genre tentative at best. A thorough compositional or rhetorical analysis of the text is impossible on the basis of the few passages that can actually be read. What can be traced in the readable parts of the text, however, are a number of rhetorical devices and commonplaces, which show that the author of *Interpretation*, like Ptolemaeus,<sup>6</sup> was familiar with ancient rhetorical conventions and employed them in composing this text.<sup>7</sup> It is in this context of ancient rhetoric that the use of body imagery in *Interpretation* is best understood.

### BODY METAPHORS IN *INTERPRETATION*

The conflict addressed in *Interpretation* is triggered by what the author calls "the spiritual gift." The author describes a situation in which "the flowing of gifts among the brothers" has split a community into haves and have-nots.<sup>8</sup> The former are those who "have made progress in the Word."<sup>9</sup> They are portrayed as having a privileged position in the group addressed in *Interpretation*. The author describes how jealousy was aroused in the community because the haves were entitled to speak while the have-nots were not.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the author maintains that the split in the church is caused by the cosmic rulers, who had also imprisoned the human being in the body.<sup>11</sup> An undesirable social development within the church is, thus, explained as being due to hostile supernatural forces.<sup>12</sup>

From the author's point of view, the main problem in this situation is the envy shown by the have-nots toward the haves. In order to address this problem, the author has created the figure of a troublemaker, who appears in the text as the author's interlocutor. This figure gives voice to a protest against the privilege of speaking bestowed upon the haves: "Why can this one speak, but I cannot speak?"<sup>13</sup> The troublemaker is also described as being envious of, hating, and speaking against those who are spiritually better off than he is. Moreover, the troublemaker is the primary addressee of the author's call for unity and concord. This can be seen in the fact that the moral exhortation in *Interpretation* is usually expressed in second-person-singular masculine forms.

The troublemaker does not have to be identical with any real person in an early Christian group, nor can it be concluded from the use of the

second-person-singular forms in the text that *Interpretation* was written to one addressee only.<sup>14</sup> The author's direct address to the troublemaker brings an element of the diatribe style into the text.<sup>15</sup> The interlocutor is first and foremost a literary device used to embody the bad attitude in the community that the author considers the nucleus of the problem addressed in *Interpretation*. Such an interlocutor no doubt represents part of the audience to whom the text is addressed,<sup>16</sup> but he does not have to be identical with any real figure in that audience.

The metaphor of the body is an essential part of the author's attempt to turn the grudging interlocutor away from envy and hate and to steer him toward concord. The relationship between the head and other parts of the body is elaborated in several passages of *Interpretation*.<sup>17</sup> The head is used as a metaphor for Christ and the other parts subordinated to the head as a metaphor for the church (*ekklēsia*).<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, there is a discussion about the body (*sōma*) and the proper places of its parts (*melos*).<sup>19</sup> It was most likely affirmed in this severely damaged passage that no single part of the body can become the entire body; this much can be concluded from the extant words "or entirely an eye." Other body parts, most likely the hand and the foot, were most likely mentioned in the same connection. In addition, references to "the death of members" and "dead members," which follow a few lines later,<sup>20</sup> were probably connected with the discussion of individual body parts, but the exact connection remains obscure because of the extensive damage to the text.

In the subsequent section, which belongs to one of the better preserved passages of *Interpretation*, the author urges the interlocutor not to complain about his inferior position in the body.<sup>21</sup> The language used in this passage sounds very Pauline, but the actual relationship is not so close after all, as will be seen below. This passage runs as follows:

Do not accuse your head that it did not make an eye of you, but it made a finger of you, and do not be jealous of him who was made into the part of an eye or a hand or a foot. Be grateful that you are not outside the body. After all, you have one head, because of which the eye exists, as well as the hand, the foot and the rest of the parts. Why is it that you hate him who is made into [ . . . ] why is it that you speak against [ . . . ]

This passage offers an interesting combination of hierarchical and egalitarian arguments. On the one hand, the author argues that each part of the body has its own appropriate place allocated to it by the head. To protest against the prevailing hierarchy in the body would, therefore, be the same

as questioning the authority of the head. On the other hand, the author emphasizes that all members in the communal body are equal to one another.<sup>22</sup> The two arguments are not contradictory, for the equality of the members is based upon the recognition that they have only one head.<sup>23</sup>

The author of *Interpretation* also employs body imagery in several other ways. First, it is connected with a description of common advantage: the gifts bestowed upon one member will benefit all members in the social body,<sup>24</sup> and even the reluctant interlocutor has the same head “from whom these streams of gifts stem.”<sup>25</sup> All parts of the body should rejoice because of the gift given to one member and have their share in this gift “without hesitation.”<sup>26</sup> In fact, it seems that the author considers the spiritual progress of the more advanced in the community to be a possibility open to all members.<sup>27</sup>

Second, as part of the egalitarian argument, the author emphasizes the mutual dependence of the body parts: if one part suffers, all suffer, and if one part is healed, all are healed.<sup>28</sup> It is also stated that all members of the community “serve (*eurdiako[nei]*)” together.<sup>29</sup> The Greek verb *diakonein* used here can be read as referring to Christians as servants of God or Christ,<sup>30</sup> but it can also refer to works of charity in the community (for example, those described in Matthew 25:31–46 or in Acts 6:1–3). Again, the exact context cannot be known because of a lacuna in the text.

Third, the author maintains that an inferior part of the body should be grateful because it is “not outside the body.”<sup>31</sup> This contention appears to be an inclusive statement affirming the inferior member’s place in the community, but it also evokes an indirect threat against this member. The author has already earlier insinuated that a jealous member is in danger of being removed from the body<sup>32</sup> and has noted that there can be “dead members” in the community. The author argues that gratitude for the gift bestowed upon those who are spiritually well off is a prerequisite for one’s own progress: “[ . . . give] thanks spirit[ually and] pray for that one to have a share in the grace [that exists] in him.”<sup>33</sup>

### THE INTERPRETATION OF KNOWLEDGE AND PAULINE EPISTLES

The author of *Interpretation* clearly drew upon Pauline and deutero-Pauline epistles, in which the metaphor of a body is used for the Christian community (Rom. 12:4–5; 1 Cor. 12:14–26; Eph. 4:15–16; Col. 1:18, 1:24, 2:10, 2:19). Above all, *Interpretation* presupposes the idea found in Ephesians and Colossians that Christ is the head of the Christian community. In those

epistles, it is affirmed that Christ is the head “from whom the whole body” stems (*ex hou pan to sōma*, Eph. 4:15; Col. 2:19). This idea—which is *not* a commonsense argument!—is recalled in *Interpretation*: “You have one head, *because of which* the eye, the hand, the foot, and all other parts exist.”<sup>34</sup>

Only a few lines before the passage quoted above, the author of *Interpretation* had recalled the conclusion Paul drew from his discussion of the community as a body in 1 Corinthians 12:26 (NRSV: “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it”). In *Interpretation*, it is said: “[If there is] someone [who suffers, they] suffer with him, and [if there is someone] who is saved, they are saved with him.”<sup>35</sup> While the first part of this passage is very similar to what Paul said in 1 Corinthians, in the second part, Paul’s reference to being honored is replaced with a reference to salvation.<sup>36</sup>

Given the clear references to 1 Corinthians 12 in *Interpretation*, it is all the more striking that, in describing strife between the parts of the body, the author of this text did not choose to follow more closely Paul’s presentation of the body parts having words with each other. The only thing *Interpretation* and 1 Corinthians 12 have in common at this point is the portrayal of body parts complaining about their role in the body. In the details, *Interpretation* goes its own way. Body parts mentioned in it are not all the same as those in 1 Corinthians. “Head” and “finger,” mentioned in *Interpretation*, do not appear in 1 Corinthians 12, whereas “ear,” mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12, does not appear in *Interpretation*. In addition, the author of *Interpretation* does not follow Paul’s identification of the complaining parts. In 1 Corinthians 12:15–16, the foot complains, “because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” and the ear complains, “because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body.” In *Interpretation*, it is the finger (not mentioned by Paul at all) that is warned not to complain because it was not made an eye.

Even more striking than the differences in the details is the fact that the entire metaphor of the body is used for different ends in 1 Corinthians and in *Interpretation*. Paul is concerned with “the members of the body that seem to be weaker,” arguing that they are indispensable, and concluding that God gave “greater honor to the inferior member” (1 Cor. 12:22–25). The author of *Interpretation*, in contrast, is not at all occupied with the honor of inferior members. Rather, in this text, the inferior part (finger) is the problem; it is the wrong attitude of this part toward a superior part (eye) that threatens the unity of the social body.

Since the author of *Interpretation* knew how Paul used body metaphors in 1 Corinthians 12, there must have been some specific reason for leaving out this part of Paul’s argumentation. The most likely explanation is that

the author found other current traditions of employing body imagery more useful than what Paul had said in 1 Corinthians.

### *INTERPRETATION OF KNOWLEDGE AS DELIBERATIVE RHETORIC*

As I pointed out above, it has proved problematic to determine the genre of *Interpretation*. It seems clear now that *Interpretation* is not a community rule, as Klaus Koschorke once suggested,<sup>37</sup> for the text does not provide a set of concrete rules to be followed by the members of a community. Elaine Pagels' suggestion that *Interpretation* is a homily may seem unlikely as well,<sup>38</sup> at least if "homily" is defined as "a public explanation of a sacred doctrine or sacred text" that "served as part of a religious ceremony with the function of explaining some of the doctrines underlying that ceremony."<sup>39</sup> No clear evidence can be obtained from the surviving parts of *Interpretation* to the effect that it was intended to be read in the context of a religious ceremony.

Stephen Emmel's recent suggestion is that *Interpretation* "should be approached as something more akin to a philosophical epistle" similar to the *Treatise of Resurrection* (NHC 1, 4) and Ptolemaeus's *Letter to Flora*.<sup>40</sup> The letter genre would account better than that of a homily for the use of second-person-singular forms in *Interpretation*—even if we assume, as I have suggested, that the interlocutor described in this text is fictitious rather than real.<sup>41</sup> It is also possible that *Interpretation* was framed as a letter by its now missing opening, but this is something we cannot know. In my view, however, a major obstacle to Emmel's suggestion is posed by the closure of *Interpretation*. In this passage, which has remained intact in the manuscript, the addressee is not mentioned (as it is in the *Treatise of Resurrection* and in the *Letter to Flora*),<sup>42</sup> nor is there any greeting (as it is in *Treatise*),<sup>43</sup> nor is the act of writing referred to (as it is in both *Treatise* and in the *Letter to Flora*).<sup>44</sup> In other words, all formal signs by means of which a text could have been framed as an epistle either real or literary (a "Lehrbrief") are missing in the closure of *Interpretation*.

While the conclusion of *Interpretation* speaks against the theory that this text was written in the form of a letter, the text contains indisputable signs of deliberative rhetoric,<sup>45</sup> or the rhetoric of the assembly (*genus symbouletikon*). It was one of the three major genres of ancient rhetorical discourse and was used both in public speeches and, as Mitchell demonstrates, in letters. According to Mitchell, the four characteristic features of this genre are the following:

1. The future orientation: deliberative rhetoric “urges an audience, either public or private, to pursue a particular course of action in the future.”<sup>46</sup>
2. The appeal to advantage (*utilitas, to sumpheron*): “an argument which focuses particularly upon *to sumpheron*, the advantageous course to follow in the future, is deliberative.”<sup>47</sup>
3. Proof by example (*paradeigma*) and call to imitation: “deliberative argumentation is characterized by proof from example, and often includes an entreaty that the audience imitate the behavior of the esteemed example.”<sup>48</sup>
4. The choice of appropriate subjects for deliberation, especially common among which are factionalism and concord (*homonoia*) and unity within the political body: “arguments which seek to persuade an audience to end their party strife and live in unity in the future are deliberative.”<sup>49</sup>

Several of these features can be found in *Interpretation*. Its author addresses factionalism and urges the audience to agreement (*harmonia*), reconciliation, and concord (*sumphōnia*).<sup>50</sup> The author also employs proof by example.<sup>51</sup> The clearest evidence for this is the contrast drawn in the text between the interlocutor’s behavior and that of the Word. While the interlocutor is characterized by jealousy (“you are jealous,” *ekrphthonei*), the Word is “not jealous” (*atrphthonei*), “without jealousy” (*ajnrphthonei*), and gives away gifts.<sup>52</sup> A call to imitation can also be deduced from similar portraits painted of the Savior, who was persecuted,<sup>53</sup> and of his followers, of whom it is said that “human beings of this sort are persecuted until death.”<sup>54</sup> The recapitulation of the teachings of Jesus (*Int. Knowl.* 9.27–35) may also have served as a call to imitation.

Appeal to advantage, too, can be often found in *Interpretation*. It offers a discussion of what is and what is not beneficial to the soul.<sup>55</sup> The Coptic noun meaning “advantage” and “profit” (*hēu*) occurs several times in the text.<sup>56</sup> In addition, the impersonal predicate *sšē* appears four times in the text.<sup>57</sup> This expression is often translated “it is fitting,” but it is also used as the translation of the Greek verb *sumpherein* (Prov. 29:37). *sšē* can, thus, be translated as denoting advantage or benefit: “It is advantageous that . . .” In *Interpretation*, the verb *sšē* is used once together with a Greek verb *apolauein*,<sup>58</sup> which not only means “to have enjoyment of something” but also “to have the benefit of something.” Accordingly, the relevant passage in *Interpretation* can be translated: “It is advantageous for each of us to [have the benefit of] the gift one has received from [God].” Although we have only fragments of *Interpretation*, these examples show the considerable impact of ancient deliberative rhetoric on the composition of this text.

PAUL, THE *INTERPRETATION OF KNOWLEDGE*,  
AND THE VALUES OF DELIBERATIVE RHETORIC

The most common representatives of ancient deliberative rhetoric were Greco-Roman speeches of concord. In my view, they offer the closest analogy for the use of body metaphors in the *Interpretation of Knowledge*. The use of the human body and its parts as a metaphor for society and distribution of tasks between its members was a commonplace in these speeches.<sup>59</sup>

The most famous example of the use of body metaphors in such a context is a fable attributed to Menenius Agrippa<sup>60</sup> of a revolt of the hands, the mouth, and the feet against the belly, because it “remained quietly in their midst with nothing to do but to enjoy the good things which they bestowed upon it.” However, when other parts of the body began to protest and stopped nourishing the belly, the whole body became weak. Only then the other members realized that the belly “had no idle task to perform,” for it nourished the whole body.<sup>61</sup> Menenius Agrippa is alleged to have delivered this speech in a situation in which the inferior class in society, the *plebs*, needed to be urged “to cease from *seditio* and work for *concordia*.”<sup>62</sup> The speech clearly offers an attempt to justify the *status quo* in which the upper class is able to continue to enjoy benefits bestowed by its privileged position in society.

