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Authority as a Challenge: A Study of the Valentinian Gnostic School

The early Christian world was diverse. Various groups of Christians held opposite views on crucial theological and social elements while claiming to be the true followers of Jesus Christ. In this diversity, two streams of Christianity were particularly popular: proto-orthodox Christians and Valentinian Gnostics. These groups were included in the sharp polemical discussions and battles, as they tried to gain a monopoly in the early Christian world. In the end, proto-orthodoxy won thus marginalizing Valentinian Gnostics. In that process, Church authors, such as Irenaeus and Justin Martyr reclaimed the history of Christianity by defining themselves as the guardians of orthodoxy. Furthermore, they put the label of “heresy” on Valentinians claiming that they are not real Christians, but a subversive group that had corrupted the original message of Jesus and his disciples. In this paper, I have tried to demonstrate that one of the crucial reasons for the triumph of the *Great Church* was related to the concepts of authority and organization. To show that, I have analysed what kind of attitude Valentinian Gnostics had toward authority and organization. As sources reflect, Valentinian Gnosticism was an anti-structural movement that emphasized an individual approach to the divine through esoteric knowledge. Furthermore, their belief in the threefold division of humanity affected their attitude toward bishops and apostolic succession. Consequently, they rejected the authority of bishops and presbyters and put the emphasis on the small philosophical circle of students that would gather around influential teachers. Eventually, such a spiritual and religious perspective made it impossible to create a network of connected communities whose sense of universal identity would transgress local and regional borders. In the end, Valentinian Gnosticism was a conglomerate of independent communities scattered across the Mediterranean. In other words, Valentinian’s theological beliefs that modelled their attitude toward authority and social structure were a crucial factor in their marginalization within the early Christian world.

Keywords: Valentinian Gnosticism, Early Church, authority, structure, social organization



Introduction

Writing about the social landscape of the early Christian world at the end of the second century, bishop Irenaeus asserts:

“For the Ebionites, who use Matthew’s Gospel only, are confuted out of this very same, making false suppositions with regard to the Lord. But Marcion, mutilating that according to Luke, is proved to be a blasphemer of the only existing God ... Those, again, who separate Jesus from Christ, alleging that Christ remained impassible, but that it was Jesus who suffered, preferring the Gospel by Mark, if they read it with a love of truth, may have their

errors rectified. Those, moreover, who follow Valentinus, making copious use of that according to John, to illustrate their conjunctions, shall be proved to be totally in error by means of this very Gospel.”¹

As a zealous opponent of those he deemed heretical, Irenaeus proceeds to explain that the only truthful way of practicing Christianity is to use all four of the Gospels mentioned-above.² Besides the fact that it represents the earliest external evidence of the authorship of the four New Testament Gospels, this passage clearly illustrates diversity as an important element of early Christianity.³ As scholars came to realise several decades ago, during the second and third centuries, various streams of Christianity were often at odds with each other. As the quoted paragraph shows, one area of disagreement was different views on the Scripture. However, a wide range of issues separated the numerous groups of Christians: from the number of gods they believed in to the way they practised their devotion and organised their communities. Among the various streams of Christianity, two are of the utmost importance for this paper. The first one is the so-called “proto-orthodoxy” with church leaders and intellectuals such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria.⁴ This is a stream of Christianity that eventually developed into an organised church with councils, decrees, and moniscopacy.⁵ As Larry Hurtado explains: “By ‘proto-orthodox’ faith, I mean early examples and stages of the sorts of beliefs and practices that, across the next couple of centuries, succeeded in becoming characteristic of classical, ‘orthodox’ Christianity, and came to be widely affirmed in Christian circles over

¹ Iren. *Adv. haer.* III.11.7. Irenaeus’ citations are taken from: SCHAFF 2002.

² Iren. *Adv. haer.* III.11.8. Terms such as “orthodoxy” and “heresy” are not objective reflection of the past reality. As Nicole D. Lewis explains: “*They were developed by certain second-century figures to characterize themselves and differentiate them from outsiders. They are what sociologists and anthropologists call emic terms, labels developed only within a social group. In other words, many people might have considered themselves to be orthodox and others, heretics. The terms are subjective and therefore not very useful.*” – LEWIS 2013, p. 21.

³ See: KING 2008, p. 66–86; LUTTIKHUIZEN 2012; KÖSTENBERGER – KRUGER 2010.

⁴ I do not find this term appropriate. Justin or Valentinus did not consider themselves proto-orthodox authors. They both were convinced that they were bearers of the orthodoxy. Furthermore, scholars have abandoned the term “orthodoxy” (“right belief”) because it implies the value judgment similar to “heresy” (“wrong belief”). It is not the task of a historian to evaluate which of the streams of Christianity had right or wrong beliefs. Moreover, the term even presupposes a teleological view of history. By calling Justin “proto-orthodox”, we associate him with a later theological development. In what follows, I will refer to this stream as the *Great Church* (or simply “the Early Church”) since it was apparently used by pagan critics (e.g., Celsus) in their polemic against Christians. Celsus was aware of the different streams of Christianity. Yet, he criticized those that he called the *Great Church* whose members confess that the God of the Old Testament is the same God that Jesus prayed to. See: Orig. *C. Cels.* 5.59. Celsus’ quotations are taken from: CHADWICK 1980.

⁵ Even though Bart Ehrman is widely considered to be the first scholar who suggested “proto-orthodoxy”, the earliest use of this term was in 1987 by Bentley Layton who also used it to denote the stream of Christianity during the second and third centuries that anticipated “orthodoxy”. See: LAYTON 1987, p. xx–xxiii.

against the alternatives.”⁶ The second group was the *Valentinian Gnostic School*.⁷ Regarded by Irenaeus as the most oppressive and dangerous heretical group, the Valentinians represented a mixture of classical Gnostic ideas, Platonism and Christianity.⁸ Their name derived from an actual person, a teacher and philosopher called Valentinus who preached his message and attracted people in Rome during the second century. According to some early

⁶ See: HURTADO 2003, p. 494.

⁷ Since there is a mountain of research on the Valentinians, it is impossible to list all of the studies conducted. Probably the most influential one was that of Einar Thomassen. See: THOMASSEN 2008. See also: DUNDERBERG 2008. Interestingly enough, the two scholars are at odds when it comes to how one designates “Valentinianism”. Thomassen asserts that they should be viewed as a church, but Dunderberg claims that the best course of action is to think of them in terms of philosophical schools with developed dimension of liturgy. My opinion is that the sources allow us to side with the latter thesis. Bishop Irenaeus asserts that Valentinus was the founder of a school (*διδασκαλείον*). He also refers to the “Valentinian School” (*Ὀυαλεντίνου σχολή*). Other patristic evidence (e.g. Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus of Rome, and Eusebius) supports that conclusion. See: Iren. *Adv. Haer.* I.11.1; I. praef. 2; I.30.14; II.19.8; Clem. Al. *Strom.* III.92.1; IV.71.1; Hipp. *Haer.* VI.29.1; X.13.1; Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* IV.30.3. Clement’s quotes (books I – III) are taken from: FERGUSON 1991. Hippolytus’ quotes are taken from: LITWA 2016; Eusebius’ quotes are taken from: MANDAC 2004. Einar Thomassen claims that the term “school” was used among the authors within the *Great Church* as a metaphor designated to degrade the heretical enemies – in this case the Valentinians. He also points to the fact that Valentinians themselves identified as members of the “church” (*ἐκκλησία*). Cf. THOMASSEN 2020, p. 32–44. In an earlier study, the Norwegian scholar expressed the necessity of caution when categorizing the Valentinians as a of “church”. See: THOMASSEN 2013, p. 88–89. However, one has to consider the fact that the Valentinian documents discovered at Nag Hammadi (Egypt) emphasize the notions of knowledge and education. For example, Jesus is portrayed as the one who goes to school and teaches disciples. See: *GTr.* 19: 17–30. In a “Valentinian Exposition” (also discovered at Nag Hammadi) the whole world is described as a teaching room where Gnostics can receive their knowledge from the teacher who came from above. See: *Val. Exp.* In the “Gospel of Philip” there is a clear difference between the basic instructions given to new converts and the more complex knowledge one can gain if they are deemed worthy of it. See: *GPh.* 100; LITWA 2016:12–13f. The elements of knowledge, school, education and a teacher-disciple relationship are present both in the Valentinian texts and the writings of the heresiologists, such as Irenaeus. Therefore, it seems appropriate to categorize Valentinian Gnosticism as a school. Needless to say, every sharp distinction is useful only as a heuristic tool, and not the exact replica of past events. In other words, there were probably a lot of “grey areas” between those two categories (“church”, and “school”) in the early Christian world. Nag Hammadi sources are quoted from: LAYTON 1987; MEYER et alii 2009.

⁸ Gnosticism is a modern designation probably coined in the eighteenth century. It denotes a group of religious movements that flourished in Late Antiquity (especially during the second and third centuries). Since it was an extremely diverse phenomenon, modern scholars are inclined to speak about “Gnosticisms” (plural) or to even abandon the term all together. Whatever theoretical position one takes, the Gnostics certainly claimed to possess a superior type of knowledge (*γνώσις*). The origin of that knowledge was in a heavenly world where they all belonged. According to the classical gnostic myth, the spark of that knowledge accidentally fell into this lower (material) world of evil, and illusion. Most Gnostics were proponents of what Cal B. Smith called “anti-cosmic dualism”. They believed that there were two separate divine beings: the one ultimate and supreme God and the lower, ignorant, and even evil divine being that was responsible for the creation of the material world and whose goal was to keep people ignorant of their ultimate origin. However, only the Gnostics had a divine spark in them that represented their true “self” which belonged to the divine realm or *Pleroma*. To save the divine spark from the shackles of the material world, a Gnostic person had to gain knowledge of the ultimate God, the creation of the world, and their true identity. See: KING 2003; SMITH 2004; WILLIAMS 1996; LOGAN 2000, p. 907–928.

church sources, he almost became a bishop before he was strictly declared a heretic with a perverted view of God, creation, Scripture, and Jesus.

