

*What is “the Middle”? Theological Diversity in
Valentinian Christianity*

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1. Introduction

Valentinian Christianity, a school of Gnostic thinking, flourished in the early centuries of Church history but faded away due to various factors, including societal pressures when Rome adopted Christianity officially in its Proto-Orthodox form. Our sources for Valentinian Christianity are derived from three places: references to them by Orthodox commentators, their own writings preserved by those same Orthodox commentators, and their own writings as preserved by Valentinians themselves (discovered at Nag Hammadi, Egypt in 1945). Valentinianism is named after its founding teacher, Valentinus, who was a popular Roman theologian who was almost made Bishop of Rome at one point (demonstrating his popularity among Orthodox and Gnostic Christians alike). Only a few small fragments of the writings of Valentinus have been preserved, leaving us mainly with later Valentinian writings to read from.

Many scholars today believe that a document found at Nag Hammadi, the *Gospel of Truth*, stems from the hand of Valentinus because Irenaeus notes that a work by that same name was very popular among Valentinians (Layton 1987:251). The assumption by these scholars is that it makes sense that a document popular with Valentinians would be authored by their founder, but this assumption must be cautioned by the fact that Irenaeus never claims it was written by Valentinus. Because of this latter point, some scholars do not presume to include *Truth* in their reconstruction of what Valentinus believed (Thomassen 2008:34). Yet, even

these scholars assume that *Truth* is representative of Valentinian beliefs. This paper seeks to partially investigate this issue by drawing attention to a reference in *Truth* to something called “the Middle” and comparing its description with that of the *Gospel of Philip* and Ptolemy, a prominent Valentinian theologian whose writings are extensively quoted by Irenaeus.

2. Competing Ideas in Valentinian Thinking

When comparing these two documents, it becomes apparent that they not only differ, but are dramatically opposed to each other on some important topics. For instance, the issue of “the Middle” proves to be a problematic point of controversy. In comparing the two, special attention should be given to Ptolemy, whose theology became very popular in Valentinian communities during the second century. According to Irenaeus’ quotation of Ptolemy’s beliefs, humans derive from primarily two categories: animate (material) and spiritual, with some animate deriving from fear (referred to as those “consisting of dust,” *Adv. Haer.* 1.7.5; Layton 1987:297), those who are destined to be lost, and other animate humans being those who can be saved by doing good works (1.6.2), such as those people found in the Orthodox churches (1987:297). Whereas Valentinians are perfect children derived directly from the true God, Orthodox Christians are from the lesser divinity that made the physical world and so they have to earn their salvation (1987:294). Ptolemy also describes the Middle eschatologically as the place of rest where Jesus will live (1.7.1; 1987:294-295).

In contrast, the *Gospel of Truth* states that “error... engaged in preparing works and forgetfulness and fears in order, by these means, to beguile those of the middle and to “make them captive” (Grant 1984:290). So who are “the Middle” in *Truth*? These appear to be the same people described as “empty-headed” who thought themselves wise, but were actually ignorant (1984:291). It is likely not coincidental that Jesus is described as coming “in the middle of a school” to confront such people (1984:291). In another place, they appear to also be described as “material men” who were “alien to him [Jesus].” Thus, a fourth designation for these people are “the ignorant,” even if this is not a title but simply a description. In an expanded passage, it describes how “the one who has knowledge is he whose name the Father has pronounced.” It goes on to state:

For he whose name has not been spoken is ignorant. Indeed, how shall one hear if his name has not been uttered? For he who remains ignorant until the end is a creature of forgetfulness and will perish with it. If this is not so, why have these wretches no name, why do they have no sound? Hence, if one has knowledge, he is from above (Grant 1984:291-292).

In contrast to those of “the middle” are those who are called “the perfect,” those said to have “knowledge,” called “the living,” and described as “little children” who are the ones that the Father has revealed the Savior (Jesus) and the truth to. The people described as perfect are those who “are inscribed in the book of the living, learn for themselves, receiving instructions from the Father” because “in their heart, the living book of the Living was manifest.” According to *Truth*, Christ anoints certain humans with ointment, an ointment that is described as “the pity of the Father, who will have mercy on them” (1984:295). However, it is clarified at the end that “those whom he has anointed are those who are the perfect,” and not the others (1984:295). It is clarified that “children of this kind are those whom he loves,” and not the others who falsely claim to be. In contrast to the false children who are actually ignorant, the perfect “do not go down to Hades” (1984:297).

What becomes apparent by comparing Ptolemy with the *Gospel of Truth* is that their visions of the Middle are entirely different. Ptolemy views it as both a category of salvation and an actual eschatological middle ground between the lost and the spiritual, a place where the Savior will dwell and preserve those who worked for their salvation. On the other hand, *Truth* appears to only know two categories, not three, and it also appears to associate the Middle with the lost in Hades. In its conception, one is either a true child of God and has the knowledge of being called, or one is ignorant and destined for destruction. Intriguingly, the *Gospel of Philip* (another Valentinian document) also appears to share this same understanding of the Middle or “midpoint.” It states in fragment 55 that the midpoint “is death” and that those who are lost end up there. The writer even exclaims: “god forbid I should end up there!” Likewise, the document describes in fragment 90 that those in the midpoint are “imperfect” (Layton 1987:340, 348).

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, it appears that if the *Gospel of Truth* indeed stems from Valentinus, then Valentinianism experienced a dramatic transformation under Ptolemy’s thinking, one that became more open toward their Orthodox siblings. This would in fact agree with Irenaeus describing Ptolemy as someone that “may be described as a bud from that of Valentinus” (*Adv. Haer.* 1 Pref. 2; Roberts et al. 1885:316), as if implying his work was understood to have gone in new directions. While this may be possible, a question that should be pursued in the future is whether both *Truth/Philip* and Ptolemy represent divergences from whatever Valentinus originally may have taught. That conclusion would possibly have important ramifications for thinking about the development of Valentinian thought.

On the other hand, this inquiry must be balanced by the acknowledgment that we only know of Ptolemy's view through Irenaeus, and given that he was not favorable to his Gnostic counterparts, this suggests that we might need to be skeptical of his reports. Does the discrepancy between these Valentinian authored documents and the account of Ptolemy's views in Irenaeus' work indicate genuine divergence or that Irenaeus has misrepresented Ptolemy? While such a possibility must be entertained, the recognition that even Proto-Orthodox Christianity had a large amount of diversity suggests that it is only natural that we should expect that Valentinian Christians would also exhibit this same theological diversity. Likewise, given that Ptolemy's view is kinder toward Irenaeus than what the other visions of an eschatological Middle suggest, this fact might be taken as an indication that the account of Ptolemy is accurate. If Irenaeus had wanted to misrepresent his view, it is hard to imagine that he created a less problematic version of the doctrine to do so. Regardless, this illustrates that Valentinian texts and the traditions that embody their views must be carefully examined for reconstructing the complex and likely non-homogenous viewpoints they cultivated in early Christianity.

References

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