In his study on 1 Corinthians, Dale Martin has demonstrated that this bias was typical of Greco-Roman speeches of concord. According to him, such talks mirror the conservative ideology of “benevolent patriarchalism,” for their primary purpose “was to mitigate conflict by reaffirming and solidifying the hierarchy of society.”<sup>63</sup> Martin argues that, on this issue, Paul was the exception to the rule: “Paul was well acquainted with the rhetoric of concord, but in 1 Corinthians he turns it against its usual role as a prop for upper-class ideology. . . . Paul argues . . . that the normal status hierarchy is only ‘apparently’ unproblematic and that it is actually the lesser members, those who are weaker and seemingly less honorable, who are ‘really’ the most honored.”<sup>64</sup>

In comparison to Paul’s subversive way of using body metaphors in 1 Corinthians 12, the author of *Interpretation* takes a step back toward the traditional values inherent in the Greco-Roman rhetoric of concord. While Paul warned against despising the less honorable members in the social body, the appeal to concord in *Interpretation* is characterized by the same upper-class ideology as in Menenius’s speech, though the upper class is not defined in *Interpretation* in terms of one’s position in society but in terms of one’s having the “prophetic” gift.<sup>65</sup> The author of *Interpretation* has no

qualms about the circumstance that only those belonging to the spiritual upper class are entitled to speak while others were not. Above all, upper-class ideology can be seen in the way the author approaches the conflict addressed in the text: what puts the community in danger is the lower class (the have-nots) and its envy toward the upper class (the haves, the spiritually advanced). Moreover, the solution the author recommends to the audience recalls the benevolent patriarchalism of the Greco-Roman rhetoric of concord. The author's upper-class attitude becomes most clearly visible in the affirmation that the inferior members should be first and foremost grateful for being part of the communal body and stop complaining about their lower status in it. In *Interpretation*, writes Michael Desjardins, "the advice still comes from 'on high,' and with the expectation that the church members will obey."<sup>66</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The description of a community split into two factions in *Interpretation* begs the question of what was going on in the group to which this text was addressed. It would be unwarranted, however, to identify the situation described in the text with the real-life situation of its addressees. Concord speeches were not always delivered in the midst of an acute crisis; such talks could also be composed for entertainment and as parts of historians' accounts.<sup>67</sup> Thus, the use of deliberative rhetoric itself does not say much about the situation of the addressed community.

Nevertheless, the conflict described in *Interpretation* over the issue of who is entitled to speak in the meetings of a community seems so concrete that it is unlikely that this text would have been composed for purposes of entertainment. Rather, I would assume that, in order to be meaningful, the text had to have some equivalent in the real-life situation of those to whom it was written; otherwise, it would hardly have made any sense to them (and it would have been unlikely that the text would have been copied afterward).<sup>68</sup>

This does not mean, however, that the real-life situation of the community can be deduced from the rhetorical situation created in *Interpretation*. The rhetorical situation does not have to have a one-to-one relationship with the situation of the community. Philip Tite has reminded us that "we need to clearly differentiate *actual* social relations and *perceived* social relations. Rhetorical portrayal of a social situation can radically differ from an actual social context."<sup>69</sup> Accordingly, it is possible that the text describes a perceived rather than an actual crisis (though the difference

between the two is often blurred), or it can be that the text describes only an anticipated crisis:<sup>70</sup> the author may have been sensitive to some initial, or only potential, problems that could lead to strife in the community at a later stage. In that case, the author's description of strife within the social body should not be understood as a mirror image of, or a reaction to, what had happened in a community but rather as an attempt to alert the audience to potentially destructive tendencies in this group.

While it is impossible to tease out from *Interpretation* the exact situation in which it was written, it is worthwhile to recognize that the text's ethos basically corresponds to the picture painted of Valentinian Christians by their opponents. The insistence on the privileged status of those who have "made progress in the Word" in *Interpretation* and Irenaeus's polemical description of the sense of elitism characteristic of Valentinians are two sides of the same coin: the same social phenomenon is described from opposite perspectives in *Interpretation* and by Irenaeus. *Interpretation* could well be read as a response to critics such as Irenaeus, who accused Valentinians of elitism. Irenaeus maintained that they considered themselves "the spiritual ones" and the ordinary members of the church less advanced "psychic" Christians. The author of *Interpretation* addresses protests, such as we find in Irenaeus, against the boundary between those who have and those who do not have the spiritual gift, and responds by portraying these protests as expressions of hatred and envy.

In this context, it is noteworthy that the boundary drawn in *Interpretation* is not one between two separate communities. Instead, the author presupposes a situation where the two groups are within the same community and argues that the have-nots can draw benefits from the gift bestowed upon the advanced.<sup>71</sup> This picture of a mixed community corresponds to that emerging from Irenaeus's presentation: the Valentinians he was opposed to had not established a church of their own but had formed a group of spiritually advanced Christians within the "ordinary" church.<sup>72</sup> What clearly sets the author of *Interpretation* and Irenaeus apart from each other is their scenarios of how things should be. While Irenaeus wanted to make the boundary between Valentinians and other Christians as insurmountable as possible, the vision of the Christian community in *Interpretation* is that instead of separation there should be unity between the two factions of Christians.

As was mentioned above, the opponents defined Valentinians as a "school," and this definition probably conformed with Valentinian self-understanding.<sup>73</sup> *Interpretation* is no exception here, as can be seen in the school terminology the author uses to describe the church.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, the

language of “making progress in the Word” was also probably borrowed from philosophical schools. The division between the more and the less advanced members, which the author of *Interpretation* sought to justify, can be best understood within this context of a school of thought, in which it seems to have been a usual practice that instruction was offered at different levels and that advanced teaching was reserved for a chosen few.<sup>75</sup> Body metaphors are used in the *Interpretation of Knowledge* to offer legitimacy to the existence of different levels of spiritual progress and of respective factions within the Christian community.

## PART III

### ◆ MYTH, SOCIETY, AND ◆ NON-CHRISTIANS



MYTH, POWER, AND THE  
OPPRESSED CHURCH

VALENTINIANS NOT only used mythic discourse to justify distinctions within the Christian community, but they also employed it to account for the structure of Greco-Roman society, to explain why the Christian church had to suffer in this society, and to offer a foundation for a distinct self-understanding that makes Christians different both from Greeks and Jews. These concerns become visible in the way the cosmogonic myth is used in the *Tripartite Tractate* (NHC I, 5).

The author of this text is especially occupied with describing the origin and effects of power. This topic looms large in the text: the verbal expression “to love command” (*maeioueh cahne*) and the abstract noun derived from it, “lust for power” (*mntmaeioueh cahne*), appear fifteen times.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, related Coptic expressions for “command” (*ouah/oueh cahne*, both verb and noun) and for “commander” (*refoueh cahne*) are attested a dozen times.<sup>2</sup> The two former expressions denoting lust for power do not appear at all in any other Nag Hammadi tractates, and the expression *ouah cahne* occurs in some other Nag Hammadi tractates<sup>3</sup> but only a few times in contexts similar to that in the *Tripartite Tractate*. Also, other expressions are used in this text to emphasize the aspects of power and dominion.<sup>4</sup>

Lust for power is a theme of crucial importance in the *Tripartite Tractate* because of the role assigned to it in the organization and administration of the cosmic household (*oikonomia*), which is one of the key concepts in the text.<sup>5</sup> The *oikonomia* described in the *Tripartite Tractate* is pervaded by beings whose major characteristic is lust for power. It is due to this fact that a cosmic hierarchy must be established in which each of these beings is entitled to rule over something.<sup>6</sup>

He provided each of them with a suitable position. Each of them was commanded to become a ruler over a place and a work. . . . In consequence, there are commanders and those who are beyond them in the structures of dominion and servanthood of the angels and the archangels. Their works are of different sorts and diverse. Each ruler . . . was entrusted with the cosmic household [*oikonomia*]. Nothing remained without command, and nothing remained without kingship. From the end of the heavens to the limits of the [earth], to the inhabited areas of the world and to the places beneath the earth, there are kings, lords and commanders. Some of them are needed for punishment, others for judgment, others for providing rest and healing, others for teaching, and others for guarding.

This passage belongs to an account of angelic rulers, but the hierarchy described in it, extending from heaven to the earth and beneath the earth, seems to include all other kinds of rulers as well. “Kings,” “lords,” and “commanders” mentioned in this passage may, therefore, denote angelic and human rulers as well. This view is supported by the fact that no substantial difference is drawn between angels and human beings elsewhere in the *Tripartite Tractate*; rather, they are regularly portrayed as belonging together in this text.<sup>7</sup>

The portrayal of the beings who love to command and of their functions in the *oikonomia* lends an emphatically political tone to the *Tripartite Tractate*. While previous scholarship on this text has provided us with plenty of data related to its theological and philosophical background,<sup>8</sup> the political aspect has gone practically unnoticed thus far. What makes this aspect even more intriguing is the fact that the power-seeking beings do not only appear as *dramatis personae* in a cosmogonic tale, but their continuing influence becomes also visible in the situation of the church as described in this text.<sup>9</sup> The presentation of the power-seeking beings in the *Tripartite Tractate* raises, therefore, broader questions concerning myth, its functions, and its relationship to social reality.

#### GNOSTIC MYTH AND SOCIETY: FROM KIPPENBERG TO WILLIAMS

Only a few decades ago, it was not unusual to trace references to social reality in Gnostic myths. In his article from 1970, Hans Kippenberg argued that the designation of evil powers as *archai*, *exousiai*, and *archontes* in Gnostic systems “has political references and contains a judgment over conditions of power of the state in which the Gnostic lives.”<sup>10</sup> The Gnostic’s

cosmic model is, according to Kippenberg, “a projection of a certain social assessment: rejection of the authoritarian administration of the Roman state.”<sup>11</sup> Consequently, Kippenberg affirmed that the Gnostic “living under this power is called to rebellion.”<sup>12</sup> Leaning on Weber, Kippenberg maintained that this attitude toward the state in ancient Gnosticism is “the reaction of a class of intellectuals to having been declared politically incompetent” (*eine politische Entmündigung*).<sup>13</sup> Although “there are no direct references to the political order of Imperium Romanum in Gnostic systems,”<sup>14</sup> Kippenberg contends that the Gnostic Creator-God embodies “the political power that faces (the Gnostic) as alien.”<sup>15</sup>

In an article published in 1976, Elaine Pagels also suggested that there is a political stance in Gnostic portrayals of the Creator-God. Instead of seeing a protest against the Roman state, however, she insisted that these portrayals reflect a Gnostic opposition to *ecclesiastical* authorities: “Even in the demiurge’s ‘foolish’ assertion that ‘I am God, and there is none other,’ the Gnostic could hear the bishop’s claim to exercise exclusive power over the community. In his warning ‘I am a jealous God,’ the Gnostic might recognize as well the bishop’s ‘jealousy’ of those who are beyond his authority.”<sup>16</sup> Unlike Kippenberg, Pagels took into account the description in the *Tripartite Tractate* of those characterized by their lust for power and vain ambition. She associated the “spirit of ambition, lust for power, and envy” with “the distinct ‘orders’ among ‘the clergy’” as well as with the distinction between “laymen and priests.”<sup>17</sup> This view is modified in Pagels’ later work, in which the ambition and lust for power mentioned in the *Tripartite Tractate* are no longer connected to the clergy alone, but more generally to “the demiurge’s offspring—the ordinary Christians.”<sup>18</sup> This conclusion may be supported by the fact that in the *Tripartite Tractate* those who lust for power are identified with psychic humans who, in other Valentinian sources, are identified with the “ordinary” Christians.<sup>19</sup> As I will argue below, it is not clear that this, however, would really be the case in the *Tripartite Tractate*.

More recent scholarship has been more reticent in reading Gnostic myths as reflections of social reality.<sup>20</sup> In her article published in 1990, Karen King still spoke of “the situation of the Gnostic” that is characterized by “entrapment . . . and oppression,” and affirmed, like Kippenberg, that “the proper response is always rebellion,” which becomes visible in “rejection of the physical body and . . . rebellion against worldly authority.”<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, King did not subscribe to Kippenberg’s approach of inferring social reality from the Gnostic myth, but she warns against “a speculative move from the symbolic world (of myth) to the social world (of community).”<sup>22</sup>

Likewise, Michael Williams has reminded us of “how careful one must be in drawing conclusions about social reality based on mythological symbol.”<sup>23</sup> He points out “that religious traditions with supposedly ‘anticosmic’ mythologies are not automatically incompatible with political initiative.”<sup>24</sup> In addition, Williams questions the view that there was a distinct Gnostic attitude toward society, be it either rebellion or indifference. Instead, he shows that there is a variety of different views about society among the groups usually labeled as “Gnostic,” and these groups belong to different points in the axis between “sect movements” and “church movements.”<sup>25</sup> According to Williams, Valentinianism belongs to the latter group.<sup>26</sup>

In support of this distinction, Williams argues that “demiurgical myth seems in many instances to have been associated with greater involvement with the larger society, not less.”<sup>27</sup> This contention is supported with the following arguments: biblical demiurgists were active in Rome, they ate meat offered to idols and attended gladiator shows, they adopted ideas from Greek philosophy, and at least some of them showed a disdain for martyrdom.<sup>28</sup> The last point shows, according to Williams, that “there were certainly important examples of persons who by their criticism of martyrdom were in fact advocating the toning down of Christian sociopolitical deviance . . . they ‘fit in’ more comfortably with surrounding society, experienced less social tension—and were apparently *interested* in experiencing less social tension.”<sup>29</sup>

Williams has no doubt provided us with a necessary correction of sweeping generalizations as to what was considered to be the Gnostic attitude toward society. Nevertheless, all indications he gives to the effect that some demiurgical groups attempted to reduce their distance to the surrounding sociocultural environment are not equally compelling. For example, the evidence for Valentinian Christians eating meat offered to idols or attending gladiator shows<sup>30</sup> is as problematic as that related to their immoral sexual behavior (which Williams does *not* take at face value),<sup>31</sup> for each of these accusations stems equally from heresiological polemics. There is no firsthand evidence in Nag Hammadi tractates for Christian teachers who would have encouraged their adherents to eat meat offered to idols or to attend pagan festivities.<sup>32</sup> As I will argue in chapter 11, the adoption of Greek philosophical ideas is not an unequivocal sign of accommodation either. Although the *Tripartite Tractate* is replete with ideas borrowed from Greek philosophy, this text condemns the Greek culture in its entirety.