In the latter part of his remark, Hurtado hinted at the particular issue that has to be introduced here. Despite the diversity of early Christian movements, only one stream eventually triumphed. But why was that? Why did the *Great Church* manage to marginalise other “heretical” movements such as the *Valentinian Gnostic School of Thought*?⁹ Certainly there were numerous reasons that are beyond the scope of this paper. However, I think that probably the most important cause was the attitude towards the concepts of structure and authority. Unlike the *Great Church*, the Valentinians never developed anything close to moniscopacy or a strong ideal of a universal community that exists beyond the limits of a city, region or even the empire.¹⁰ Similarly, they never created an idea of apostolic succession that certainly represented a helpful tool in the polemics the *Great Church* engaged in with its opponents. The main purpose of this paper, therefore, is to probe into the question of the authority and structure among the Valentinians. To do that, one first has to introduce the basic features of the *Valentinian Gnostic School* with a special focus on Valentinus as the founder of the movement.

1. Valentinian Gnosticism: basic features

The first mention of Valentinus and his community appears in Justin’s *Dialogue with Trypho*, written around 155 CE.¹¹ While listing heretical movements that emerged within the Church, Justin explicitly refers to a group he calls “Valentinians” (οἱ Οὐάλεντινιανοί).¹² We learn more information about Valentinus from the Bishop Irenaeus who claims that he arrived in Rome during the pontificate of Pope Hyginus (c. 138–142 CE) where he stayed until the beginning of the pontificate of Pope Anicetus (c. 157–168 CE).¹³ In other words, Valentinus was active in Rome for approximately 30 years. Irenaeus does not mention anything about his place of origin, but Epiphanius, writing several centuries later, claims that Valentinus came from Egypt, where he learned about the Greek philosophical tradition.¹⁴ Epiphanius even asserts that he was a successful teacher in Egypt with a considerable number of students.¹⁵

⁹ It is an extremely complicated question I have tried to answer in a dissertation entitled *The Social and Religious Capital of the Great Church and the Valentinian Gnostic School in the 2nd and 3rd Centuries*, Zagreb, 2022. This article was derived from twelfth chapter of that dissertation. Certain aspects were changed in light of new research theories and conclusions.

¹⁰ I have dealt with the issue of the authority and structure in the *Great Church* in a recently approved paper that is still in the process of publishing. The article entitled *Charisma and Authority in the Early Church: Coexistence or Conflict* is an end product of a paper I presented at the conference “Biography, Hagiography, and Charisma” held in Zagreb (May 2021).

¹¹ See: LAMPE 2003. p. 260.

¹² Just. *Dial.* 35:6. Justin’s works are taken from: BODROŽIĆ 2011; BODROŽIĆ 2012.

¹³ Iren. *Adv. haer.* III.4.3.

¹⁴ Epiph. *Adv. haeres.* I.31.2.2.3.

¹⁵ According to Clement of Alexandria, Valentinus’ pupils asserted that he had been a student of Theudas, who had been a disciple of Paul. See: Clem. Al. *Strom.* VII.106.4. It is very difficult to know whether this is true, since there is no additional information about Theudas. Christoph Marksches

Given that the city of Alexandria was a melting pot of the ancient world and that Clement knew the work of Valentinus and his disciples, one can postulate that Valentinus was truly of Egyptian origins. However, the claim that Valentinus ended up in Cyprus where he went mad is probably a later invention with a clear motive of degradation. The popularity that Valentinus gained in Rome is illustrated best by the fact that Irenaeus wrote his *magnum opus* primarily to educate fellow Christians on the dangerous aspects of Valentinian heresy.¹⁶

Based on the available sources we can conclude that, by the middle of the second century Valentinus was a popular and charismatic teacher and head of his own philosophical school. Even though all of the “proto-orthodox” authors, from Justin and Irenaeus to Tertullian, and Epiphanius, accused him of heresy, he was not officially excommunicated from the Church in Rome during his lifetime.¹⁷ The basic reason for that was the fact that the structure of the *Great Church* was not fully developed by that time. To put it more bluntly, the level of centralisation was not that high. The *Great Church* was still marked by the existence of several loosely connected communities that were probably held together by the force of their concept of universal identity and the council of presbyters who were responsible for the well-being of the whole Church.¹⁸ Even though Justin attacked the Valentinians for being heretics, we cannot be sure how much popularity he gained in Rome. According to his own testimony, Justin spent most of his time in one house where he tutored other Christians about their faith and philosophy. He explicitly states that he did not know of any other gathering place of Christians in Rome.¹⁹ Therefore, it seems highly problematic to just assume that Justin spoke for most of the Christians in Rome.²⁰

The parting of the ways between Valentinus and the *Great Church* probably culminated at the beginning of the third century with the writings of Tertullian. In his work *De Praescriptionibus Adversus Haereticos* Tertullian claims that, at first, both Valentinus and Marcion were full members of the *Great Church*, but later on, they were excommunicated because of their “restless curiosity”.²¹ However, in a later work Tertullian gives a different story. He asserts that

concludes that the Egyptian roots of Valentinus are a likely hypothesis that cannot be proved with any certainty. See: MARKSCHIES 1992, p. 330. Quotations from the fourth book of Clement’s *Stromata* are taken from: SCHAFF 2004.

¹⁶ Irenaeus asserts that his personal encounter with the member of the *Valentinian Gnostic School* sparked the writing of a multivolume book originally entitled “*Ἐλεγχος καὶ ἀνατροπὴ τῆς ψευδωνύμου γνώσεως*” (“On the Detection and Overthrow of the So-Called Gnosis”). See: Iren. *Adv. haer.* 1. praef. 2.

¹⁷ See: THOMASSEN 2004, p. 241–256.

¹⁸ See: THOMASSEN 2008, p. 420.

¹⁹ *Acta Iustini* 3. Quotes are taken from: MUSSURILO 2000.

²⁰ See: LAMPE 2003, p. 390–391.

²¹ Tert. *De praescr. haeret.* 30.2. We can only assume that “restless curiosity” refers to his overwhelming urge to question some of the beliefs of the *Great Church*. Quotations of Tertullian’s works are taken from: SCHAFF 2006.

Marcion and Valentinus left the Church on their own accord.²² To make things even more complicated, Tertullian also wrote a treatise *Adversus Valentinianos*. In it the church author explains that Valentinus became a “heretic” only after he was passed for the position of a bishop in Rome which eventually led to his excommunication.²³ The first two accounts can be associated with Marcion. In other words, it seems as if the original story that reached Tertullian referred only to Marcion and Tertullian inserted Valentinus’ name into it.²⁴ The third account is difficult to understand because it contains what Lampe has called “the classical polemic against a heretic”.²⁵ It is virtually impossible to differentiate between genuine information and the polemical rhetoric aimed at the “heretical enemy”. It is indicative enough that Irenaeus, who was closer to the described events, does not mention the failed attempt at gaining the position of a bishop as the prime source of Valentinus’ heretical teachings. Instead, Irenaeus claims that the reason for heresy was that Valentinus “adopted the principles of the heresy called ‘Gnostic’ to the peculiar character of his own school”.²⁶ Considering that Irenaeus is probably the pioneer of the idea of apostolic succession, and that he was among the first to provide a detailed (although not entirely reliable) list of Roman bishops, it remains unclear why he did not, in a work primarily focused on Valentinus and his followers, mention an important “ecclesiastical” episode in Valentinus’ life.

However, even if we accept the notion that Valentinus was not excommunicated from the Church in Rome during his lifetime, that does not mean that his theology was in accordance with that of the *Great Church*. As one can see from the surviving sources, early on Valentinus became an archetype of heresy that could jeopardise the stability and unity of the *Great Church*. With that we arrive to the burning question of his theology. What did Valentinus believe in? The following chapter will explore the worldview of Valentinus and his followers.

1.1 Valentinus’ Gnostic Myth

When attempting to reconstruct the basic theological elements of Valentinus and his school scholars can turn to two types of available sources.²⁷ On the one hand, we have the words of early church authors who obviously stood against the Valentinians and everything they represented. Because of that, these sources are filled with stereotypes and polemical tools that are of little help to historians interested in genuine information. However, some of the church authors quote Valentinians themselves. For example, Clement quotes from the works of Theodotus on five occasions. He was a well-known Valentinian teacher who taught in Asia Minor during the last quarter of the second

²² Tert. *Carn.* 1.3.

²³ Tert. *Adv. Val.* 4.1.

²⁴ See: LAMPE 2003, p. 391.

²⁵ See: LAMPE 2003, p. 391.

²⁶ Iren. *Adv. haer.* I.11.1.

²⁷ For more about the available sources see: DESJARDINS 1986, p. 342–347.

century.²⁸ Furthermore, other church authors quote certain fragments from Valentinus. Probably the most important example is Hippolytus of Rome who quotes Valentinus' psalm followed by his interpretation of it.²⁹ On the other hand, we are fortunate enough to have several Valentinian texts discovered at Nag Hammadi. However, they are also burdened with methodological difficulties. First and foremost, none of them claims to be of Valentinian origin. In determining the Valentinian origin of those texts, scholars must rely on the vocabulary and style of narrative which are then compared with all the information gathered from heresiologists and their accounts. This presents a particular conundrum that calls into question the aspirations of some scholars such as Kurt Rudolph who think that the Nag Hammadi texts should be the most important sources on Valentinian Gnosticism.³⁰ In other words, it is highly questionable to attach greater importance to the Nag Hammadi texts when they cannot be related to the Valentinians without the help of the information gathered from church authors.

In reconstructing Valentinus' theology and cosmology, I will look at three separate accounts: Valentinus' psalm quoted by Hippolytus of Rome, the summary of Valentinus' Gnostic myth according to Irenaeus, and the Valentinian treatise entitled the *Gospel of Truth*. The authorship of the latter text is still a debated issue. At the end of the second century, Irenaeus claimed that the *Gospel of Truth* emerged within the Valentinian school and that the text completely disagrees with everything written in the New Testament gospels.³¹ Discovered in Egypt, the *Gospel of Truth* contains the following prologue:

“The proclamation of the truth is a joy for those who have received grace from the father of truth, that they might learn to know him through the power of the Word that emanated from the fullness that is in the father's thought and intellect – the Word, who is spoken of as ‘saviour’: for, that is the term for the work that he was to accomplish to ransom those who had fallen ignorant of the father; while the term ‘proclamation’ refers to the manifestation of hope, a discovery for those who are searching for him.”³²

²⁸ These quotes are significant because they represent the only surviving traces of the Eastern branch of the *Valentinian Gnostic School*. See: THOMASSEN 2008, p. 28–29.

²⁹ Hipp. *Haer.* VI.37.7–8. Dunderberg thinks that the interpretation of the psalm is actually a work of unknown Valentinus' disciple. Cf. DUNDERBERG 2008, p. 62–63; HOLZHAUSEN 1993, p. 66.

³⁰ Cf. RUDOLPH 1987, p. 3. See also: DESJARDINS 1986, p. 343.

³¹ Iren. *Adv. haer.* III.11.9. The basic problem in dealing with Valentinus' theology is the differentiation between his original teaching and the teachings of his successors. See: SMITH 2004, p. 143. Bentley Layton translates Valentinus' poem as the *Summer Harvest*. Cf. LAYTON 1995, p. 246. Einar Thomassen and Christoph Marksches claim that the original title of the poem was *θέρος* (Summer). I concur with the latter thesis. See: THOMASSEN 2008, p. 479; MARKSCHIES 1992, p. 218. See a detailed analysis of the poem in: MCGOWAN 1997, p. 158–178.

³² *GTr.* 16:31 – 17:1. See: PEARSON 2007, p. 152–153.

Already the first analysis of the *Gospel of Truth* concluded that the author was Valentinus.³³ Later generations of scholars raised their suspicions claiming that there is simply not enough evidence to associate this text with Valentinus.³⁴ However, there are still scholars such as Birger Pearson and David Brakke who think that the author was indeed Valentinus.³⁵ In my opinion, the evidence is not clear enough. Nevertheless, the fact remains: The *Gospel of Truth* was written before 180 CE which makes it chronologically very close to the time of Valentinus.³⁶

Despite the particular interest the *Gospel of Truth* brings to the discussion, I will start the analysis of Valentinus' theology with his poem "Summer"³⁷:

I see how all depends on spirit (1)
 I perceive how all is borne by spirit: (2)
 Flesh suspended on soul (3)
 Soul clinging to air (4)
 Air suspended from ether (5)
 But from the depths, fruits being brought forth (6)
 From the womb, a child being brought forth (7)

The first thing to note is the personal and direct religious experience emphasised in the poem. Unlike classical Gnostic texts (e.g. *The Secret Book According to John*) where a specific third person is put into the midst of the narrative (e.g. Adam, Paul, John, etc.), in this poem Valentinus' personal religious experience is put forward. This is not an exception, but a pattern visible in the Valentinian corpus. Take, for instance, the *Gospel of Truth*, where the author himself (maybe Valentinus?) claims that he was in "the place of repose".³⁸ In one of his surviving fragments, Valentinus refers to a mystical experience in which Word (Logos) appeared to him in the form of a child.³⁹ According to Valentinus, the knowledge of the Supreme God is equated with the self-knowledge.⁴⁰ The structure of the psalm can be divided into two separate parts. In the first five verses Valentinus emphasises the dependence

³³ Probably the first scholar who reached that conclusion was Gilles Quispel. Cf. QUISPEL 1955. p. 91–101.

³⁴ See: MARKSCHIES 1992. p. 339–356. In his conclusion (p. 356) the German Scholar asserts: "Da uns auch kein einziger Hinweis im Text selbst veranlaßt, Valentin als Autor zu diskutieren, besteht aus meiner Sicht kein Grund für eine solche Zuschreibung des Textes".

³⁵ Cf. PEARSON 2004. p. 152–153; BRAKKE 2010. p. 100. Despite the title, the *Gospel of Truth* is not similar at all to the New Testament gospels. It does not contain a narrative of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. The word *εὐαγγέλιον* from the beginning of the prologue is better understood as the *good news* or the *proclamation* to evade the possibility of any confusion. As for the genre, the *Gospel of Truth* is a type of homily topically oriented towards the role of Jesus and the knowledge he brings to chosen disciples. See: ROBINSON 1963. p. 234–243.

³⁶ Interestingly enough, Irenaeus claims that this text was highly appreciated among the Valentinians. Does this provide a piece of further evidence of the authorship of the *Gospel of Truth*? Unfortunately, this question goes beyond the scope of this paper.

³⁷ Hipp. *Haer.* VI.37.7. Greek text available in: THOMASSEN 2008. p. 479.

³⁸ *Gtr.* 43:1–15.

³⁹ Hipp. *Haer.* VI.42.2.

⁴⁰ See: BRAKKE 2010. p. 103.

of everything that exists on the spiritual realm. The vocabulary he uses points to the strong influence of Greek philosophy.⁴¹ The first five verses suggest the unity and stability of the cosmos, but also a particular hierarchy. Nevertheless, the last two verses indicate that a dynamic change has occurred. Stability was abolished by the act of creation. In the end the reader is left in a sort of cognitive dissonance. On the one hand there is a notion of stability and connectivity, but on the other, there is a strong emphasis on the spiritual force that can create a new life.

The psalm is too short to be a fruitful ground for an elaborate reconstruction of Valentinus' cosmology and theology. However, if we were to compare the psalm with other information about Valentinus and his theology, we would not discover a clear contradiction. Despite the opinion of some scholars, the psalm does not suggest a positive evaluation of the material world.⁴² One could even argue that the last two verses represent eons emanating from Depth (a Valentinian expression for the supreme God) which are different from the material world because the latter strongly depends on the spiritual realm. If that really is the case, it is justifiable to conclude that Valentinus' psalm is an expression of a strong differentiation between the material and divine realms. That is indeed close to classical anti-cosmic dualism which is the basic feature of Sethian Gnosticism.⁴³ Moreover, the basic notion of the psalm is that everything eventually depends on the divine realm which means that a positive evaluation has to be connected to the divine, and not to the material world.⁴⁴ Finally, the nature of the material world and its

⁴¹ The influence of Greek philosophy (especially Platonism) on the development of Valentinian theology is a common prevalent conclusion among the scholars. It is backed up by numerous references in the primary source. See: Hipp. *Haer.* VI.16; Epiph. *Adv. Haeres.* I.31.2.2. Einar Thomassen draws attention on the similarity between the Pythagoreans' philosophy and the Valentinian theology, especially in the case of the first part of Valentinian cosmological myth topically related to the nature of the divine realm. See: THOMASSEN 2008. p. 195–198. Furthermore, the role of Demiurge as the lower divine being who creates material world can be closely connected to the platonic tradition. See: THOMASSEN 2008. p. 428–429. Valentinus' cosmological myth where the world is described as the inferior copy of the higher (spiritual) world is also a strong indication of the Platonic influence. This is most clearly illustrated in one of the preserved fragments of Valentinus' writings (fragment D, according to Bentley Layton's classification). See: Clem. Al. *Strom.* IV.89.6–IV.90.1; PEARSON 2004. p. 151. David Dawson asserts that Valentinus used the Platonic and Jewish tradition while creating his own cosmological myth. See: DAWSON 1992. p. 135–144.

⁴² Thomassen justifiably asserts that the picture of the whole material reality that depends on higher aspects is not an expression of admiration, but only of understanding how the cosmos is structured. See: THOMASSEN 2008. p. 482. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that a particular contradiction is avoided if one accepts the conclusion of a Norwegian scholar. Namely, one of the surviving fragments of Valentinus' writings (fragment C) talks about the creation of Adam and it gives a strongly negative portray of angels who created the first man.

⁴³ This interpretation corresponds with another Valentinus' fragment where he explains that the material world is an inferior copy of the divine realm. See: Clem. Al. *Strom.* IV.89.6.