It may be true, then, that, as Williams affirms, “social behavior is at least as indicative of psychological attitudes as is mythological symbol,”<sup>33</sup> but it is very difficult to draw a precise picture of that behavior on the basis of

our extant sources. It is, however, no longer possible to simply turn back to earlier theories about the political ramifications of Gnostic myths. In light of Williams' groundbreaking study, it is now clear that Kippenberg operated with an overly monolithic understanding of ancient Gnosticism. Moreover, Kippenberg's sociological interpretations of what he took to be *the* Gnostic myth is not only based on a clearly reductionist understanding of religious texts,<sup>34</sup> but it also neglects the great variety of functions that can be attributed to myth in general.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, when it comes to the cosmogonic tale told in the *Tripartite Tractate*, the political aspect is exceptionally strong in it and needs to be taken into account.<sup>36</sup> Not only is this text concerned with *oikonomia*, which is, by and large, a political concept,<sup>37</sup> but the myth is also closely linked with, and accounts for, the social reality described in this text.

#### MYTH: LUST FOR POWER IN THE COSMIC TALE OF THE *TRIPARTITE TRACTATE*

In the *Tripartite Tractate*, lust for power is derived from Word. He is one of the aeons dwelling in the divine pleroma who, in this text, are understood as "mental substances" of the Father of All.<sup>38</sup> The account of Word in this text runs parallel to that of Sophia in other versions of the Valentinian myth described by Irenaeus and other heresiologists.<sup>39</sup> Like Sophia in Irenaeus, Word is described in the *Tripartite Tractate* as the youngest of all eternal beings, and it was he who attempted to grasp the Father's incomprehensibility. His action, like that of Sophia, involved both audacity (*mntnoč mmeeue*) and love (*agapē*).<sup>40</sup> Like the attempt of Sophia, that of Word also proves a failure. It results in self-doubt, division, forgetfulness, ignorance, sickness, and separation from the divine realm.<sup>41</sup> Word, who has been described as male to begin with, now becomes "like a female nature," being able to bring forth only shadows, copies, appearances, and likenesses of the pleroma.<sup>42</sup>

It is the "exalted" or "arrogant" thought (*pimeeue mminjasihēt*)<sup>43</sup> of Word from which emerges a group of beings characterized by lust for power. The portrayal of cosmic rulers lusting for power offers a completely new aspect in comparison with the Valentinian myth of Wisdom in Irenaeus. Yet this feature is not an invention of the author of the *Tripartite Tractate*. Rather, it goes back to earlier non-Valentinian traditions. The idea of the administration of the world by angelic or similar other beings was, as Jean Danielou has affirmed, "a common theme in ancient thought, Jewish, Greek and Christian as well." Even the view that this administration was evil is

not completely unusual.<sup>44</sup> The closest analogy to the *Tripartite Tractate* at this point is the view ascribed to Simon Magus that there were creator angels who governed the cosmos badly because each of them loved power (*dia to philarchein hekaston autōn*).<sup>45</sup>

In the *Tripartite Tractate's* cosmological tale, the traditional characterization of the angels who lusted for power is connected to an earlier affirmation that Word brought forth “without having the command” (*emntef mpouah cahne*).<sup>46</sup> This implies that the lust for power of Word's offspring goes back to his lack of power. Other designations attached to the offspring of Word are also related to power. These beings are characterized by disobedience, rebellion (*mntapostatēs*), and lack of humility; they want to command each other and they think that they are more honored than everyone else.<sup>47</sup> The empty thought of Word becomes visible in their empty love of glory (*toumntmaei eaou etsoueit*).<sup>48</sup> Just as Word no longer knew himself, his offspring do not know their origin but think that they are without a source.<sup>49</sup> Those who lust for power are also identified with more concrete figures, such as fighters, warriors, troublemakers, and rebels.<sup>50</sup>

Though the consequences of Word's imperfect begetting are portrayed as being largely negative, it is striking that his action receives a *twofold* evaluation in the *Tripartite Tractate*. On the one hand, it resulted from self-exaltation (*pfčinfif ahrēi*)<sup>51</sup> and arrogance (*jise nhēt*), from which Word had to be saved.<sup>52</sup> On the other, not only did Word undertake his action “for the glory of the Father” (*aeau mpiōt*),<sup>53</sup> but his role was also foreseen by the Father, who knew in advance those who would come into existence and brought forth Word for them. Thus, the “movement” (*kim*) of Word is understood as the cause of *oikonomia*, which was predestined to come into existence (*oikonomia ectēs atressōpe*).<sup>54</sup> In a similar manner, it is affirmed that the things stemming from Word did have the glory that contained a cause of the cosmic structure (*sustasis*).<sup>55</sup>

Another kind of offspring is brought forth by the conversion of Word from evil to good.<sup>56</sup> The conversion itself is described in a manner similar to that of Sophia in other versions of Valentinian theology: it involves prayer and supplication by the fallen one.<sup>57</sup> The consequences of conversion are, however, different. From it emerges a new order of good powers who had a faint notion that “something greater than themselves exists prior to them, although they did not understand what it was,”<sup>58</sup> while the inferior order was completely unaware of its origin. While the inferior order was characterized by lust for power, the new one acts in harmony, love, and unanimity. The two groups represent two different categories characteristic

of Valentinian theology: the good order is identified with “psychics,” also called “the right ones” and “the middle ones,” while beings stemming from the arrogant thought of Word are “hylics” or “the left ones.”<sup>59</sup> The two orders wage war against each other, in which lust for power is also inflicted upon the good order. Thus, “the empty love of glory draws all of them to the desire of the lust for power.”<sup>60</sup>

The battle between the two orders is also described in terms of competition, in which the distinct nature of each order becomes obscure. The relevant passage is probably corrupted,<sup>61</sup> but the bottom line seems clear enough. In the mutual competition, the evil order sometimes acts in a good way and the good order occasionally does what is evil, assuming thus what is called in the text “the form of the man of lawlessness” and “a power of the man of lawlessness.” Here the author calls upon a distinctly apocalyptic tradition<sup>62</sup> that has, as far as I can see, gone unnoticed in the commentaries on the *Tripartite Tractate* thus far.<sup>63</sup> The Coptic word *čons*, denoting “violence,” is also used as a translation of the Greek word *anomia*, “lawlessness.”<sup>64</sup> Hence my suggestion that the Coptic expression *rmmefnjnčons* is a translation of the Greek expression *ho anthrōpos tēs anomias*, “the man of lawlessness.” This expression is most likely derived from 2 Thessalonians 2:3, where it is used for the eschatological adversary of Christ. Another sign of distinctly apocalyptic imagery in the *Tripartite Tractate* that also may recall 2 Thessalonians is that it mentions “rebellion” (*mntapostatēs*) as one of the characteristic features of those belonging to the evil order.<sup>65</sup> In 2 Thessalonians 2:3, rebellion is associated with the coming of the man of lawlessness.

Since the term “the man of lawlessness” is quite unusual, its usage in the *Tripartite Tractate* suggests that 2 Thessalonians 2 can be understood as an intertext that complements the meaning of the text in the *Tripartite Tractate*. If so, the apocalyptic imagery derived from 2 Thessalonians may bring in further political connotations. The man of lawlessness is portrayed in 2 Thessalonians 2:4 as the one who “opposes and exalts himself above every so-called God or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God” (NRSV). The portrayal of the desecration of the temple by the man of lawlessness lends itself to political interpretations, for it “evokes a keen recollection of the actions reported of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, Pompey the Great, Caligula, and Titus.”<sup>66</sup> The political association in this passage is further supported by the fact that the figure of the man of lawlessness invokes the description of the arrogant prince of Tyre declaring in Ezekiel 28:2: “I am a god; I sit in the seat of the

gods, in the heart of the seas" (NRSV). The same claim to being a god appears also in *Sibylline oracles* in a passage that is clearly a description of *Nero redivivus*.<sup>67</sup>

### MYTH AND THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

The author of the *Tripartite Tractate* makes use of categories stemming from classical Valentinian anthropology in describing the situation of the church. Yet this author offers a striking reinterpretation of these categories. In Irenaeus's account of Valentinian theology, "pneumatics" and "psychics" denote two different levels of Christians, while all other human beings are considered "hylics."<sup>68</sup> In the *Tripartite Tractate*, however, the "psychics" (or "the right ones") and the "hylics" (or "the left ones") represent two different responses to the Lord and the church.

The church is portrayed in the *Tripartite Tractate* as being persecuted by those who have rejected Christ: "there is the road to error for those who stem from the order of those on the left side. For they did not only reject the Lord and made an evil plot against him, but their hatred, zeal and ill-will are also directed towards the church. For this reason, those who have moved and started the attempts against the church are condemned."<sup>69</sup> Persecution is not described in very concrete terms here. It may be that the mention of "zeal and ill-will" in the *Tripartite Tractate* goes back to an earlier tradition similar to that attested in *1 Clement*, in which it is affirmed that "the pillars" (cf. Gal. 2:9) of the earliest Christian communities were persecuted because of "zeal and ill-will" (5:2).<sup>70</sup>

The persecuted church, however, is not merely a theme adopted from an earlier tradition; it is also a significant issue for the author of the *Tripartite Tractate*. Only a few lines before the passage quoted above, this author mentions sicknesses (*šōne*) and sufferings (*mkooḥ*) of the church.<sup>71</sup> The same theme is taken up again later in this treatise, as it is affirmed: "while their bodies [remain] on earth, serving all their [ . . . ], being partners [with them] in their sufferings, their persecutions [*diōgmos*], and their [oppression] [*lōjh*], these that have been inflicted upon the saints [*netouaab*] in all places."<sup>72</sup>

It cannot be simply inferred from these passages that the *Tripartite Tractate* was addressed to an audience suffering from an acute persecution, for it cannot be taken for granted that references to persecutions in early Christian writings always mirror the actual situation of communities behind them. Recent studies have made it likely that even the Book of Revelation was written during a relatively peaceful period rather than during a

time of persecution; the real problem for the author of this text was not the persecution of Christians but their increasing assimilation to Roman society.<sup>73</sup> Likewise, the Gospel of John evokes the threat of Jewish persecution of Christians (John 16:1–4), but there is no watertight evidence that this would be a reflection of the historical situation of Johannine Christians—even though most scholars are still interpreting John in this way.<sup>74</sup>

Nevertheless, each of these texts presupposes an audience that is able to identify with the oppressed church; otherwise they would hardly convey any meaningful message to their audiences. This anticipated response can go back to the audience's own experiences or to a more common knowledge that some Christians had been persecuted in the Roman Empire. In either way, persecutions are part of the Christian self-identity created in these texts, including the *Tripartite Tractate* and its manner of speaking about the church. In this text, the church is portrayed as being modeled after the eternal church that exists in the divine realm,<sup>75</sup> but as it now stands, the church consists of “us” who are “in the flesh.”<sup>76</sup> Thus, the *Tripartite Tractate* speaks about the actual church in which the author includes the implied audience of this text. The persecuted church is, thus, part of their symbolic world, even if there would be no acute persecution in their “real world.”<sup>77</sup>

Since Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Clement all accused their opponents of a disdain for martyrdom,<sup>78</sup> it may seem surprising that the church is so clearly defined in terms of persecution in the *Tripartite Tractate*. Nevertheless, this is by no means a unique feature in the texts of the Nag Hammadi Library. For example, the author of the *Second Treatise of the Great Seth* claims that the Christians represented by this text were persecuted not only by outsiders but also by other Christians: “we were hated [*aumestōn*] and persecuted [*aupōt nsōn*] not only by those who are ignorant but also by those who think that they are advancing the name of Christ, since they are vain in ignorance. . . . Those who were set free by me they persecute since they hate them.”<sup>79</sup> Even here it is difficult to detect the historical situation that the text possibly reflects.<sup>80</sup> Disagreements in doctrinal questions are more clearly indicated in *2 Seth* than forms of eventual oppression of the community behind it.<sup>81</sup>

Unlike in *2 Seth*, there is no indication in the *Tripartite Tractate* of a conflict *within* the church or among Christian groups, nor does the text evoke a distinction between the human and the real church. In the *Tripartite Tractate*, the church is constantly portrayed as a unified whole.<sup>82</sup> Instead of a split within the church, there is a split in the outsiders' reactions to the church. Neither of the two groups characterized by “lust for power” in the

text seems Christian to begin with. The difference between the two groups is that “those of the right ones” understand the limits of the power assigned to them—they recognize that this power “is given to them for a time and for certain periods,” while the other group consists of “human beings and angels from the order of the left” who remain “proud because of the desire of ambition,” love “temporary glory,” and continue to persecute the church.<sup>83</sup>

In addition, the *Tripartite Tractate* reckons with the possibility that *converts* can be recruited from the former group. They will “confess the Lord” and participate in the sufferings of the church.<sup>84</sup> It is noteworthy how the conversion of those belonging to the right order, or “the calling,” is described in the text. Those who began to believe in Christ “left behind their gods they had served before and the lords who are in heaven and those on earth.” Moreover, as soon as these converts realized that Christ is the only Lord, “they handed over to him their kingdoms, rose from the thrones, and withheld from their crowns.”<sup>85</sup> Conversion involves, thus, abandonment of both power and idolatry (“their gods”).<sup>86</sup> Those belonging to the right order are, thus, portrayed as polytheists. This is not a likely description of other Christians, even if they would be regarded as forming an inferior class and as servants of the Creator-God, as the psychics do in Valentinian theology as described by Irenaeus. The picture drawn of the psychics, or “those of the right ones,” in the *Tripartite Tractate* suggests, rather, that they include polytheistic traditionalists in power who are expected to become members of the church.