⁴⁴ Andrew McGowan sees in the elements of esoteric thought and the lack of transparency of the psalm the foundations of the later Gnostic redaction of the original teachings of Valentinus whose Gnosticism is significantly greater than the one present in, for example, Philo. By doing this, McGowan tries to "save" the theological gap between Valentinus and his disciples which is

creation in the psalm does not at all contradict with what one finds in the Valentinian corpus that belongs to his disciples (e.g. *Tripartite Tractate*).⁴⁵

The summary of Valentinus' myth according to Irenaeus represents a certain synthesis between the Christian tradition and classical or Sethian Gnosticism.⁴⁶ Like other Gnostics, Valentinus thought of the supreme God as a complex structure of eons who emanated from him. Besides, Valentinus postulated a series of eons who originally dwelt in the divine realm called *Pleroma* which is placed within two distinct boundaries: the first boundary separates divine beings from two principles called Abyss and Silence; the other boundary separates an eon called Achamoth from both the divine beings in the *Pleroma* and the two principles mentioned above.⁴⁷ But unlike the classical Gnostic myth, the names of eons in the Valentinian cosmological system are based on the biblical tradition ("Truth", "Life", "Logos", "Church"). Furthermore, while the Gnostics referred to the eternal realm as fulness, Valentinus called it "Pleroma". He probably derived that name from the beginning of the *Gospel According to John*.⁴⁸ Valentinus agreed with the classical Gnostic myth in that one of the eons made a terrible mistake. However, amid the cosmic drama was not Sophia but Mother who created a series of divine beings such as the Christ, and the Demiurge. The latter is portrayed as the God of the Old Testament and the creator of this world.⁴⁹ Valentinus, thus, agrees with the classical Gnostic myth when it comes to the belief that the creator of the material world is an inferior divine being. However, he does not call him Yaldabaoth but Demiurge (*δημιουργός*) – a concept taken from the Platonic tradition. Moreover, the Demiurge is characterised as an inferior divine being, but he is never called evil or ignorant like Yaldabaoth.

undoubtedly present if one accepts the idea that Valentinus was not a Gnostic in any sense at all. See: MCGOWAN 1997. p. 171–172.

⁴⁵ It is worth pointing out a particular ambiguity in the basic details of the creation of the first man. According to one of the preserved fragments of Valentinus' writings (fragment C), the creation of the first man is the work of evil angels. However, in the tradition of Valentinus' successors, the Demiurge is the one depicted as the creator of the first man. This ambiguity can be resolved by postulating angels as those who help the Demiurge. This notion cannot be excluded *a priori* from the fragment since it is incomplete. Besides that, *Tripartite Tractate* contains the picture of angels as helpers of Demiurge in the creation of the first man. See: *TriTrac*. 105. Finally, one cannot exclude the possibility that Valentinus developed his theology and cosmology during his lifetime. Maybe the first version of his theology included only evil angels as creators, but later on Valentinus posited Demiurge as the principle creator of the first man. See: THOMASSEN 2008. p. 433–434.

⁴⁶ There are heated debates among the scholars about the reliability of Irenaeus' account. Einar Thomassen certainly belongs to the "sceptical camp" even though he is open to the possibility that certain elements of Irenaeus' account is genuine. The problem is that the strong conclusion cannot be made without the comparison of that account with Valentinus' writings. Since everything we have from Valentinus is fragmentary, it is impossible to make a full comparative analysis. Unlike Thomassen, Gilles Quispel and Simone Petrement assert the genuine authenticity of Irenaeus' account. Cf. QUIPEL 1996. p. 346–347; PETREMENT 1993. p. 368–369.

⁴⁷ Iren. *Adv. haer.* I.11.1.

⁴⁸ Jn 1, 16.

⁴⁹ Iren. *Adv. haer.* I.11.1.

The last example of how Valentinus revised the classical Gnostic myth is connected to the nature of the saviour figure. In the *Secret Book According to John*, Sofia and Barbelo work together to bring knowledge about the supreme God to chosen people. In contrast to that, Valentinus did place so much emphasis on the return of the divine spark that is trapped inside the human body. He was more oriented toward the idea of the divine essence that is located in humans and that presents a bridge between them and the supreme deity. Interestingly enough, the saviour figure in Valentinus' theology is Logos incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth. To put it bluntly, God has revealed himself, *via* Logos (or his son), to humans who are now, through knowledge, able to "see" God. Valentinus believed that salvation unlocks the divine potential in people, enabling them to supersede the corruption of the material world. This notion is clearly illustrated by one of Valentinus' fragments where he encourages his students to renounce the material world.⁵⁰ If Valentinus was the author of the *Gospel of Truth*, that would be the only systematic presentation of his theology. One of the essential aims of this text is to equate sin with the lack of knowledge. The primal fall is not a moral but an intellectual category. In other words, people have forgotten about God; they do not comprehend him anymore. Therefore, salvation is defined as the process of getting to know God once again through the intermediate help of the Saviour (Logos within the person of Jesus), who shares the knowledge about the Highest God, the creator of all. In the *Gospel of Truth*, the material world that people inhabited is the direct consequence of ignorance. Interestingly, the author introduces Error that takes over the role Wisdom and Yaldabaoth had in the classical Gnostic myth. To put it more bluntly, the material world is the product of ignorance shaped by Error. Jesus Christ is the primal bridge of knowledge. As the author states:

"It is to the perfect that this, the proclamation of the one they search for, has made itself known, through the mercies of the father. By this, the hidden mystery Jesus Christ shed light upon those who were, because of forgetfulness, in darkness. He enlightened them and gave them a way, and the way is the truth, about which he instructed them."⁵¹

This passage clearly illustrates the Valentinian soteriology. Jesus came to Earth to enlighten others and bring them closer to knowledge, which is the only way to a full salvation. Error persecuted him and caused his crucifixion.⁵² However, instead of the cross, Valentinus (or the unknown author) uses the metaphor of the tree. On that tree, Jesus becomes a "fruit of the father's acquaintance".⁵³

⁵⁰ Clem. Al. *Strom.* IV.89.1–3. This was originally a sermon that Valentinus used as the way of teaching his students the real truth about the God and the world. See more about this fragment in: THOMASSEN 2008, p. 460–465. Furthermore, this fragment could indicate that Valentinus believed his community was predetermined for the salvation that would come.

⁵¹ *GTr.* 18:11 – 18. The "perfect" are the Valentinians. They are the ones who possess the *gnosis* or the knowledge. See: LAYTON – BRAKKE 2021, p. 254.

⁵² *GTr.* 18:21 – 26.

⁵³ This represents a clear reference to the *Book of Genesis* and the tree of knowledge. See: *Gen* 2, 5.

However, eating from this tree is not a forbidden, but a desirable thing to do. By accepting the *gnosis* Jesus teaches, people are opening themselves to the knowledge that brings salvation.⁵⁴ Interestingly enough, the *Gospel of Truth* interprets the sacrament of the Eucharist as valuable means of obtaining knowledge – a viewpoint that contradicts the ideology of the classical Gnostic myth.⁵⁵ Where is God located? The spark of Him is located inside the Valentinians because they are the emanation of the Highest God. Through salvation, man unlocks the divine potential that enables him to overcome the corruption of the material world that, in turn, leads to liberation from it.⁵⁶ It does not come as a surprise that Irenaeus saw Valentinus as a great danger for the stability and the future of the *Great Church*. After all, he used similar concepts, pictures, and metaphors, but he added a certain amount of Gnosticism with an “esoteric flavour” that the *Great Church* could not accept.⁵⁷ Moreover, Valentinus was a highly skilled theologian and philosopher. In the first stage of the development of his school, the Valentinians were definitely a part of the *Great Church*.⁵⁸ In other words, it is not suitable to talk about Valentinus as a founder of a separate religion. The process of separation happened gradually during the second and third centuries.

However, I do not think that we should speak about the *Valentinian Gnostic School* only as one of the variations within Christianity because this notion implies a lack of clear classification differences between the Valentinians and the *Great Church*. It is worth noting that the *Great Church* had core theological views from the beginning of the new religion decades before the emergence of any Gnostic communities.⁵⁹ In other words, by defining the Valentinians solely as a variation within the early Christian world, we are in danger of losing our “eye of the ball”.⁶⁰ The postmodern view shared by scholars such as Karen King

⁵⁴ The soteriology based upon the idea of knowledge is the fundamental element of the classical gnostic myth and this idea is consistent in every stream of Valentinian Gnosticism. The words of Theodotus illustrates this the best: “*It is not the bath alone that liberates, but also the acquaintance: Who were we? What have we become? Where were we? Into what place have we been cast? Where are we hastening to?*”. See: *Exc. Ex. Th.* 78:2. “Extracts from the Works of Theodotus and the So-Called Oriental Teachings at the Time of Valentinus” are taken from: LAYTON 2021. p. 501–534.

⁵⁵ See: KASSER – MEYER – WURST 2007. p. 20–21.

⁵⁶ The interpretation of salvation as a process of liberation from the material world is a feature of one of the surviving Valentinus’ fragments. It is probable that this fragment was initially a sermon Valentinus used in front of his pupils. See: Clem. Al. *Strom.* IV. 89.1–3.

⁵⁷ Iren. *Adver. Haer.* III.15:2.

⁵⁸ James McCue analysed the extensive use of the New Testament literature by the Valentinians. He saw this as the additional indicator of their attempt to present themselves within the existing structures of the *Great Church*. See: McCUE 1979. p. 123.

⁵⁹ See: GATHERCOLE 2016. p. 407–456.

⁶⁰ According to Karen King, any study of early Christianity that starts with an acceptance of the differences between the *Great Church* and all other early “Christian” groups in fact accepts the traditional paradigm of the relationship between heresy and orthodoxy. The main feature of this paradigm is the notion that heresy is a secondary phenomenon, a corruption of the original truth embodied in the *Great Church*. Cf. KING 2003. p. 2–3, 164. By way of reply, I can state that the acceptance of the core ideological (or theological) differences between the various early “Christian” groups does not mean that there were clear-cut boundaries. Of course, there was a

which tries to reject any distinction within the Christianities because it represents an apology of heresiology, becomes the opposite radicalism. By rejecting the distinctions, we forget about the real differences that existed among the different early Christian groups. Therefore, it is possible to talk about the *Valentinian Gnostic School* as a group that, during the first several decades of its existence, became a separate community without accepting the traditional and Christian notion of the relationship between heresy and orthodoxy. In other words, by adapting the Gnostic system in their own theological framework, the Valentinians created a distinctive community. If we accept the postmodern viewpoint, we can easily neglect the core differences between the various Gnostic groups and the *Great Church* during the second and third centuries.

Thus, Valentinus was an influential (Christian) philosopher whose public ministry in Rome reached its peak in the middle of the second century. There, he attracted a number of followers. Valentinus successfully adapted certain aspects of the Gnostic myth to the existing Christian theological ideas so that he could easily appeal to the proto-orthodox Christians. Simone Petrement asserts that Valentinus' theology represents a departure from the classical Gnosticism towards the partial "rehabilitation of Judaism".⁶¹

1.2 Valentinians after Valentinus: cosmology and soteriology

We are not quite sure how Valentinus taught his students. The common presupposition is that he was in charge of a philosophical school where the participants tried, guided by the basic features of Valentinus' theology, to penetrate into the original meaning of biblical tradition.⁶² Some of his disciples became prominent teachers in charge of Valentinian communities who extended their activity beyond the life of their founder. Interestingly enough, they seem to have moved a step closer to the classical Gnostic myth. According to Hippolytus, the Valentinian school was divided geographically into the Italian and eastern branches. This division was caused by the different views about the nature of Christ. The Italian branch believed that Christ had a material body into which his spirit entered at the moment of baptism and the eastern branch held that his body was purely spiritual.⁶³ Hippolytus also

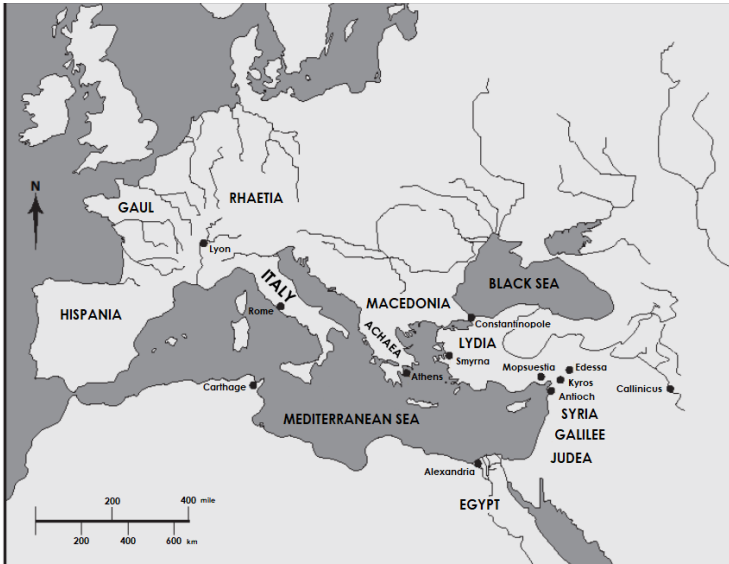
certain amount of fluidity between the groups, but the basic ideological features were different from the beginnings. It is hard not to see the crucial difference between the groups that devalues the Old Testament and believe in two different Gods (e.g, Marcion, and partially the Valentinians) and the *Great Church* that shares the idea of ideological continuity between the Old and the New Testament and believes that there is only one God.

⁶¹ See: PETREMENT 1993, p. 370–378. Bentley Layton concurs with this reasoning. See: LAYTON 1995, p. 217–222.

⁶² See: THOMASSEN, 2013, p. 183–197. One of Valentinus' fragments asserts that there are truthful claims in other philosophical traditions (beyond the Judeo-Christian world). Because of that, it is highly likely that Valentinus used non-Christian texts in his lectures and sermons. See: Clem. Al. *Strom.* VI.52:3–4.

⁶³ Hipp. *Haer.* VI.35.5–7. Tertullian confirms that the Valentinians were divided into two schools (lat. *duae scholae*). Unfortunately, he provides no details about their respective differences. He only

informs us about two important Valentinians that belonged to the Italian branch: Ptolemy and Heracleon.⁶⁴ Moreover, Clement of Alexandria describes the title of the teachings of Theodotus: *ἐκ τῶν θεοδοῦτου καὶ τῆς ἀνατολικῆς καλουμένης διδασκαλίας κατὰ τοὺς Οὐαλεντίνου χρόνους ἐπιτομαί* (“Epitomes from the Work of Theodotus and the So-Called Eastern Teaching at the Time of Valentinus”).⁶⁵ As the member of the “Italic” branch, Heracleon is notable for having written the first commentary on the Gospel of John.⁶⁶ We do not have a lot of biographical information about these teachers but we have enough to reconstruct their basic teachings. Map 1.0. illustrates popularity and the dispersion of Valentinianism.



Map. 1.0. The diffusion of Valentinianism in the Roman Empire⁶⁷

As one can see from the map, a series of schools emerged on the backs of Valentinus' theology all across the Roman Empire. Briefly, Valentinianism was a distinctive and Gnostic form of Christian theology primarily oriented toward educated Christians who could understand deeper truths and become

states that Valentinus' disciples deviated from the original teachings of Valentinus. See: Tert. *Val* 11.2; 4.1–2.

⁶⁴ Hipp. *Haer.* VI.35.6. It seems that the eastern branch is closer to Valentinus' teachings. See: THOMASSEN 2008, p. 41.

⁶⁵ The work is known today in the Latin version as *Excerpta ex Theodoto*. Joel Kalvesmaki questioned the authenticity of this division by arguing that both Hippolytus' and Clement's testimonies are unreliable at best. Cf. KALVESMAKI 2008, p. 79–89. Einar Thomassen accepts the division and points to particular theological differences between the two branches. The Norwegian scholar argues that the eastern branch believed that Jesus (as a figure of a saviour) needed salvation as well. See: THOMASSEN 2008, p. 31–32, 34, 38.

⁶⁶ The commentary is available only in fragmentary quotation by the Church author Origen who had a polemical discussion with Heracleon. See: PAGELS 1989.

⁶⁷ The table is taken from: LEWIS 2013, p. 70.

members of the spiritual class (*πνευματικοί*).⁶⁸ The sources illustrate how certain Valentinians at first participated as the members of *Great Church* structure.⁶⁹ Irenaeus claims that Valentinians approached other Christians and offered them a chance of advancement in understanding the true message of Christ.⁷⁰ What was the basic theology of Valentinus' successors?⁷¹ In answering this question, I will be using Irenaeus' summary of Ptolemy's myth and the document called *Tripartite Tractate* discovered in Nag Hammadi.⁷² The latter represent the only available example of systematic description of Valentinian gnosis.⁷³

Instead of a detailed analysis of both narratives, I will present the distinctive features of the Valentinian cosmology by emphasising the key differences between the two narratives.⁷⁴ Like classical Gnostic systems and their teacher, the Valentinians believed that everything emerged from one and ultimate divine being they called Depth.⁷⁵ This divine being is represented according to the principles of apophatic theology, which is a basic feature of the classical Gnostic myth.⁷⁶ Moreover, God wanted people to understand him so he, with

⁶⁸ See: BRAKKE 2006, p. 256.

⁶⁹ Eusebius mentions Florinus, a presbyter under bishop Victor at the end of the second century. The bishop excommunicated him after finding out his true ideology. See: Euseb. *Eccl. hist.* V.20.1–8.

⁷⁰ Iren. *Adver. Haer.* I. praef. 1.

⁷¹ The theology of Valentinus' successors can be reconstructed based on Irenaeus and other church authors who describe their theology, cosmology, and soteriology. Sometimes they even quote their works (e.g. Ptolemy's "Letter to Flora"). Besides, we have a corpus of Valentinian texts found at Nag Hammadi. See: LEWIS 2013, p. 81–83.

⁷² In the prologue of his first book, Irenaeus emphasizes that his main goal is to describe and discredit the basic theological beliefs of Valentinus' disciples, especially those who followed Ptolemy and his school. See: Iren. *Adver. Haer.* I. praef. II. *Tripartite Tractate* probably dates to the middle of the third century, approximately 70 years after Irenaeus wrote his *magnum opus*. Given the time gap, one should not be surprised by differences in the description of the Valentinian myth. This also illustrates the fact that Valentinians tended to rewrite and revise their basic myth. To learn more about the *Tripartite Tractate* see: THOMASSEN 1980, p. 358–375.

⁷³ See: PEARSON 2004, p. 184.

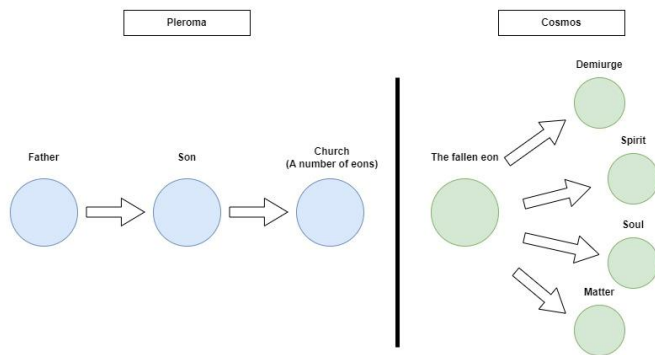
⁷⁴ Einar Thomassen thinks that the differences between the *Tripartite tractate* and Irenaeus' version of Ptolemy's myth is important in understanding the basic social features of Valentinianism. In the introduction of the latest translation, he asserts: "*The importance of this tractate is above all that it contains a version of the Valentinian system that is distinctly Valentinian at the same time that it differs on many points from the well-known systems reported by the church fathers. For this reason, it helps us understand better what are the constant and indispensable features of the Valentinian system and what are individual and local variations.*" – THOMASSEN 2009, p. 57–58. Moreover, these variations are both the indications of the constant revision of the cosmological myth and the inherent differences between particular schools within the Valentinian tradition. In other words, variations are a constant reminder that the schools within the Valentinian tradition did not develop in the same sense that the *Great Church* did. The latter also had a degree of local differences but remain fully aware of the one community bound by certain ideological ideas from the beginnings.