### WHO DID PERSECUTE THE CHURCH?

The portrayal of potential converts and of those who continue to persecute the church raises the question of whether it is possible to identify these groups with some people in the real world. There are three possibilities that need to be taken into account: hostility shown by other Christians toward Valentinians, (imagined) Jewish oppression of Christians, and persecution of Christians by Roman officials.

Pagels has argued that the *Tripartite Tractate* reflects an inner-Christian conflict between Valentinians and other early Christians. There are indeed signs of such a conflict and also of the oppression of Valentinians by other Christians beginning quite early; one of the first signs was that Irenaeus urged Victor, the bishop of Rome (189–199), to get rid of his close associate Florinus, who was a Valentinian.<sup>87</sup> Nevertheless, the portrayal in the *Tripartite Tractate* of those who lust for power does not fit well with this theory. No members of the clergy nor any other Christians are mentioned

in the text as examples of the power-seeking ones. Also the portrayal of those lusting for power as polytheists speaks against this interpretation.

Regarding the second possibility, there are several early Christian sources from the second and the third century claiming that the Jews either persecuted Christians<sup>88</sup> or at least initiated their persecutions undertaken by Romans. Tertullian even called synagogues “sources of persecutions” (*fontes persecutionum*)<sup>89</sup> and, in the *Martyrium of Polycarp*, the Jews are portrayed as taking the initiative in the persecutions of Christians.<sup>90</sup> These polemical claims leveled against the Jews are still taken at face value by surprisingly many scholars,<sup>91</sup> though the obvious purpose of these accusations was to diminish the responsibility of Roman officials for persecuting Christians by putting the blame on the Jews.

Nevertheless, even if the threat posed by the Jews was not acute in the real world, it could be part of the symbolic world of the *Tripartite Tractate*'s author—just as it was in the Gospel of John.<sup>92</sup> The Jews are indeed portrayed in the *Tripartite Tractate* as a mixture of the hylics and the psychics,<sup>93</sup> and, later on in the same text, it is the hylics (the “left ones”) who plot against the Lord and now persecute the church.<sup>94</sup> Moreover, it is not completely impossible that the Jews, though generally known for their monotheism, would be presented as polytheists in an early Christian text; this is how they are portrayed, for example, in the *Martyrium of Polycarp*.<sup>95</sup> In the *Tripartite Tractate*, however, no clear links are drawn between the Jews and those who persecute the church. Above all, there is not a slightest hint in that direction in a lengthy section where “the Hebrews” are mentioned and different groups among them are discussed.<sup>96</sup> This makes it unlikely that the author of the *Tripartite Tractate* would have held the Jews responsible for persecutions, as some other early Christians authors did.

This leaves us with the third possibility that the *Tripartite Tractate* is concerned with Roman officials and their persecution of Christians. In my view, this is the most likely explanation for many details in the text. It accounts for the portrayal of those in power as polytheists. Moreover, the use of the term “the man of lawlessness” was likely to evoke associations with Roman rulers. Difficulties with the rulers also account for the author's interest in, and critical interpretation of, the concept of power. Furthermore, this explanation accounts for the somewhat surprising affirmation in the *Tripartite Tractate* that even the inferior order sometimes emulates the good one, acting in a good way. This description coincides well with vacillating Roman responses to early Christianity between 150 and 250, during which period the *Tripartite Tractate* was most likely written. As is well known, Roman policies as to Christianity varied greatly at this time, and

even some emperors showed variation in their own reactions to Christians. While Christians were martyred during the reign of Marcus Aurelius (Justin and the martyrs of Lyon), there are signs of increasing tolerance under his successor Commodus.<sup>97</sup> Although local persecutions took place under Septimius Severus, he was also known for helping Christian senators attacked by the crowds.<sup>98</sup> Hence the dual evaluation of him in Christian sources: he was compared to Darius, who wanted to save Daniel,<sup>99</sup> and he was considered to be Anti-Christ or Judas.<sup>100</sup> Elagabalus and Alexander are portrayed as being generally tolerant toward Christianity.<sup>101</sup> Even more favorable are Christian evaluations of Philip's reign,<sup>102</sup> whereas after him, under Decius, persecutions started anew and more forcefully than ever before.<sup>103</sup>

There were also local variations in Christian persecutions. Their intensity depended on how active local plaintiffs (*delatores*) were in leveling accusations against Christians<sup>104</sup> and on how effectively Roman governors were able to overrule these claims during their short visits in assize cities.<sup>105</sup> The continuously changing reactions of those in power to early Christianity is well captured by the imagery in the *Tripartite Tractate* of an evil order characterized by lust for power, persecuting Christians, but also doing good things occasionally.

## CONCLUSION

I would like to return to Michael Williams' suggestion that demiurgical Christian groups can be divided into sect and church movements. Where should the *Tripartite Tractate* be located on the axis between these two extremes? Williams maintained that Valentinians showed an attitude toward society characteristic of the church movements. This may hold true in general, but it does not seem to apply to the *Tripartite Tractate*. Rather, it contains clear signs of sociopolitical deviance. The condemnation of Greek philosophy, to be discussed in the next chapter, is one sign of this stance toward society. It is, moreover, noteworthy how the text describes the conversion of those belonging to the right order, or "the calling."<sup>106</sup> There were two requirements: converts had to abandon both their power and their idolatry. This no doubt meant deviance from what was expected in society. In addition, constant references to persecution in the *Tripartite Tractate* remind the readers of the high costs connected to their membership in the group. As Rodney Stark has argued, "high costs tend to screen out free riders—those potential members whose commitment and participation would otherwise be low." They form, according to Stark, "a barrier to group entry."<sup>107</sup>

While these features in the *Tripartite Tractate* presuppose social deviance, there are other features in the text that may support the opposite. Although the idea of lust for power is derived from traditions related to the evil government of angels, this theory itself is not adopted as such in the *Tripartite Tractate*. Instead, the text emphasizes the notion that lust for power proved useful as the whole universe became organized by the Savior. In addition, the text not only maintains that the evil order sometimes does good but even promises future rewards to those belonging to this order for their good actions.

The *Tripartite Tractate* also reckons on the possibility that converts can be recruited from those who, at the moment, are on the side of the persecutors. The way their conversion is described indicates that (political) power is not completely denounced. What is expected from the converts is that they recognize the *limits* of their power. They are expected to understand that power “is given to them for a time and for certain periods,” while those who do not convert “forget that it was only for certain periods and times which they have that they were entrusted with power.”<sup>108</sup> The emphasis on the temporary limits of power evokes the old “Republican ideal that public office should be held briefly and should work on a rotation basis” and implies “the equally republican horror of power being held beyond the established limit.”<sup>109</sup>

Thus the political stance in the *Tripartite Tractate* is twofold. On the one hand, lust for power is of dubious origin, but, on the other, it is necessary for the administration of *oikonomia*. This double stance does not really encourage “rebellion against worldly authority,” a view that used to be regarded as the typically Gnostic attitude to society.

If we would imagine an ancient Christian reader of the *Tripartite Tractate* faced with the difficult decision of whether to accept public office or not, which solution would that reader find supported in the text? It seems to me that withdrawal from duties in public life, for which Roman traditionalists accused early Christians,<sup>110</sup> is not the only choice. It is argued in the *Tripartite Tractate* that lust for power was made useful by the Word, that lust for power is therefore *sine qua non* in the *oikonomia* foreseen by the Father, and that there can be a right attitude to power: those who do exercise power only need to recognize that their ruling is temporary. It could have been the case that our ancient Christian reader found in these affirmations justification for taking part, even more actively than some other early Christians did, in public life and in the duties involved with it.

## MYTH AND ETHNIC BOUNDARIES

IT HAS become clear by now that Greco-Roman philosophy, especially Platonism, had no lesser impact on Valentinian teachers than it had on Sethian Christians.<sup>1</sup> Could this help us assess their relationship to society as well? As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Michael Williams saw in the adoption of philosophical ideas one sign of accommodation to society. According to him, the demiurgical Christians tried “to reduce the distance between on the one hand elements of the inherited Jewish and/or Jesus-movement traditions, and on the other hand key presuppositions from the wider culture, including Platonic philosophy.” He also maintained that “such an effort to reduce cultural distance strongly implies an effort to reduce social distance as well.”<sup>2</sup>

It seems to me, however, that the relationship between adopting philosophical ideas and attitudes toward society is more intricate. The way philosophy is approached in the *Tripartite Tractate* provides us with one example of how complicated this relationship can be. While there is no denying a thorough influence of philosophical traditions on this text,<sup>3</sup> the portrayal of philosophers and their views in it is not favorable. This portrayal can be found in the third major part of the text, beginning with a lengthy section devoted to Greeks, barbarians, Hebrews, and Jews.<sup>4</sup> Previous scholarship on this passage has been occupied with the question of which Greek schools of thought and Jewish groups the author of the text may have had in mind. In my opinion, however, the more important questions are: (1) How and to what purpose was mythic discourse used to construct a picture of the Greeks and Jews?<sup>5</sup> and (2) What conclusions can be

drawn from their portrayal concerning the Valentinian stance toward the world they lived in?

### GREEKS AND JEWS IN EARLY CHRISTIAN BOUNDARY DRAWING

The portrayal of the Greeks and the Jews in the *Tripartite Tractate* is best approached as a case of boundary drawing. As Jack Sanders has pointed out, “one of the most important aspects of group self-definition is boundary drawing—defining who ‘we’ are as over against ‘them.’”<sup>6</sup> Boundary drawing involves, thus, a construction of “the other” to which “we” are then compared.

The ethnic categories “Greek” and “Jew” were quite common in early Christian constructions of the other. This strategy began with Paul affirming that there is neither Jew nor Greek in Christ (e.g., Rom. 10:12; Gal. 3:28), and it flourished in early Christian apologetic literature of the second and third century c.e. In this body of literature, Christians were portrayed in terms of new ethnicity: they formed “the third race” (*tertium genus*) different from both Greeks (and other nations) and Jews.<sup>7</sup> The *Tripartite Tractate* provides us with one early Christian example of the boundary drawing based upon the novel usage of ethnic categories by early Christians.

In practice, early Christian strategies in boundary drawing over against the Greeks and Jews were diverse. Attention was variably paid to their gods, religious practices, and other customs and ideas. Even different versions of one and the same work can reveal strikingly variant pictures of Greeks and Jews, as can be seen in Aristides’ *Apology*.<sup>8</sup> Though it was tension with these groups that was usually emphasized in early Christian apologetic literature, there are always signs of continuity with their traditions as well. In fact, it seems to be necessary for new religious movements that they manage to create and sustain the delicate balance between continuity and tension with previous traditions.<sup>9</sup>

In early Christian constructions of Greek and Jew, levels of continuity and tension vary from one case to another. If an axis is drawn between acceptance and rejection of the surrounding culture in early Christian texts, the *Tripartite Tractate* should be placed, in contrast to what one might expect, very close to the negative end of that axis. This is particularly true when it comes to this text’s judgment of the polytheists. As frequently in apologetical literature, Judaism fares notably better than the Greco-Roman culture in the *Tripartite Tractate*.

GREEKS AND JEWS IN THE *TRIPARTITE TRACTATE*

The title for the entire third main part of the *Tripartite Tractate*<sup>10</sup> could well be “Myth and Us,” for this part offers two examples of how the cosmogonic and anthropogonic tale described in the former two parts is related to the social reality of the audience. The discussion of Greeks and Jews is the first of the two examples, the second one being a portrayal of how the lust for power described in the former parts of the text becomes visible in the experiences of the church.<sup>11</sup>

The passage in the *Tripartite Tractate* describing Greeks and Jews can be outlined as follows:

1. There are two orders, those on the right and those on the left, competing with each other (108.13–35).
2. The left order:
  - 2.1. False theories of “the cause of the things” (108.35–109.24)
  - 2.2. Condemnation of the philosophy and culture of the polytheists (109.24–110.22)
3. The right order:
  - 3.1. Stage 1: Hebrews were like Greeks (hylics) (110.22–33)
  - 3.2. Stage 2: Development of Hebrews caused by the psychic powers (110.34–111.5)
  - 3.3. The righteous and the prophets (111.6–112.14)
  - 3.4. Jewish interpretations of the Hebrew Bible (112.14–113.5)
  - 3.5. Evaluation: Prophets spoke about the Savior, but inexactly (113.5–114.4)
4. Conclusion: The spiritual Word is “the cause of the things” (114.4–30; *inclusio*, cf. # 2.1, above)

As this outline shows, the topic that brings the whole passage together is “the cause of the things.” Theories that the author considers erroneous are presented at the beginning of the passage, while it ends with affirming that the cause of the things is Word, whose actions leading to the emergence of the world had been described in the first part of the *Tripartite Tractate*.

The distinction made in this text between the psychic and the material essence is based upon the two mental dispositions of Word, his arrogance and conversion. As was seen in the previous chapter, they gave rise to two groups of powers competing with each other. The same distinction is also crucial in the portrayal of the creation of the human being described in the second main part of the *Tripartite Tractate*.<sup>12</sup> Here it is affirmed that three

essences were bestowed upon the first human being. One part stemmed from the spiritual Logos, but the Creator-God also “sent down souls of his own substance,” that is, psychic souls. In addition, the material beings contributed to the creation by bringing forth “their own human beings,” that is, merely material beings. All three essences were present in the first human being, who was “a mixed formation, and a mixed creation, and a deposit of those of the left [i.e., the material ones] and those of the right [i.e., the psychic ones], and a spiritual word whose attention is divided between each of the two substances from which the human being takes its being.”<sup>13</sup>

Later in the text, however, humankind is divided into three different classes corresponding to the three essences bestowed on the first human being. This distinction is based upon ethnic categories. Greeks and other nations (called “barbarians”) are associated with the material ones, while Hebrews basically belong to the psychic ones, though here the author has developed a more complicated theory, as will be seen below. By implication, it is the Church that forms the third race of the spiritual ones.