⁷⁵ Iren. *Adver. Haer.* I.1.1.

⁷⁶ Thus, the *Tripartite Tractate* explains the infinite complexity of the highest God in the following way: "*But the way he is in himself, his own manner of being – that no mind can conceive, no word express, no eye see, and no body touch, so incomprehensible is his greatness, so unfathomable his depth, so immeasurable his exaltedness, and so boundless his extension.*" See: *TriTrac.* 54.

the force of his mind, created eons that dwell with him in the highest realm called Pleroma.⁷⁷ In the *Tripartite Tractate*, eons are without numbers and names.⁷⁸ The Father and Son are located in the middle of the Pleroma and after them comes the set of eons that together creates a church.⁷⁹

According to Ptolemy, there are exactly thirty eons divided into groups of eight, ten, and twelve.⁸⁰ Every eon has a name related to the Judeo-Christian tradition: Truth, Word, Hope, etc. The last one is Wisdom (or Sophia). In Ptolemy's myth, the thirty eons exist in male – female pairs, which is also a standard feature of the classical Gnostic myth. The Valentinians probably valued the idea of stability and harmony within the divine realm. This stability is achieved precisely through the male – female pairs that are also a convenient metaphor in explaining of the contradiction between the unity and multiplicity of the highest God. Irenaeus claims that the Valentinians (including Valentinus!) believed that the highest God also has a female “partner” called Silence (*σιγή*).⁸¹ As is the case with the classical Gnostic myth (best represented in the Secret Book According to John), the creation of the world was the consequence of an error that occurred in the divine realm – one of the eons broke the perfect stability and harmony in the Pleroma. To be more precise, one of the eons tried to comprehend the highest God fully (without permission) and by doing so, started the process that would eventually lead to the creation of the material world. Picture 1 illustrates the creation of the world according to the *Tripartite Tractate*.



Picture 1. *Tripartite Tractate* and the creation of the world

Unlike the *Tripartite Tractate* where the fallen eon is nameless, Ptolemy gives it a name: Wisdom (*Σοφία*).⁸² Furthermore, in Ptolemy's myth, the role of the creator of the material world is assigned to Wisdom. As the consequence of

⁷⁷ Iren. *Adver. Haer.* 1.1.1.

⁷⁸ See: LEWIS 2013, p. 76.

⁷⁹ *TriTrac.* 51–60.

⁸⁰ Iren. *Adver. Haer.* 1.1.2–3. Tertullian suggests that Ptolemy was the architect of the idea of thirty eons that dwell in the Pleroma. See: Tert. *Val.* 4.2.

⁸¹ Iren. *Adver. Haer.* 1.11:1.

⁸² *TriTrac.* 99–101; Iren. *Adver. Haer.* 1.2:2–3.

a mistake she made, the Highest God expels Wisdom from the divine realm. After that, she emanates three different substances that represent the basic building blocks of the cosmos: matter (*ὑλη/χοῦς*), soul (*Ψυχή*), and spirit (*πνεῦμα*). According to the Valentinian tradition, matter is a physical substance present everywhere: from stones to animals, and people. However, matter is portrayed as the element deriving from the fallen eons called Ignorance, Fear, Terror, and Sorrow. In other words, the origin of matter is pictured quite negatively.⁸³ Soul emerges as the consequence of Wisdom's remorse after she realised how grave a mistake she had made. To put it bluntly, according to the Valentinian tradition, the soul is placed between the matter and the third element. The third element (spirit) was created after the Highest God and other eons in the divine realm accepted the last eon as a member of the *Pleroma*. Spirit is the element that enables (certain) people the ability to insight, which is the *condicio sine qua non* of salvation.

The most important feature of the Valentinian myth is the emergence of the three elements mentioned above. These elements are now mixed and placed in humans (in various amount). At the end of time, they are going to be separated and put where they belong. The spiritual element will return to *Pleroma*, the material element will be annihilated, and the soulish element will be placed somewhere between.⁸⁴ It seems that the Valentinians were especially inspired by a particular interpretation of Paul's theology. To be specific, Paul talks about the nature of people and their relation to God:

“The person without the Spirit (*ψυχικός*) does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. The person with the Spirit (*πνευματικός*) makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments.”⁸⁵

Based on Paul's words, the Valentinians concluded that there were three classes of people depending on the element that dominates within them. Needless to say, the highest element dominates within the spiritual class or the Valentinians themselves. The lowest element (matter) dominates among the pagans and Jews. They will eventually be annihilated. For them, salvation is unreachable. As the author (Valentinus?) of the *Gospel of Truth* asserts:

“For whoever lacks knowledge until the end, is a modelled form of forgetfulness, and will perish along with it. Otherwise, why do these contemptible persons have no name? Why do they not possess the faculty of speech? So that whoever has knowledge is

⁸³ In the *Gospel of Philip* ignorance is called “the mother of all evils” while knowledge is equated with the freedom and salvation. See: *GPh*. 83:30; 84:10–13.

⁸⁴ David Brakke thinks that both the spiritual and soulish elements will be saved at the end. Cf. BRAKKE 2010. p. 116–117.

⁸⁵ 1 Cor 2, 14–15.

from above: and if called, hears, replies, and turns to be the one who is calling; and goes to him.”⁸⁶

All Christians who follow Jesus Christ, but do not belong to the Valentinian circle are considered to be a part of the psychic or soulful class of people. According to Irenaeus, the Valentinians believed that this category would eventually dwell with the Demiurge in the intermediate (divine) reality, located between the Earth and the *Pleroma*.⁸⁷ It is uncertain whether they accepted the possibility of their salvation and final return to the *Pleroma*. This brings us to the complex question of predeterminism. Did the Valentinians believe that the destiny of all was already decided based on the class they belonged to? Irenaeus asserts that these classes originated from the three sons of Adam: Cain became the father of material people, Abel became the father of psychical or soulful people and Seth became the father of spiritual people whose salvation is already ensured.⁸⁸ Those belonging to the material class are doomed, while the psychical class of people depends on their good work that can bring them partial salvation. It is unclear what the soteriological degree of mobility between these three classes was. The *Tripartite Tractate* explains the threefold division of humanity in the following way:

“Now, humanity came to exist as three kinds with regard to essence—spiritual, psychical, and material—reproducing the pattern of the three kinds of disposition of the Word, from which sprung material, psychical, and spiritual beings. The essences of the three kinds can each be known from its fruit. They were nevertheless not known at first, but only when the Saviour came to them, shedding light upon the saints and revealing what each one was.”⁸⁹

These passages seem to suggest that the Saviour revealed what had already existed. In other words, people were already divided by the dominant element within them, and Jesus only revealed the predetermined reality. In the following passages, it is asserted that every class of people responded differently to the message Jesus preached. The Spiritual class accepted it immediately, the material class rejected it, and the psychic or soulful class hesitated at first but eventually accepted his message.⁹⁰ Based on this, it is possible to conclude that people reacted according to their class and predetermined destiny. By dividing people into three classes corresponding to the basic elements within them, the Valentinians were trying to convey a deep theological message that certain people were saved by their nature while others were not.

⁸⁶ *GTr.* 21:34–22:4.

⁸⁷ *Iren. Adver. Haer.* 1.7:1.

⁸⁸ *Iren. Adver. Haer.* 1.6:1–4; 1.7.5.

⁸⁹ *TriTrac.* 118.

⁹⁰ *TriTrac.* 118–119.

However, sources imply that Valentinians tried to spread their message to other Christians, which would suggest partial upwards mobility between the soulful and the spiritual class of people.⁹¹ Finally, in the Valentinian tradition salvation is equated with the inner discovery of the spirit that lies within the person. This discovery was primarily esoteric and individual which had a profound effect on how the Valentinians interpreted the act of resurrection and (consequently) the idea of authority! This issue will be addressed in the following chapter.

2. The Attitude towards authority and structure in Valentinian communities

As the interpretation of sources reveals, in the Valentinian tradition, salvation is understood as a process of “unlocking” the divine spark within the spiritual person which enables him or her to overcome the inferiority of the material world. In one of his surviving fragments, Valentinus encourages his pupils to renounce the material world, which could suggest a certain degree of asceticism.⁹² With that in mind, it is crucial to note the difference in the interpretation of asceticism between the *Great Church* and various Gnostic communities. In the latter case, the rejection of this world is perpetrated by the belief that it was created by an inferior (or even evil) divine being called Demiurge or Yaldabaoth. After all, the creation of the material world was a consequence of an error and an abrupt disruption of harmony in the divine realm. Furthermore, the classical Gnostic myth takes a strongly negative view of the material world. It seems that most Gnostics even rejected both the traditional (Greek) and Christian concepts of time and the world. Take, for instance, the fact that most Gnostics borrowed the idea of the cosmos filled with divine beings from the Greek philosophical tradition. However, unlike Greeks who divinised heavenly beings, the Gnostics believed they were a personification of evil and associates of the Demiurge. Henri Puech draws a clear picture writing that Greeks talked about “God and the world”, while the Gnostic starting point was “God or the world”.⁹³ From that derives the conclusion that most Gnostics in antiquity held a deeply individualistic and anti-structural view of the world.⁹⁴

This is the view that the Valentinians, in a certain aspect, borrowed and modified to their own worldview.⁹⁵ Regarding Valentinus’ conception of authority and structure, it is worth noting that he legitimised his own position based on of his own eloquence, charisma, and a deeply personal relationship with the divine realm. His poem *Summer* is undoubtedly a great example of that.⁹⁶ Even in the cases where the Saviour (Jesus Christ) appears as the

⁹¹ Take for instance the *Letter to Flora* written by Ptolemy. See: LAYTON 1995, p. 308–315.

⁹² Clem. Al. *Strom.* IV.89:1–3.

⁹³ See: PUECH 1959, p. 60.

⁹⁴ See: PEARSON 1990, p. 132–134.

⁹⁵ In this context, the rejection of fasting in Ptolemy’s *Letter to Flora* could indicate a negative conception of the material world in the Valentinian tradition. See: Ptol. *Ep. Flor.* 5:3; THOMASSEN 2013, p. 184–185.

⁹⁶ See: BRAKKE 2010, p. 104.

“mediator” of salvation, the way he brings the salvation implies an individualistic point of view. What do I mean by that? In the Valentinian tradition, salvation is equated with the discovery of a person’s true identity, with the knowledge of who we are, where we came from, and where we are going. This is the core message that divine Logos incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth brings.⁹⁷

Besides the knowledge and the individualist attitude towards the salvation, distinction between the Supreme God and the Demiurge led the Valentinians to the rejection of the authority and structure that the *Great Church* had fully accepted.⁹⁸ One should bear in mind that the Valentinians did not believe that the Demiurge was an evil, but only an inferior divine being through which Wisdom had created humans and then, without his knowledge, inserted a divine spark.⁹⁹ For example, Heracleon, as one of the most important representatives of the Valentinian tradition, describes explicitly the role of the Demiurge as the (inferior) mediator in the creation of the material world.¹⁰⁰ Elaine Pagels asserts that the early bishops, by insisting on the belief in one God, advocated for a specific system of organisation and conception of authority with one bishop in charge of a community.¹⁰¹ Even though Pagels postulates the existence of a developed monepiscopacy too soon, her theory about the connection between strict monotheism and the development of a structural organisation with the bishops as leading figures in early Christian communities seems to be right on point. As an example, she forgets to mention, we can take Clement’s letter to the Corinthian community written at the end of the first century. While emphasising the unity of God and the continuity between the *Old* and the *New Testament* Clement concludes:

“The apostles were given the gospel for us by the Lord Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ was sent forth from God. Thus, Christ came from God and the apostles from Christ. Both things happened, then, in an orderly way according to the will of God. When, therefore, the apostles received his commands and were fully convinced through the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and persuaded by the word of God, they went forth proclaiming the good news that the Kingdom of God was about to come, brimming with confidence through the Holy Spirit. And as they preached throughout the countryside and in the cities, they appointed the first fruits of their

⁹⁷ *GTr.* 18:11–18. The “perfect” ones are only the Valentinians because they possess the *gnosis*. Only they belong to the spiritual class of people. See: LAYTON 1995. p. 254.

⁹⁸ The authority of the *Great Church* is represented by bishops, presbyters and deacons and perpetuated by a specific ideology called Apostolic succession. This is the idea that bishops are successors of Jesus Christ and his first apostles. This was the “motivational fuel” contributing to the development of church structure. The culmination of that process was the appearance of the monepiscopacy.

⁹⁹ *Exc. ex. Th.* 53.2.

¹⁰⁰ *Orig. In Jo.* XIII.50.336. The quotations of Heracleon are taken from the following edition: HALTON 1993.

¹⁰¹ See: PAGELS 1989. p. 34.

ministries as bishops and deacons of those who were about to believe, testing them by the Spirit.”¹⁰²

In the subsequent passages Clement explicitly justified the existing structure and authority within the *Great Church* by referring to the Old Testament and claiming that the ultimate origin of a bishop’s authority is God.¹⁰³ For our purposes, it is not relevant whether apostles really appointed bishops in all congregations within the *Great Church*. The key point is that monotheism was a major source for legitimising of their position and authority. On the other hand, the Valentinians rejected the pyramidal structure of authority mainly because of their view on salvation and belief in two different divine beings.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, the threefold division of humanity and a certain soteriological elitism by which salvation was not a universal category also affected their concept of authority and structure.¹⁰⁵ Valentinian teacher Theodotus claimed that knowledge attainable only to chosen one was is a superior mode of salvation than baptism.¹⁰⁶ Tertullian reported that the process of initiation into the Valentinian congregation took five years which points to an advance and complex system of recruitment.¹⁰⁷ Considering how they conceptualised salvation and the nature of divine realm, the Valentinians developed a particular stance towards the *Great Church*. Take, for instance, Heracleon and Ptolemy who believed that the “proto-orthodox” Christians were part of the psychical or soulful class of humanity that followed the Demiurge without realising that he was not the Highest divine being worthy of worship.¹⁰⁸ Consequently, members of the *Great Church*, Heracleon claimed, were slaves of the Demiurge, blind before the knowledge of the Highest God.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, Irenaeus asserted that the followers of Valentinus believed that the faith of the *Great Church* was only an elementary level of insight while their community provided an advanced level of teachings and beliefs that could help a spiritual person to elevate beyond the realms of the Demiurge.¹¹⁰

This kind of belief about the divine realm, creation, and humanity has implications for developing the Valentinian conception of authority. By joining Valentinian community, a person gains spiritual authority based primarily on

¹⁰² 1 *Clem.* 42:1–4. All of the quotations of the Apostolic fathers are taken from: EHRMAN 2003.

¹⁰³ 1 *Clem.* 42:5.

¹⁰⁴ Pagan philosopher Celsus also mentioned the threefold division among the various Gnostic groups. See: Orig. *C. Cels.* 5:54, 61–62.

¹⁰⁵ Iren. *Adv. Haer.* I.3:1. Niclas Forster has analysed Valentinian teacher Marcus and his community concluding that they both co-existed within the *Great Church*, but eventually separated themselves thinking that they were “members of the Christian elite”. See: FORSTER 1999, p. 402. Einar Thomassen resonates similarly in his study of the Valentinian tradition. Because of that, Thomassen analyses the social context of the Valentinian meetings emphasising their special congregation which was only available to the spiritual elite. See: THOMASSEN, 2013, p. 195.

¹⁰⁶ *Exc. ex. Th.* 78:1.

¹⁰⁷ *Tert. Val.* 1.2.

¹⁰⁸ Orig. *Comm. Jo.* XIII.16; Iren. *Adver. Haer.* I.21?1–4.

¹⁰⁹ Orig. *Comm. Jo.* XIII.19.

¹¹⁰ Iren. *Adver. Haer.* I.21:4–5.

the knowledge of themselves.¹¹¹ To put it bluntly, given that the basis of individual salvation lies within a person, acceptance of the pyramidal authority and absolute obedience to a superior (bishop) could not develop in the same sense they did within the *Great Church*. The organisation system within the Valentinian tradition was restricted to the personal relationship between a teacher (the bearer of the “good news”) and a student. The knowledge that led to salvation was mystical and esoteric – it was beyond and above the established tradition of the *Great Church*. Essentially, the Valentinians emphasised personal spirituality and direct contact with the divine spark within a spiritual person. Moreover, the division between the Highest God and a lower divine being (Demiurge) contradicts the idea of subordination. As Pagels notes, the Valentinians equated obedience to bishops with obedience to the Demiurge.¹¹² Her thought brings another important implication that she did not notice. According to Valentinian beliefs, the purpose of salvation is to return to the *Pleroma* – a divine space spiritual people came from. In other words, salvation is understood as a process of liberating the divine spark within the spiritual person with the *Pleroma* as a final destination. The return to the highest divine realm where the spiritual person belongs to. Consequently, the destiny of those who receive and accept the knowledge of their origins is that they will eventually rise above the divine realm that the Demiurge inhabits.¹¹³

It is inconceivable that the Valentinians would accept the authority of bishops given that they saw them as proteges of the Demiurge who is beyond the realm they (the Valentinians) belonged to. To put it bluntly, the Valentinians emphasised the superiority of the spiritual class over the divine being that created this world. By doing so, they also rejected the authority of bishops and the social structure of the *Great Church*.¹¹⁴ In other words, Valentinian teachers advocated a belief system where the need to discover a divine spark within a person was of primary interest.¹¹⁵ In contrast, the *Great*

¹¹¹ Perhaps, it would be better to say that by entering the Valentinian community, a person (one?) discovers the authority that lies within him.

¹¹² PAGELS 1976. p. 314.

¹¹³ See: FORSTER 1999. p. 402.

¹¹⁴ See: DECONICK 2013. p. 153–154.

¹¹⁵ April DeConick studies the clash between the *Great Church* and the *Valentinian Gnostic School* within the boundaries of anthropology. The Valentinians emphasised the superiority of (spiritual) men over the creator of this world while the *Great Church* supported the idea of subordination of men to God and his representatives. See: DECONICK 2013. p. 153. By analysing social features of the Marcus' community, Niclas Forster found a similar anthropological perspective in the dimension of prophecy. Forster explains that the gifts of God in Marcus' community were depended on the personal authority of each member since all of them considered themselves a spiritual elite. That would mean that God's gift is inferior in relation to a spiritual person. Irenaeus, on the other hand, strongly rejected this notion and claimed that every gift from God (e.g., ability to prophesize) cannot be inferior in relation to a believer since it comes from the almighty divine being and the sole creator of the entire world. See: FORSTER 1999. p. 130. It is worth noting that Hippolytus refers to a community within the Marcus' tradition that accepted bishop as a leading figure. According to Hippolytus, in charge of this community was indeed a bishop whose main responsibility was to convey a gnostic truth and to lead a ritual aspect of meetings. However, Irenaeus (writing several

Church accepted the subordination of men and life within the organised communities led by bishops whose authority derived from God himself.¹¹⁶ Where Clement of Rome, confident in his belief in a strong continuity between the *Old Testament* God and Jesus Christ, legitimised the authority of bishops as representatives of God and Jesus Christ, the Valentinians saw subordination to the divine being (Demiurge) who is, ranked lower than themselves on the scale of divine importance.