The *Tripartite Tractate* is not the only document to link the Valentinian tripartite distinction of humankind to ethnic categories. As I pointed out above, Heracleon approached polytheists, Jews, and Christians from the same perspective.<sup>14</sup> There is, however, one crucial difference between Heracleon’s and the *Tripartite Tractate*’s strategies of boundary drawing. While the latter is occupied with the opinions of the non-Christian others, Heracleon speaks about differences in worship. He called upon an early Christian text entitled the *Kerygmata Petrou*, in which it was affirmed that Greeks, worshipping trees and stones, acknowledge the “material works” (*ta tēs hulēs pragmata*), and that also the Jews, though they think they know God, are in fact ignorant of Him, worshipping merely angels, months, and the moon.<sup>15</sup>

Heracleon interpreted John 4:21 as showing that while nations (*ethnikoi*) worship the creation and the Jews worship the creator, it is the spiritual ones who worship “the Father of truth.”<sup>16</sup> Heracleon, thus, linked pagans with *hyle* and Christians with the spiritual essence. Moreover, he associated “Jews” with the Creator-God, whom he and other Valentinians considered a psychic being. Therefore, Heracleon’s definition of ethnic categories as being equivalent to the three essences within humankind coincides with what we find in the *Tripartite Tractate*, though his way of distinguishing the spiritual ones from the nations and the Jews is different.

Aristides provides a non-Valentinian analogy to the distinction of humankind into either three or four ethnically defined categories. In the Greek version of his *Apology*, it is affirmed that “there are three classes of

men,” that is, polytheists, Jews, and Christians. According to the Syriac version, “there are four classes of men in this world: Barbarians and Greeks, Jews and Christians.”<sup>17</sup> The latter distinction is, in fact, exactly the same as that made in the *Tripartite Tractate*. It may be impossible to tell which of the two versions of Aristides’ work is more authentic here, but the bottom line of his argument is clear enough to show a striking similarity to what we find in *Kerygmata Petrou*, Heracleon, and the *Tripartite Tractate*. On the basis of that similarity, it seems that, in their portrayals of Greeks, Jews, and Christians, Heracleon and the author of the *Tripartite Tractate* were indebted to early Christian apologetical traditions.<sup>18</sup>

### DOXOGRAPHY OF COSMOLOGIES IN THE *TRIPARTITE TRACTATE*

In the *Tripartite Tractate*, the portrayal of Greeks and barbarians is preceded by a brief doxography of five theories about the cause of all things.<sup>19</sup> The theories are introduced with simple attributions like “some say that” (*henhaeine eujō mmac je*) and “others say that” (*hnkekaue eujō mmoc je*). This is a more widely attested doxographic technique. For example, at the beginning of his *Letter to Flora*, Ptolemy introduces two opposite views about the origin of the biblical law in a similar manner.<sup>20</sup> Also one of Epictetus’s discourses begins with a very similar doxography of views about God.<sup>21</sup> The closest parallel to this section in the *Tripartite Tractate* is a doxographic passage in *Eugnostos* (NHC III, 1; V, 1) and its Christianized version, the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* (NHC III, 4; BG 8502, 3).<sup>22</sup> In my quotations of these texts below, I have italicized the introductory formulas, while the key words by which each theory is identified are printed in bold; for clarity, I have also added numbers at the beginning of each theory in both texts.

#### TRI. TRAC. 109

[1] *Some say* that the things that exist exist in **providence** (*pronoia*). They are those who observe the stability of the movement of creation and reliability. [2] *Others say* that it is **hostile** (*allotrion*). They are those who observe the [diversity]<sup>23</sup> and the lawlessness of the powers and what is evil. [3] *Some say* that what exists is **fate** (literally, “what is destined to happen,” *petēp ašōpe*). They are those who have had leisure for this thing. [4] *Some say* that it is **in accordance with nature** (*kata phusis*). [5] *Some say* that it is **self-existent** (*petšoop ouaetf, automatos?*).

EUGN. (NHC III, 3) 70

Their wisest sages have speculated what is the truth as to how the world is governed, but their speculation has missed the truth. For all the philosophers explain the government with three theories. Therefore, they do not agree with each other. [1] For *some of them say* that the world **was sustained by itself** (*ntauage mmof hitootf mmin mmof*), [2] *others* that it is **providence** (*pronoia*), [3] *others* that it is **fate** (literally, “what is destined to happen,” *petēp ešōpe*).

Whereas the number and the order of theories mentioned in the *Tripartite Tractate* differ from those in *Eugnostos*, three of the five theories mentioned in the former occur also in the latter:

“Providence,” occurring in both texts, is often employed as a keyword denoting the Stoic worldview,<sup>24</sup> but its usage is not restricted to Stoics; Platonists agreed with them that “the world is governed by divine providence.”<sup>25</sup> Item 4 (“in accordance with the nature”) in the *Tripartite Tractate* also fits both Stoics and Platonists.<sup>26</sup> It is, in fact, surprising to see “providence” included in the *Tripartite Tractate*’s list of the rejected opinions, for, only one page earlier, the author of this text referred to the human being’s expulsion from paradise in the positive sense, as “a work of providence.” It may be, as Thomassen has suggested, that what is at stake here is not “the idea of providence as such, but the identity of this providence.”<sup>27</sup> Since the *Tripartite Tractate* draws upon a fixed doxographic tradition, in which providence was mentioned (this is confirmed by *Eugnostos*), it is also possible that the author took over this tradition without noticing or being concerned with the tension it occasions in the overall presentation.

“Fate” is mentioned in the same form in the *Tripartite Tractate* and *Eugnostos*. This characterization is not very distinctive either. It may refer to astrological beliefs, as has been suggested in commentaries,<sup>28</sup> but it “may also be a reference to Stoic opinions of ‘destiny.’”<sup>29</sup> However that may be, there is little doubt that both item 5 (“it is self-existent”) in the *Tripartite Tractate* and item 1 in *Eugnostos* (“self-directed”) denote the mechanistic worldview of the Epicureans.<sup>30</sup> The association with Epicurean cosmology is even closer if the Coptic formulation used in the *Tripartite Tractate* at this point (*petšoop ouaatf*) is a translation of Greek *automatos* (“self-acting,” “spontaneous,” “without external agency,” “without visible cause,” “accidental”).<sup>31</sup>

TABLE 11.1 Cosmological Theories Presented in the *Tripartite Tractate* and *Eugnostos*

<i>Tri. Trac.</i>	<i>Eugn.</i>
1. providence ( <i>pronoia</i> )	1. the cosmos is “self-directed” ( <i>ntauage mmof hi tootf mmin mmof</i> )//“from
2. “hostile” ( <i>alotrion</i> )	itself” ( <i>petebol hitootf mmin</i>
3. fate ( <i>petēp ašōpe</i> )	<i>mmof</i> )//“self-made” ( <i>pešafaaf</i> )
4. “in accordance with nature” ( <i>kata phusis</i> )	2. providence ( <i>pronoia</i> )
5. “self-existent” ( <i>petšoop ouaetf</i> )	3. fate ( <i>petēp ešōpe</i> )

It is more difficult to identify item 2 in the *Tripartite Tractate*. The Greek word used here (*alotrion*) means either “hostile” or “alien.” I have preferred the former meaning in my translation above, for it fits well the subsequent comment about the proponents of this view: “These are people who observe the diversity and the lawlessness of the powers and what is evil.” Usually this description has also been connected with the Epicureans,<sup>32</sup> but I do not know how the latter part of it, “the lawlessness of the powers and what is evil,” would fit their worldview. It has also been suggested that this opinion could be an allusion to Carneades and the skeptical Academy.<sup>33</sup> Carneades regarded laws as human agreements, while “there is no natural law” according to him.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, even here there is no special allusion to the lawless powers and evil. In my view, the best reference for this opinion in the *Tripartite Tractate* is to the archons described in Sethian and related texts. In them we find the combination of lawlessness, evil, and the powers. In the *Apocryphon of John*, it is said of the archons that their beauty was “lawless,”<sup>35</sup> and the *Letter of Peter and Philip* urges the audience “not to listen to these lawless ones.”<sup>36</sup> As Meyer suggests, the latter designation can “include the archons as well as the hostile collaborators of the archons on the earth, the opponents afflicting the Gnostic Christians.”<sup>37</sup> Since there is no parallel for this designation in *Eugnostos*, the author of the *Tripartite Tractate* may have expanded the traditional list of theories by adding a reference to a distinctly Sethian view of the world.

Neither in *Eugnostos* nor in the *Tripartite Tractate* do we find any serious refutation of the rejected explanations of the cosmic order.<sup>38</sup> As to *Eugnostos*, the mere existence of different theories suffices to show that they are erroneous. Hence the opposed views can be refuted with one-liners: “But it is none of these. Again, of the three voices I have just mentioned, none is true. For whatever is from itself is an empty life; it is self-made. Providence

is foolish. Fate is an undiscerning thing.”<sup>39</sup> This strategy presupposes an audience that has already adopted the author’s point of view and has no need of further persuasion. Moreover, the author of this text insists that it is necessary to get free from these opinions, to confess God, and to agree about what is said about him. It only in this way that a person can become immortal.<sup>40</sup>

In the *Tripartite Tractate*, arguing against different views is less important than showing their connection with the mythic framework developed in the earlier parts of the text. Diversity in the opinions about the cause of all things is explained by means of the cosmic tale: the sages (*nsophos*) among the Greeks and the barbarians “have advanced to the powers which have come into being by way of imagination and vain thought.” This has affected the very nature of these sages: striking blows on each other (*pikolh ahoun anouerēu*) and apostasy are active forces *in* them.<sup>41</sup> The sages are like the powers. They “spoke in a vague, arrogant and imaginary way concerning the things which they thought of as wisdom . . . they thought that they had attained the truth, when they had attained error.”<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the author condemns the wisdom of the other by means of demonization: the sages are unable to see the truth since the powers “seem to hinder them.”

It is striking that, according to the *Tripartite Tractate*, the diversity affected by the powers is not only to be seen in philosophy but also in all other dimensions of culture: “Therefore, nothing was in agreement with each other, nothing, neither philosophy nor types of medicine nor types of rhetoric nor types of performative arts<sup>43</sup> nor types of logic (?),<sup>44</sup> but they are opinions and theories.”<sup>45</sup> As will be seen below, such a condemnation of the entire culture of the polytheists is unusually strict even among early Christians.

### THE TRIPARTITE TRACTATE AND OTHER EARLY CHRISTIAN ASSESSMENTS OF PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy (*mntphilosophos*) is mentioned in the *Tripartite Tractate* as part of the culture of the other. Assessments of philosophy often go hand in hand with those of Greek education. This may also be the case in the *Tripartite Tractate*, for the term *mntmousikon* denotes not only “performative arts,” as I have translated it above, but more broadly “liberal arts” as taught in schools.<sup>46</sup> Some philosophers, too, condemned this basic education; both Zeno and the Cynics regarded it as useless as the author of the *Tripartite Tractate* does.<sup>47</sup>

The early Christians’ use of philosophy is not an unambiguous sign of “an attempt to reduce social distance.” It is true that, especially in the age

of Antonine emperors, who were positively attuned toward teachers of philosophy, Christians could probably draw benefit from being identified with philosophers, and, in claiming their place in the world of intellectuals, they were able to call upon the already existing tradition of *barbaros philosophia* (“alien philosophy”) and the fascination shown by Greek philosophers (such as Numenius) toward oriental wisdom.<sup>48</sup>

Nevertheless, it is not self-evident that the Christian alliance with philosophy led to lesser social distance. First, although early Christian authors made use of Greco-Roman philosophy, they rarely accepted it without critical qualifications. Second, the use of philosophical traditions is no undisputed sign of accommodation of early Christians to society. Philosophers themselves were prominent critics of the Roman order and they were often regarded as enemies of the empire, as their recurring expulsions from Rome show.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, philosophers were accused of antisocial behavior—and for a good reason, since the choice of philosopher’s way of life often involved withdrawal from public life.<sup>50</sup> It is, therefore, by no means certain what kind of a stance toward society can be inferred from the adoption of philosophical ideas by early Christians. There were certainly periods in Roman history when Christians could benefit from being associated with philosophers,<sup>51</sup> but at some other times, close affinities with them could prove dangerous.

In early Christian responses to philosophy, at least five different positions can be outlined;<sup>52</sup> not all of them are mutually exclusive.

(1) *Acceptance of philosophy*: Justin the Martyr maintained that pagan philosophers—as well as poets and legislators—had partial insight to the truth due to their share of *logos spermatikos*,<sup>53</sup> and Minucius Felix affirmed that “either the Christians of today are philosophers, or . . . the philosophers of old were already Christians.”<sup>54</sup>

(2) *Philosophy and, more broadly, Greek education are a propaedeutic*: they provide intellectual means for understanding Christian truth. This position was characteristic of the two famous Alexandrian teachers Clement and Origen.<sup>55</sup> Though believing it to be of dubious origin (see paragraph 4, below), Clement considered Greek philosophy part of God’s plan: it is necessary for education that enables salvation of humankind.<sup>56</sup> Origen distinguished between “the wisdom of this world”—consisting of rhetoric, music, and medicine—and “the wisdom of the princes of this world,” including Egyptian secrets, occult philosophy, Chaldean astrology, and diverse Greek opinions about God.<sup>57</sup> Origen only refuted the latter wisdom, while the former had positive value for him.

The views of Clement and Origen were preceded by the Alexandrian Jew Philo, who considered liberal arts taught in schools a necessary preparation for virtue: "virtue will employ no minor kind of introduction, but grammar, geometry, astronomy, rhetoric, music, and all the other branches of intellectual studies."<sup>58</sup> Philo regarded education in grammar, music, geometry, rhetoric, and dialectic as preparation for virtue.<sup>59</sup> They form "the middle education" (*hē mesē paideia*)<sup>60</sup> that Philo compares to "the simple and milky foods of infancy," "while the virtues are grown-up food, suited for those who are really men."<sup>61</sup> Moreover, Philo saw in the two wives of Abraham, Hagar and Sarah, an allegory for different levels of learning. While Hagar denotes the mind exercising "itself in preliminary learning" (*en tois propaideumasi*), Sarah stands for the mind striving for virtue.<sup>62</sup> The "Hagar" education is that offered in schools.<sup>63</sup> It is "the junior and the handmaid," while wisdom and knowledge are "the full-grown and the mistress."<sup>64</sup>

(3) *Christianity itself is a philosophy.* Many Christian teachers put on the philosopher's robe and presented Christianity either as a philosophy or in terms closely related to it, such as *paideia*. This did not necessarily involve favorable judgments of Greco-Roman philosophy. For example, although Tatian and Hermias identified Christianity with philosophy in their apologetical works, they strictly condemned Greek philosophy.<sup>65</sup>

(4) *"The Theft of the Greeks."*<sup>66</sup> Christians borrowed from the Jews the idea that Greeks had stolen their wisdom from Hebrew sages. (Greeks leveled the same accusation against the Jews.) Clement transposed this claim to the cosmic level by maintaining that inferior angels stole Hebrew wisdom and passed it on to the Greeks.<sup>67</sup> There is no real contradiction between this view and Clement's idea of Greek philosophy as a propaedeutic for Christian truth, since the idea of the theft of the Greeks enables the viewing of their wisdom as stemming from the same divine origin as that of the Hebrews. Thus, it was the manner in which Greeks got hold of wisdom that was dubious, not their wisdom itself.

(5) *Condemnation of philosophy.* The clearest example of the outright denunciation of philosophy comes from Tertullian. He claimed that philosophers have absolutely nothing in common with Christians: "What is there . . . about them that is alike, the philosopher and the Christian—the disciple of Hellas and the disciple of Heaven—the dealer in reputation and the dealer in salvation—one occupied with words and one with deeds—the creator of error and its destroyer—the friend of error and its foe—the despoiler of truth and its restorer—its robber and its warden?"<sup>68</sup> A similar picture of philosophers is drawn in the pseudo-Clementine *Homilies*. In this collection, Clement of Rome is portrayed as criticizing philosophers

who “pride themselves on their philosophy, who are vainglorious, or who have put on the philosopher’s robe for the sake of gain, and not for the sake of virtue itself.” The negative attitude toward philosophy goes together with an equally negative stance toward Greek education: “the whole learning of the Greeks is a most dreadful fabrication of a wicked demon.”<sup>69</sup> In this text, too, we find a doxography of Greek views that is very similar to those in the *Tripartite Tractate* and *Eugnostos*: “For they have introduced gods of their own . . . and others have introduced fate, which is called genesis . . . and others have introduced an unforeseeing destiny, as if all things revolved of their own accord, without the superintendence of any master.”<sup>70</sup> Moreover, also here the context for discussing Greek beliefs is clearly apologetical. This can be seen in the narrative setting of the homily in which these beliefs are discussed: Clement is made to deliver an apology—in front of an audience consisting of a grammarian, an astrologer, and an Epicurean—for his decision to “act in the manner of the Jews.”<sup>71</sup>

If these positions are compared to those in the *Tripartite Tractate*, the following conclusions can be drawn. First, Justin, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen show a greater appreciation of philosophy and Greco-Roman culture than does the author of the *Tripartite Tractate*. Second, the *Tripartite Tractate*’s rejection of philosophy, rhetoric, performative arts, and logic (or mechanics) completely denies the value of Greco-Roman education. (This aspect is even more plainly emphasized, if the term *mntmousikon* was used in the *Tripartite Tractate* to denote “liberal arts.”) While there were Jewish and early Christian authors who saw Greco-Roman education in a positive light, the author of the *Tripartite Tractate* was squarely opposed to this view. The closest analogy to his stance is to be found in the pseudo-Clementine *Homilies*, which displays a strictly negative attitude toward philosophy and non-Christian education. Third, both the *Tripartite Tractate* and Clement explain Greek philosophy as resulting from the powers or demons. Yet the *Tripartite Tractate* contains no equivalent to Clement’s and other Alexandrian theologians’ more positive judgment of Greek philosophy and education as a propaedeutic to Christian truth. In fact, both the *Tripartite Tractate* and the pseudo-Clementine *Homily 4* discussed above substantiate the claim of Clement of Alexandria that some Christians denounced Greek philosophy because it was inspired by the inferior powers.<sup>72</sup> Fourth, the portrayal of philosophers in the *Tripartite Tractate* is close in spirit to Tertullian and the pseudo-Clementine texts. All of them portrayed philosophers as concerned with their own reputation

and constantly disagreeing with each other; this is especially the case when it comes to their opinions about God.<sup>73</sup>

In sum, the author of the *Tripartite Tractate* does not seek to establish any mediating position as to Greco-Roman philosophy, as many other early Christian teachers did. This text, rather, sides with the most radical refutations of philosophy and philosophers within early Christian apologetical traditions.

### HEBREWS AND JEWS IN THE *TRIPARTITE TRACTATE*

While the culture of the polytheists is denounced in the *Tripartite Tractate*, the author's argumentation turns very subtle when it comes to "the race of Hebrews." The author draws a careful distinction between "Hebrews" and "Jews." The former term is used with reference to the Hebrew Bible, while the latter denotes contemporary Jews, including rabbis, "their teachers of the law."<sup>74</sup> The term "Hebrew" is, thus, used in a manner different from what we find in the Valentinian *Gospel of Philip*.<sup>75</sup> On the other hand, the distinction between the ancient Hebrews and contemporary Jews seems to "have been the usual practice in early Christian literature."<sup>76</sup>

In the *Tripartite Tractate*, the Hebrews are not portrayed as a unified group of psychics, as Heracleon described the Jews. Instead, the Hebrews form a mixed group consisting of both hylics and psychics. Hebrews as a group are, thus, similar to the first human being, who was described as a deposit of those on the left side and those of the right side.<sup>77</sup>

The section dealing with Hebrews begins with the surprising contention that "the things which came from the [race] of Hebrews" were written down by "the hylics who speak in the fashion of the Greeks."<sup>78</sup> It seems that the author has coined an original version of the notion of theft as explaining the history of ideas: Hebrews imitated Greeks to begin with but moved away from them later on. The author describes how Hebrew thought developed with the help of the psychic powers. They made it happen that the Hebrews "afterwards" turned to the truth and had some access "to the order of the unmixed ones."

For this reason, the author sharply contrasts the righteous and the prophets in the Hebrew Bible with philosophers. The righteous and the prophets "did not think of anything and did not say anything from imagination or through a likeness or on the basis of obscure thinking," like the philosophers, but simply passed on what they "saw and heard."<sup>79</sup> Like the

psychic powers, the prophets and the righteous were aware that there exists something superior to them. Moreover, they have “the seed of prayer and searching,” which draws them to the superior one—like the psychic demiurge was drawn to the Savior in another version of the Valentinian myth reported by Irenaeus.

The author’s approach to the Hebrew Bible is supersessionist, for what really matters in it is that it bears witness to the Savior: “the main theme of their proclamation is what each of them said as regards the Savior’s arrival.”<sup>80</sup> Nevertheless, the witness of the prophets and the righteous in the Hebrew Bible is of relative value. Though it sometimes seems that the Savior speaks through the prophets, their proclamation is of multiple origin. This coincides with what Irenaeus said about the Valentinian theory that the spiritual offspring speaks through the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, yet their message is not “pure,” but rather offers a mixture of the words of Achamoth, the spiritual offspring, and the Creator-God.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, it is affirmed in the *Tripartite Tractate* that the prophets are similar to the psychic powers in that they did not really know the truth but had only a faint notion of it.<sup>82</sup> When it comes to the Savior’s real essence, “he did not come into their thought.”<sup>83</sup>

Despite these reservations as to the Hebrew Bible, the author is more attuned to a dialogue with Jews than with philosophers. This can be seen in how the author deals with the diversity of Jewish interpretations. Several Jewish opinions about God are listed in the text by using the same doxographic technique as was used earlier in the account of the theories of the polytheists:<sup>84</sup>

Some claim that God is one, who preached in the old writings.

Others claim that he is many.

Others claim that God is simple and single-minded by nature.

Others claim that his work is connected to the emergence of good and evil.

Yet some others claim that it is he who is the creator of what came into being, while some others claim that he created through the angels.

There is a clear symmetry in the author’s way of presenting the opinions of the polytheists and those of the Jews. Again, it is difficult to identify the real-life Jewish groups the author possibly had in mind.<sup>85</sup> What I find more intriguing in this passage is that the diversity in Jewish opinions is not explained as being due to an evil nature and arrogance, as plurality was in the case of the philosophers. Rather, disagreements in Jewish views about God that, notably, “exist to the present,” are regarded as an unavoidable

consequence of the diversity within scripture itself. It is this diversity that makes “their teachers of the Law” necessary.<sup>86</sup>

Moreover, the author is strikingly tolerant toward Jewish interpretations of scriptures, affirming that the Jews “do not reject any of (scripture) but have accepted the scriptures in a different way.”<sup>87</sup> It is nowhere maintained that the Jews are in error, as it was said about philosophers. The use of the word *hairesis* (spelled *heresis*) in connection with the Jewish opinions<sup>88</sup> does not have to be polemical in tone, either. The word is most likely not employed here in the sense of “heresy,”<sup>89</sup> but in a more neutral meaning as referring to “any group of people perceived to have a clear doctrinal identity.”<sup>90</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Although there are some common elements to the portrayals of the polytheists and Hebrews in the *Tripartite Tractate*, its view of the Hebrews and Jews is far less negative than its view of the Greeks. This is in keeping with a more general tendency in apologetic literature.<sup>91</sup>

The condemnation of philosophers, in turn, may have arisen from the need to draw a clear barrier against their teaching. Their condemnation may seem paradoxical if we take into account how thoroughly the *Tripartite Tractate* is affected by philosophical discourse and has adopted views stemming from different schools of philosophy. Yet the paradox is ostensible rather than real. Explicit rejection and implicit acceptance of philosophy are not mutually exclusive options. The closer the relationship to Greek philosophy (continuity) was, the greater was the need to show what makes a difference (tension).

Furthermore, it is not only a question of right and wrong opinions that was at stake in refuting Greek cosmological explanations. In *Eugnostos*, the refutation went hand in hand with the insistence that that the audience must *free* themselves from these opinions. This statement was no doubt expected to have ramifications as to social behavior. By rejecting the philosophers’ theories, the author also denied the value of the instruction offered in other schools of thought. To free oneself from wrong views is most likely not only an intellectual process but also involves a concrete withdrawal from the groups in which these views are taught.

The practical dimension of the rejection of the philosophy and education of traditionalists becomes even more clearly visible in the pseudo-Clementine *Homilies*. The author of this text sees danger lurking even in the elementary education offered in schools: “For they who from their childhood learn letters by means of such fables, while their soul is still pliant,

engraft the impious deeds of those who are called gods into their own minds; whence, when they are grown up, they ripen fruit, like evil deeds cast into the soul.”<sup>92</sup> The obvious conclusion is that Greek education must be avoided: “it behooves the young not to be satisfied with those corrupting lessons, and those who are in their prime should carefully avoid listening to the mythologies of the Greeks.”<sup>93</sup> The same idea can be at work in the refutation of philosophers and mainstream education of the surrounding culture in the *Tripartite Tractate*.

As to the Hebrew Bible, the author of the *Tripartite Tractate* both retains its value (continuity) and makes critical insights into it (tension). The very subtle argument at this point suggests that this issue was of greater importance to the author and the implied audience of this text than was the discussion about Greek opinions. The formulation “*their* teachers of the Law” suggests that this audience did not consist of Jews but of other Christians. There is, however, no compelling reason to restrict the implied audience to Valentinian Christians. Rather, the text is addressed to Christians in general (“the Church”). In this text, no distinction is made between Christians at different levels. The psychics are not other Christians but those outside, either Hebrews or even polytheists.

It is, in fact, striking in how many different ways the category of the psychics can be used in Valentinian sources. The word not only denotes non-Valentinian Christians, as in Irenaeus’s account. It can also stand for “the righteous and the prophets” in the Hebrew Bible and for those who have persecuted the Church but may convert to Christianity after all (thus the *Tripartite Tractate*), or it can stand for Jews in general (thus Heracleon). The major characteristic of the category of “psychics” is flexibility: they are those able to choose between good and evil. This characteristic feature obviously admitted a variety of applications as to which real-life groups could be designated as the psychics, wavering between right and wrong.

## CONCLUSION



VALENTINIAN SECRETIVENESS  
RECONSIDERED

IN THIS concluding chapter, I will not repeat the results of the individual chapters but seek to develop a view as to how Valentinian esotericism could be better understood in the context of ancient schools of thought.<sup>1</sup> As was seen above, Irenaeus effectively created a veil of secrecy surrounding the teaching of the Valentinians. Holding back something, or saying one thing and thinking another, is always suspicious, hence the usefulness of this claim in polemics. Not only did the early allies of Irenaeus repeat this accusation, but modern scholars still continue to speak of their “hidden agenda.”

What tends to be forgotten is that, in the second century C.E., this accusation was not only leveled against Valentinians or other heterodox Christians; it was made against *all* Christians by non-Christians such as Celsus, who complained about them: “Their favorite expressions are ‘Do not ask questions, just believe!’ and: ‘Your faith will save you!’ ‘The wisdom of this world,’ they say, ‘is evil; to be simple is to be good.’ If only they would undertake to answer my question. . . . But they refuse to answer, and indeed discourage asking questions of any sort.”<sup>2</sup> Celsus’s complaint is not much different from Tertullian’s accusations against Valentinians:

If you question them in all good faith, they answer with a poker face and raised eyebrows, “that is obscure”; if you feel them out diplomatically, they swear they have the same beliefs as you, only blurred in translation. . . . They do not even reveal their secrets to their own disciples before they make them their own, but instead they have a trick by which they persuade them before they teach them.<sup>3</sup>

Irenaeus's and Tertullian's claims of Valentinian secretiveness and Celsus's allegations against Christians were probably not completely groundless. Full initiation to Christianity in the early period could take years: according to *Apostolic Tradition*, attributed to Hippolytus, the prebaptismal teaching of initiates could take three years. So it is conceivable that Celsus, as an outsider, did not receive a full clarification of Christian beliefs from his discussion partners. Tertullian alleges that initiation into Valentinian doctrine took even longer, up to five years.<sup>4</sup> While this claim is impossible to verify in the absence of other evidence, Ptolemaeus's *Letter to Flora* and the *Gospel of Philip* bear witness that Valentinian teachers at least adjusted their teaching to the level at which they thought their students to be.

What from one perspective can seem a reasonable adjustment of the instruction to a student's level of perception (is this not what *all* teachers do?) can be easily made to look like a teacher's attempt to keep his or her real thoughts hidden. Irenaeus and Tertullian used this strategy and castigated Valentinian teachers as double-dealers, saying one thing and meaning another, betraying their real thoughts only to limited audiences in secrecy.

But are we really entitled to think that, say, Ptolemaeus did not want to reveal too much of his heretic theology to Flora since he was afraid that this would frighten her away from his toils? I rejected this interpretation in chapter 5. It seems, rather, that Ptolemaeus felt that Flora simply needed to learn a few basic things before she was able to fully understand his more advanced instruction. If so, his reason for not giving a full account of his teaching was not theologically but educationally motivated: he wanted to bring her to up to the level where he thought advanced theological reasoning was possible.

Such considerations emerge from the following paradox in Irenaeus's account of Valentinians: on the one hand, he accused them of keeping their teaching secret from outsiders; on the other, in the preface to his massive work, he gave a vivid account of his conversation with Valentinian teachers and mentions that he had access to their texts. How is it possible that he was able to squeeze out of them so much information about their advanced mythic teaching, obviously reserved for insiders, if they were as secretive about it as he claims? I believe we can rule out the possibility that Irenaeus disguised himself and infiltrated a Valentinian group in order to gain information about their actual teaching. Although this strategy is attested for some curious Romans, who, as Shayen Cohen points out, "sent spies to discover what the rabbis were teaching,"<sup>5</sup> it is not conceivable for Irenaeus. As a bishop, he must have been relatively well known, and it is unlikely that he would not have said aloud his own opinions to Valentinians.

The Valentinian teachers with whom Irenaeus conversed must have been fully aware that he was vehemently opposed to them. Nonetheless, they treated him as an insider to whom they were ready to reveal their mythic teaching. To me, this suggests that they considered Irenaeus to be on the same level of learning as they were, which made advanced discussion with him possible. In other words, it seems that Valentinian secrecy is best understood in terms of esotericism of the learned, or “scholastic”<sup>6</sup> esotericism, rather than as an instance of “religious” esotericism, in which real knowledge is only disclosed to those fully initiated into the mysteries.

Such scholastic esotericism was by no means restricted to the school of Valentinus or to other heterodox groups in antiquity. There are signs of similar secretiveness in a number of ancient schools of thought. The students of Ammonius, including such renowned names as Plotinus and Origen, were pledged to silence.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, some Hermetic tractates are obviously addressed to the spiritually advanced. The author of one Hermetic tractate distinguishes between “my son Tat, who is a novice” (*neōteros*), and the more advanced addressee, to whom the author says, “I wanted to write selectively on a few of the most important headings of what I told him (Tat), but I have given them a more mystical interpretation, suitable to someone of your greater age and learning in the nature of things.”<sup>8</sup> Another Hermetic text opens with the author’s warning that “it contradicts even some of my own discourses.”<sup>9</sup> In addition, Garth Fowden has argued—convincingly, in my opinion—that cosmic sympathy is affirmed in the Hermetic tractates meant for initial instruction, while more dualistic views appear in those addressed to the more advanced.<sup>10</sup> Based upon this analogy, it may be that the implied recipients of Valentinus’s poem *Harvest*, which betrayed no dualistic tendencies (see chapter 4), and the recipients of his teaching about Adam, which does betray a dualistic orientation (see chapter 3), were at different levels of development and, thus, in need of different instruction.

Regarding Jewish learned groups, esoteric instruction was probably offered in the school of Philo,<sup>11</sup> and in rabbinic Judaism passages in scripture “which were difficult or easily misunderstood . . . were to be taught only to a few pupils at a time and not to the public.”<sup>12</sup> Discussion of difficult or offensive passages in the Torah was, thus, restricted to the specialists. One sign of this kind of scholastic esotericism are rabbinic discussions concerning passages in the Hebrew Bible that should be left untranslated in synagogue meetings.<sup>13</sup> It has even been suggested that Jewish rabbis took a strictly orthodox and monotheistic line in the synagogue but indulged in more speculative discussions among themselves. The rabbis’ vivid speculations as to Adam’s original form have been explained as emerging from the

latter context.<sup>14</sup> Speculation seems here a scholarly enterprise confined to, and characteristic of, an inner circle of the learned. It is not necessary to assume that rabbis thought that the views they expressed within the school setting challenged their public teaching. The ability to deal with speculative issues and to offer new innovations seems simply to be part of being learned.

The idea of esoteric instruction can also be seen in Origen, who “approves a Jewish custom of keeping the Song of the Songs . . . out of the hands of the spiritually immature.”<sup>15</sup> As Denise Kimber Buell notes, Clement of Alexandria also thought that “some teachings ought to be kept secret within Christian thought, and made available only to those who have been adequately prepared for such knowledge.”<sup>16</sup> It is possible that Valentinian teachers shared a similar view, and this provided ammunition for the accusation in hostile sources that they kept their real teachings to themselves. The example of Irenaeus shows, however, that admittance to Valentinian school discussions was not restricted to those initiated in specific cult practices such as the rituals of the bridal chamber and the redemption.

There is no evidence that Valentinians made vows to keep silent about their teachers’ instruction, as did the students of Ammonius. However, according to Irenaeus, Valentinian teachers preferred “living speech” to “written documents.”<sup>17</sup> It can be inferred from this that their advanced instruction was probably delivered orally. This is consistent with what we know about other early Christian teachers and Jewish rabbis. It is well known that Papias preferred oral teaching to written ones in his appraisal of early Christian traditions.<sup>18</sup> As Shaye Cohen points out, “rabbinic law . . . was always studied orally,” and Clement of Alexandria was even apologetic for having to lay bare his thoughts in writing.<sup>19</sup>

According to Irenaeus, the advanced Valentinian discussion was heavily concentrated on speculation related to the origins of the visible world. Discussion about these issues provides us, I suggest, with a case of scholastic esotericism similar to rabbinic and Hermetic school discussions. It may be that Valentinian teachers conceived of themselves as experts able to discuss speculative issues but thought, in a manner similar to rabbis, that public meetings of Christians were not the right places for such discussions.

One impression emerging from this study is that, instead of a uniform Valentinian theology or a “system of thought,” there was a great diversity of opinions in the school of Valentinus. In ancient philosophical schools, deviant opinions were variably tolerated.<sup>20</sup> Some teachers, above all Epicureans, advised their students to learn short maxims derived from the founders of the school by heart, whereas some other teachers encouraged

independent reflection. The diversity of opinions in the school of Valentinus indicates that those belonging to this school did not feel the need to slavishly follow the founder's opinions.

The teachings of Valentinians also bear witness to a great plurality concerning the traditions they used in building their own ideas. For example, while Valentinus probably made use of some distinctly Sethian traditions (chapter 3), Ptolemaeus engaged in a close dialogue with Marcion's theology (chapter 6). There is evidence for using Valentinus's own texts in the school, but there is no evidence that other Valentinians regarded his teachings as binding authority. Such independence was no unique phenomenon in antiquity. The Stoics, for instance, "traced their origin back to Zeno but did not regard his teachings as a binding orthodoxy."<sup>21</sup> So it seems that the school of Valentinus followed the pattern of those schools in antiquity that cherished their members' freedom to find one's own way rather than to pay heed and reverence to earlier traditions and opinions adopted in the school.

What may have originally been an admirable freedom of opinions in the school of Valentinus became a powerful weapon in the hands of the opponents of that group. They found in the disagreements among Valentinians a useful tool in their polemics. Irenaeus played the diversity in Valentinian opinions against the unity of what he considered the true Christian doctrine, while Tertullian blamed the followers of Valentinus and Marcion alike for constantly altering their given traditions.<sup>22</sup>

I once toyed with the idea that the diversity of Valentinian opinions is a sign of the open atmosphere brought about by the ideal of *parrhêsia* mentioned in Valentinus's teaching about Adam (chapter 3). However, this view probably offers too rosy a picture of the Valentinian school. There were obviously clear limits to tolerance among Valentinians. The way the author of the *Interpretation of Knowledge* conceives of an ideal situation in the Christian community (chapter 9) is that only those who have the spiritual gift are entitled to speak, whereas the have-nots should remain silent. This is obviously no encouragement of open discussion among all members in the community. Instead, the author of this text advocates a clear and unquestioned hierarchy based upon a division between the haves and have-nots. Thus his position is not much more egalitarian than one emphasizing the authority of the bishops and demanding unquestioned submission to them. The two viewpoints about the Christian community only differ from each other in their assessment as to *whom* authority belongs to.



## APPENDIX

### REMARKS ON THE SOURCES OF IRENÆUS'S AND HIPPOLYTUS'S ACCOUNTS OF VALENTINIAN THEOLOGY

#### IRENÆUS'S GREAT ACCOUNT: THE SYSTEM OF PTOLEMAEUS?

THE MAIN thread of Irenæus's so-called Great Account (*Against Heresies* 1.1–8) is often identified with the “system” of Ptolemaeus. However, this account offers no unified summation of Valentinian doctrine. Irenæus borrowed traditions from different sources and did not always indicate very clearly which teachings stemmed from his main source and which were from his other sources.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, in earlier scholarship, it used to be assumed that, once Irenæus's references to deviant Valentinian traditions and his own polemical asides are removed, the remaining “purified account”<sup>2</sup> is a faithful reproduction of a source bearing witness to Ptolemaeus's views. This assumption becomes visible, for example, in Foerster's conclusion: “It is characteristic of Ptolemaeus that he regards the emergence of the world and the human being into body as something additional that is noticed only in passing . . . the *sômatopoiein* which the demiurge accomplishes is not an action that would have an independent weight.”<sup>3</sup> This argument works only if we assume that (1) the source, from which Irenæus derived Version A, was a text written by Ptolemaeus, and that (2) Irenæus reproduced this source in full in his work. Neither of these assumptions is certain. Sagnard, for instance, differed from Foerster in assuming that Version A in Irenæus is based upon multiple sources. This view directs attention to Irenæus's active role in selecting and combining the information at his disposal, although Sagnard himself emphasized Irenæus's reliability.<sup>4</sup> More recent studies suggest that the way Irenæus presented Valentinian theology in book 1 of *Against Heresies* was largely determined by his own agenda. Klaus Koschorke argues that Valentinians did not understand their teaching in terms of a theological system, but that it was Irenæus who created this impression on the basis of their teachings.<sup>5</sup> For example, it seems that some Valentinians did not regard the divine realm as a location, as it is described in Irenæus, but “explained being within and without the fullness as implying knowledge and ignorance respectively.”<sup>6</sup> Rowan Greer and Alan Boulluec have reached similar conclusions. Greer maintains: “Irenæus's opponents were less concerned with proclaiming God than with offering a message of salvation. . . . Irenæus virtually ignores the soteriological emphasis on the evidence and concentrates upon the implications of gnosticism for

the doctrine of God.”<sup>7</sup> According to Greer, Irenaeus’s heresiological perspective accounts for “both what he has selected to report and how he has treated his sources.”<sup>8</sup> Boulluec also maintains that “it was (Irenaeus) and not the gnostics who gave the system objective reality, inviolable authority,” whereas, for Valentinians, “the ‘system’ is only one mode of expression among others (spiritual exegesis, production of the gospels, mystic poetry, catalogues of questions), and not exclusive.”<sup>9</sup> Boulluec also demonstrates that Irenaeus separated the “system” of his Valentinian opponents from their interpretation of scripture in order to portray their doctrine “as a confused mixture of heterogeneous elements borrowed from paganism.”<sup>10</sup> These observations suggest that Irenaeus’s *perspective* on his source materials had a substantial bearing on the final appearance of the Valentinian system in his work. This makes any attempt at an exact reconstruction of his sources a difficult if not impossible enterprise.

Moreover, the textual evidence for the attribution of Irenaeus’s Great Account to Ptolemaeus is far from clear.<sup>11</sup> In the Latin version, this part is concluded: “Thus in truth Ptolemaeus” (*et Ptolomaeus quidem ita*).<sup>12</sup> However, this remark is absent in the extant Greek fragment of this work preserved in the *Panarion* of Epiphanius.<sup>13</sup> The suggestion that Epiphanius dropped the sentence because he quoted this part of Irenaeus’s work in his account of Valentinus (*Panarion* 31) and not in that of Ptolemaeus (*Panarion* 33)<sup>14</sup> seems unlikely. Rather, the fact that Epiphanius felt free to quote Irenaeus’s Great Account as part of his account of *Valentinus* indicates that this passage was not yet ascribed to Ptolemaeus in his version of Irenaeus’s work.

In his preface to book 1 of *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus mentions “those around Ptolemaeus” and accuses them of spreading heretical teaching.<sup>15</sup> The Greek expression *hoi peri (ton) Ptolemaion*, which Irenaeus uses here, can be translated either as “the disciples of Ptolemaeus”<sup>16</sup> or as “the school of Ptolemaeus.”<sup>17</sup> The expression can include Ptolemaeus, but does not necessarily do so,<sup>18</sup> or, if understood periphrastically, as denoting Ptolemaeus himself.<sup>19</sup> The third possibility, however, is unlikely, since Irenaeus uses elsewhere the same expression for another group of followers of Ptolemaeus whose opinions differed from those related in the Great Account.<sup>20</sup>

It is striking that Irenaeus does not mention Ptolemaeus by name in the course of the Great Account. Instead, he usually refers to his opponents in the plural (“they say,” “they tell,” “they claim,” “they hold,” “they teach,” etc.);<sup>21</sup> more specific attributions are rare.<sup>22</sup> It seems, thus, that Irenaeus had in mind Ptolemaeus’s followers rather than Ptolemaeus himself. This suggestion finds support in Irenaeus’s report of Marcus and his followers.<sup>23</sup> This section is clearly divided into two parts, of which the former is devoted to Marcus himself<sup>24</sup> and the latter to his followers.<sup>25</sup> Irenaeus uses plural references similar to those in the Great Account only in the latter part, while in the former part he consequently uses singular attributions. If Irenaeus wanted to speak of Ptolemaeus’s own opinions in the Great Account, he would probably have mentioned him by name more often or referred to him in the singular in the same way as he refers to Marcus in *Against Heresies* 1.13–15.

The paucity of information about Ptolemaeus in other parts of Irenaeus’s work points to the same conclusion. Ptolemaeus is later mentioned in connection with Valentinus, Heracleon, and other Valentinians.<sup>26</sup> One particular case where Ptolemaeus is mentioned is a section in which Irenaeus disputes the Valentinian theory of the number of aeons based upon the view that Jesus lived thirty years; Irenaeus counters this by maintaining that Jesus lived more than forty years, deriving this number from the words of the Jews to Jesus in John 8:57 (“You are not yet fifty years old”). Thus Irenaeus claims that his view is safeguarded by the apostolic authority of John, the disciple of the Lord, while Ptolemaeus, who taught that Jesus lived only thirty years, “never saw any of the apostles.”<sup>27</sup>

This polemical quip does not enhance our knowledge of Ptolemaeus in any substantial manner.<sup>28</sup>

In sum, the manner in which Irenaeus refers to his opponents in the Great Account does not warrant the specific attribution of this section to Ptolemaeus. It is more likely that Irenaeus sought to give a summary of the teachings of Ptolemaeus's followers.

#### SCRIPTURAL QUOTATIONS IN HIPPOLYTUS'S ACCOUNT OF VALENTINIANS

A distinctive trait in Hippolytus's account of Valentinian theology is the large number of scriptural quotations supporting this theology. At first glance, it might seem that such quotations add credence to Hippolytus's report. What complicates the issue is the fact that Hippolytus ascribes most of these quotations to other heterodox groups as well. This is no isolated phenomenon. In describing heterodox groups, Hippolytus provides a remarkably large amount of "similarities in imagery and comparisons, in the use of Scriptures, and in phraseology."<sup>29</sup> This also applies to the scriptural quotations presented in Hippolytus's account of Valentinian theology:

(1) Hippolytus maintains that Valentinians supported their idea that the Creator-God stemmed from Wisdom's fear with the scriptural quotation, "the beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord" (Ps. 110:10; Prov. 1:7, 9:10).<sup>30</sup> The match between this passage and the Valentinian Creator-God is not entirely perfect. In his additional commentary, Hippolytus applies the same quotation to Wisdom's emotions, of which fear was the first one ("the beginning"). The same quotation appears in Hippolytus's account of Basilides.<sup>31</sup> Thus, it may be that the quotation was not an original part of the Valentinian theology summarized by Hippolytus but was borrowed from his account of Basilides.

(2) Hippolytus alleges that the Valentinians identified the "highest" mentioned in Luke 1:35 with the Creator-God and "the holy spirit" in the same verse with Wisdom.<sup>32</sup> Again, a similar interpretation of Luke 1:35 is ascribed to Basilides,<sup>33</sup> who, according to Hippolytus, identified "the Holy Spirit" with the superior realm and "the power of the highest" with the Creator-God.<sup>34</sup> This interpretation stands much closer to the alleged Valentinian interpretation of Luke 1:35 in Hippolytus than to the Valentinian exegesis of Luke 1:35 in Clement's *Excerpts from Theodotus*.<sup>35</sup> This supports the possibility that, in his account of Valentinian exegesis, Hippolytus borrowed some details from the opinions ascribed to Basilides.

(3) Hippolytus claims that Valentinians supported their contention of the fiery nature of the Creator-God with the following quotation from the Hebrew Bible: "The Lord, your God, is a burning and consuming fire." This combination of Deuteronomy 4:24 and Exodus 24:17 is unattested in other Valentinian sources, but it occurs in Hippolytus's account of Simon Magus's theology.<sup>36</sup> In this account, the quotation supports the Simonian contention of fire as "the beginning of all things." It is likely that Hippolytus really found this quotation in his sources related to Simon, for Hippolytus himself opposes its usage in this connection.<sup>37</sup>

In addition, the remark on the twofold nature of fire in Hippolytus's account of Valentinian theology (*diplē de tis estin . . . hē dunamis tou puros*)<sup>38</sup> occurs in a similar form in his presentation of the Simonian doctrine (*tou puros diplēn tina tēn phusin*). In the latter context, the twofold nature of fire involved both "hidden" and "manifest" aspects that can be equated with the Aristotelian distinction between potentiality and actuality (*dunamei kai energieai*).<sup>39</sup> This distinction is a recurrent feature in Hippolytus's presentation of the

Simonian doctrine. Its bottom line is that there is a hidden divine element in everyone, yet only “potentially, not actually.” Therefore, this element needs to be actualized by being “made into an image”; if not, it is doomed to perdition.<sup>40</sup> In this analysis, thus, the presence of the divine in everyone potentially corroborates the Simonian idea of fire as the beginning of everything.

(4) Hippolytus maintains that Valentinians called upon Exodus 6:3 to support their idea that the Creator-God did not reveal the mystery he learned from Wisdom.<sup>41</sup> This quotation, too, is unattested in other Valentinian sources, whereas it reappears in Hippolytus’s account of Basilides: “I am the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and I did not disclose the name of God to them.”<sup>42</sup> This passage provides a modified reading of Exodus 6:3, as Hippolytus points out (“this is how they want it to be written”): the original “my name” is replaced with “the name of God.” This change made it possible to associate this passage in Exodus with the Creator-God, the ruler of the hebdomad, who with these words indicates his knowledge of another “ineffable God” superior to him.<sup>43</sup>

There is, again, a close parallel to the quoting of Exodus 6:3 in Hippolytus’s account of Basilides, and the use of this passage is not confirmed by any other source of Valentinianism. Therefore, it remains dubious whether Valentinians really employed this quotation; it seems more likely that Hippolytus attributed it to them secondarily.

Some scholars have explained the affinities between different parts of Hippolytus’s work as being “due to *mutual borrowings* between different Gnostic sects,” indicating “a constant *free exchange* of ideas, images, similes, scriptural parables and sayings, and phraseology between independent Gnostic sects.”<sup>44</sup> Sometimes even the *possibility* that Hippolytus abbreviated his sources in the main bulk of his treatise is categorically denied.<sup>45</sup> Hence Marcovich’s confident affirmation: “*Hippolytus’s passion for plagiarizing is a blessing for us*, since we can be reasonably sure that he is, as a rule, faithfully copying his source.”<sup>46</sup>

This approach to Hippolytus has now become problematic. First, the idea of a loose interchange of ideas between the heterodox groups does not account for the close verbal similarities in Hippolytus’s presentation of their scriptural interpretations.<sup>47</sup> We should either assume that the heterodox groups described in his account created and embraced a common canon of scriptural witnesses for their opinions or that the alleged similarities in their ways of using scriptures go back to Hippolytus, who wished to make these groups to seem similar to one another. Second, there is no supporting Valentinian evidence for precisely those features that, according to Hippolytus, Valentinians shared with other heretics, while in at least one case (Luke 1:35) there is evidence for a different Valentinian interpretation.

Third, the idea that Hippolytus simply reproduced his sources has been called into question in more recent scholarship. Catherine Osborne traces apparent methodological flaws in earlier studies in which the idea of Hippolytus’s reproduction of sources was developed and concludes: “the choice of material presented by Hippolytus is not simply a matter of chance but of careful selection . . . . It is also clear that he is prepared to rearrange the material . . . and he is regularly strictly selective concerning what is relevant to the case he has to make.”<sup>48</sup> Jaap Mansfeld also allows more room for Hippolytus’s creative usage of his sources than earlier scholars have done:

Hippolytus *both* copied out texts almost verbatim or faithfully paraphrased them (often enough rearranging them to some extent) *and* felt free to carry out

modifications, to rearrange his material and to add interpolations whenever this was convenient to his heresiological purpose or whenever he wanted to claim that his book was a well-constructed and consistent whole that is entirely the work of his own pen.<sup>49</sup>

As regards similarities between the heterodox sects described in *Refutation*, Mansfeld suggests, persuasively in my view, "that interpolations from one Gnostic document treated in the *Ref.* to be found in another discussed there may equally well be due to Hippolytus himself."<sup>50</sup> I believe that this possibility offers the least difficult explanation for the similarities in scriptural interpretation between Valentinian theology and other forms of heterodox theology in Hippolytus. This means that his account of Valentinianism must be approached with great caution. It cannot be uncritically assumed that his account offers a reliable picture of the way Valentinians used the scriptures.



## ABBREVIATIONS

For the Nag Hammadi tractates, I have used the names and the abbreviations as provided in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 3rd ed., ed. James M. Robinson (Leiden: Brill, 1988), XIII–XIV.

AGJU	Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums
AKG	Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte
ANF	Roberts, Alexander, and James Donaldson, eds. <i>The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325</i> . 10 vols. Edinburgh: T&T Clark; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1867 (1993).
AnGreg	Analecta Gregoriana
ANRW	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung</i>
BAA	Bauer, Walter, Kurt Aland, and Barbara Aland. <i>Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der frühchristlichen Literatur</i> . 6th ed. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988.
BAK	Beiträge zur Altertumskunde
BASP	<i>Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists</i>
BCNH	Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi
BDR	Blass, Friedrich, Albert Debrunner, and Friedrich Rehkopf. <i>Grammatik des neutestamentlichen Griechisch</i> . 17th ed. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990.
BG	Berlinus Gnosticus
<i>Bibl</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
BRKGA	Beiträge zur Religions- und Kirchengeschichte des Altertums
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
CAH	<i>Cambridge Ancient History</i>
CBNTS	Coniectanea biblica New Testament series
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CCD	Crum, W.E. <i>A Coptic Dictionary</i> . Oxford: Clarendon, 1939.
CH	<i>Corpus Hermeticum</i>
CHJ	<i>Cambridge History of Judaism</i>
EKKNT	Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
ESEC	Emory Studies in Early Christianity
FKDG	Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments

GÖFH	Göttinger Orientforschungen, VI. Reihe: Hellenistica
HABES	Heidelberg althistorische Beiträge und epigraphische Studien
HDR	Harvard Dissertations in Religion
HR	<i>History of Religions</i>
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HUT	Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie
JAC	<i>Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum</i>
JACE	Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum Ergänzungsband
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JEH	<i>Journal of Ecclesiastical History</i>
JSJSup	Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LPGL	Lampe, G.W.H. <i>A Patristic Greek Lexicon</i> . Oxford: Clarendon, 1961 (1991).
LS	Long, A.A., and D.N. Sedley. <i>The Hellenistic Philosophers</i> . 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987 (1997).
LSJ	Liddell, Henry George, and Robert Scott. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> . Edited by Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick McKenzie. 9th ed., with new supplement. Oxford: Clarendon, 1996.
NHC	Nag Hammadi Codices
NHMS	Nag Hammadi and Manichaean studies
NHS	Nag Hammadi Studies
Nock & Festugiere	Nock, A. D., and A. J. Festugiere. <i>Corpus Hermeticum</i> . 4 vols. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1945–1954.
NovT	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NovTSup	Novum Testamentum Supplements
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NTA	Schneemelcher, Wilhelm, ed. <i>New Testament Apocrypha</i> . 2 vols. English translation edited by Robert McL. Wilson. Cambridge: James Clarke.
NTOA	Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus
PFES	Publications of the Finnish Exegetical Society
RAC	<i>Reallexicon für Antike und Christentum</i>
RGRW	Religions in the Graeco-Roman World
RHE	<i>Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique</i>
RVV	Religiongeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten
SAA	State Archives of Assyria
SAAS	State Archives of Assyria Studies
SBAW	Schweizerische Beiträge zur Altertumswissenschaft
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
SBLSS	Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series
SBLTT	Society of Biblical Literature Texts and Translations
SC	Sources chrétiennes
SGG	Smyth, Herbert Weir. <i>Greek Grammar</i> . Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1920 (1980).
SHR	Studies in the History of Religions

ABBREVIATIONS [205]

SLAG	Schriften der Luther-Agricola-Gesellschaft
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
SQSNF	Sammlung ausgewählter kirchen- und dogmengeschichtlichen Quellen- schriften N.F.
STAC	Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum/Studies and Texts in Antiquity and Christianity
SUNT	Studien zur Umwelt des Neuen Testaments
SVF	Von Arnim, Hans Friedrich August, ed. <i>Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta</i> . 3 vols. Leipzig: Teubner, 1903–1905.
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
TU	Texte und Untersuchungen
<i>TZ</i>	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>VigChr</i>	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
VigChrSup	Vigiliae Christianae, Supplements
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
<i>ZAC</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum/Journal of Ancient Christianity</i>
<i>ZKG</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte</i>
<i>ZNW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche</i>
ZTK	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>



## NOTES

### INTRODUCTION

1. Since I have elsewhere offered a general introduction to the school of Valentinus and since many of the teachings of this school will be discussed in the course of this study, a brief summary of the main representatives of this group will suffice here; cf. Ismo Dunderberg, "The School of Valentinus," in *A Companion to Second-Century Christian "Heretics,"* ed. Antti Marjanen and Petri Luomanen, *VigChrSup* 76 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), 64–99.
2. Secundus: Irenaeus *Her.* 1.11.2. Florinus: Eusebius *Church History* 5.20.1. Axionicus: Tertullian *Val.* 4.2; Hippolytus *Ref.* 6.35.7. Ardesianes: Hippolytus *Ref.* 6.35.7. Alexander: Tertullianus *Carn.* 15–17.1. For a convenient summary of what is known of each of these figures and their views, see Einar Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the "Valentinians,"* NHMS 60 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 494–503. Droserius and Valens, the two spokesmen of Valentinian theology in Adamantius's *Dialogue on the True Faith in God* (written toward the end of the third century) are probably fictitious characters; cf. Robert A. Pretty, introduction to *Adamantius, Dialogue on the True Faith in God (De Recta in Deum Fide)* (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 30.
3. John Dillon, "Philosophy as a Profession in Late Antiquity," in *The Philosopher and Society in Late Antiquity: Essays in Honour of Peter Brown*, ed. Andrew Smith (Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2005), 9.
4. Irenaeus probably knew some Valentinian texts without knowing their authors, as he occasionally mentions opinions of some anonymous Valentinians (Irenaeus *Her.* 1.11.3, 1.115, 1.12.3; cf. Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed*, 18–20).
5. Thomas Lechner argues that anti-Valentinian polemic can also be found in the letters of Ignatius. This would put the dating of these letters a few decades later (c. 165–175) than is usually assumed. Lechner follows the suggestion of Reinhold Hübner, the supervisor of his dissertation; cf. Thomas Lechner, *Ignatius adversus Valentinianos: Chronologische & theologieggeschichtliche Studien zu den Briefen des Ignatius von Antiochien*, *VigChrSup* 47 (Leiden: Brill, 1999); Reinhold Hübner, "Thesen zur Echtheit und Datierung der sieben Briefe des Ignatius von Antiochien,"







































































































































































