Although, it is worth noting that Clement of Alexandria claimed that the Valentinians tried to legitimise their position by stating that their teachings came from Theudas, who was a disciple of the apostle Paul.¹¹⁷ However, Clement wrote almost two centuries after Paul and there is no supporting evidence for the existence of this Theudas. Even if we accept Clement's claim, this notion has little to do with the classical ideology of apostolic succession that the *Great Church* promoted. Valentinian "succession" did not include other apostles (only Paul) and it was featured by a strict line of particular teachers who transmitted Gnostic truth to those worthy of it. In other words, this cannot be understood as an example of the classical ideology of apostolic succession.¹¹⁸ The Valentinian idea of succession (if it even existed) rejected the hierarchy and system of organisation within the *Great Church* and emphasised a "simple structure" based on the teacher – disciple relationship. Like Protestant communities, Valentinians seemed to have been composed of a number of localized and independent schools that did not share the idea of universal identity that would go beyond the borders of a city or a region.¹¹⁹ Even where one can at first glance find a similarity in social organization and the concept of authority between the Valentinians and the *Great Church*, a closer look reveals essential differences that cannot be ignored.

In the primary sources, specific references to the social structure of their communities are extremely rare. However, based on the sparse information available, it is possible to deduce continuity with the main theological beliefs of Valentinus and his followers. Irenaeus claimed that Marcus' community was accustomed to the practice of drawing lots as a means of deciding which member could prophesy in a given moment.¹²⁰ In other words, each member had the ability to prophesy. Tertullian reports a similar feature of the structure of Valentinian communities emphasising the equal status of all the members

decades earlier) fails to mention this community. It is possible that this was an isolated example that was developed after Irenaeus. See: Hipp. *Ref.* VI.41:4–5; FORSTER 1999, p. 403–404. Still, the fact remains: there is almost nothing in sources that would suggest a strong centralization and the acceptance of bishops in the Valentinian communities.

¹¹⁶ Iren. *Adver. Haer.* IV.16:5.

¹¹⁷ Clem. *Al. Strom.* VII.106:4.

¹¹⁸ We should also bear in mind the lack of a strong ideological/theological connection between Paul and Valentinus. There is not the slightest evidence of Gnosticism in Paul's writings.

¹¹⁹ See: DUNDERBERG 2004, p. 168. The comparison with the Protestant communities was taken from: GREEN 1985, p. 245.

¹²⁰ Iren. *Adver. Haer.* I.13:4. In his careful study of Marcus and his community, Niclas Forster confirms the authenticity of Irenaeus' reports. See: FORSTER 1999, p. 127–128.

and the lack of any structural organisation.¹²¹ Interestingly enough, Pagels asserts that Tertullian's statement implies his belief that any form of discipline and authority always results in the inequality among the members of the community. However, I think that Pagels missed the key difference between the inequality within soteriology and the inequality within the social structure of a community. Based on their theological beliefs (knowledge as a key to salvation, spiritual element in a person as the primary goal of salvation and return to the *Pleroma* as a place well beyond the Demiurge's reach), the Valentinians assimilated "soteriological elitism" into social egalitarianism. In other words, all those who are worthy of *gnosis* (spiritual class) have (by the power of the divine spark within them) an equal position in the community. Consequently, it is highly unlikely that a community of that sort would ever develop the social organization, and the stratification of roles that we can observe in the case of the *Great Church*. Moreover, the *Great Church* kept the idea of universalism in the domain of salvation which means that salvation is available to all because it is primarily based on faith, not special knowledge.

Even for Clement of Alexandria, who wrote a lot about the *gnosis*, faith comes first. In one of his works, Clement explicitly stated that the faith is the foundation of knowledge.¹²² Moreover, the basic theological structure of the *Great Church* in the first century was the belief in the continuity between the historical Jesus and the resurrected Christ.¹²³ It is appropriate to emphasise that the soteriological universalism of the *Great Church* was never transmitted to the level of social organisation. Therefore, Pagels is on the right track when she establishes the lack of an organizational system and points to the equal authority of all Valentinian members. However, she fails to make a clear distinction between soteriological and social equality. Consequently, her analysis leads to the conclusion that the *Great Church* and the *Valentinian Gnostic School* held diametrically opposed ideas on the issues of equality. To put it more bluntly, Pagels' reconstruction implies that the Valentinians were the bearers of equality while the *Great Church* defended the existence of inequality. This is, of course, result of the lack of distinction between soteriological and social universalism. A distinction that Pagels fails to notice.

¹²¹ Tert. *De praescr. haeret.* 41.2.

¹²² Clem. Al. *Strom.* VII.4. One could argue that Clement accepted the idea of advancement in faith through contemplation and education. However, unlike the Valentinians who divided Christians according to the element that prevailed in them (spiritual, and physical), Clement argued that all Christians were on the same path that leads from sin to salvation. In Clement's case, the key is to follow the rule of faith or the ecclesiastical norm as he calls it. This is a major point of departure from the Valentinian tradition. I would even go as far as to argue that Clement represents another example of the ideological flexibility of the *Great Church* which recognised the importance of knowledge and allowed space for those who were willing to study theology in a more advanced way but remain within the boundaries set by the rule of faith. Needless to say, one boundary of the rule of faith was the strict acceptance of the bishop's authority. See: LILLA 1971. p. 142-189; ESHLEMAN 2012. p. 107-108.

¹²³ See: HULTGREEN 2004. p. 92.

In explaining the practice of drawing lots, Irenaeus used the Greek term *κλήρος* literally translated as lot.¹²⁴ It was a customary practice of the ancient Greeks to use a lot in the selection process for a position in a civil office. Perhaps the Valentinians borrowed this practice for their meeting where, according to Tertullian, it was impossible to know “who is a catechumen, and who is (?) a believer”.¹²⁵ Needless to say, this kind of practice prevented the development of an organisational system based on the pyramidal structure and the differentiation of roles. However, it is worth noting that, for the Valentinians, the practice of drawing lots was not conceptualised as a random process but a necessary condition so that the Spirit could lead worship.¹²⁶ It could be that the selection of Matthias (as a replacement for Judas) that happened by casting lots serves as a model for Valentinians.¹²⁷

While the term *κλήρος* in the Valentinian communities was understood as a practice led entirely by spirit, “proto-orthodox” leaders had a different point of view. As the development of hierarchy and structure in the *Great Church* was in process, leading theologians and bishops granted it specific legitimacy. In other words, they found ideological support on a conceptual level for something that was happening in reality. For instance, Tertullian made a connection between the church communities and Roman society which was divided into distinctive social strata with their own rights and obligations. The clerics, argued Tertullian, were like the senatorial class, while the laity was like the plebeian class. Based on their position, clerics had certain rights and obligations such as the right to baptise, teach, and lead the Eucharist.¹²⁸ Irenaeus concurred and claimed that clerics were the guardians of orthodoxy.¹²⁹ The presbyters possessed, Irenaeus argued, “the succession from the apostles; those who, together with the succession of the episcopate, have received the certain gift of truth, according to the good pleasure of the Father.”¹³⁰ Valentinian communities, on the other hand, used the term *κλήρος* to reject the idea of a developed structure and authority. Consequently, they remained “trapped” within the scope of small independent communities that acted according to the principle of the constant rotation of roles and positions. Among the Valentinians, accepting a “proto-orthodox” structure with bishops as leading figures was understood to be the same as accepting the authority of the Demiurge. That, of course, was contradictory to their basic theological

¹²⁴ LIDDELL – SCOTT 1996. p. 959–960.

¹²⁵ Tertullian noticed that the Valentinians were constantly changing positions and roles within the community which resulted in a total collapse of discipline. See: Tert. *De praescr. haeret.* 41.2.

¹²⁶ See: PAGELS 1976. p. 318.

¹²⁷ Even if that was the case, one cannot overlook strong differences between the Valentinian practice and the preserved memory in Acts. In the latter case, there were strict conditions that a candidate had to fulfil in order to even be considered a potential replacement. See: Acts 1, 21–26. Niclas Forster argues that their practice was modelled on the Greco-Roman temples (e. g. Delphi) where the decision about who would prophesy was made based on lots. See: FORSTER 1999. p. 131.

¹²⁸ Tert. *Exc. cast.* 7, 17; *Bapt.* 1; *Pud.* 21.

¹²⁹ Iren. *Adver. haer.* V.20:2.

¹³⁰ Iren. *Adver. haer.* IV.26:2.

belief that they, as members of the spiritual class, were above the Demiurge and his archons. Another aspect worth bringing into the discussion is the fact that the Valentinians never developed anything like a Rule of faith which was a strong feature of “proto-orthodox” identity during the second and third centuries. Without an ideological norm, such as the Rule of faith, the Valentinians could not centralise and unify their communities. In his careful study of Valentinian communities, Einar Thomassen noticed a constant revision of the cosmological myth within the western Valentinian schools. Within the scope of this revision, the Saviour’s physical aspect was repeatedly emphasised as the idea that the physical (soulful) class (“ordinary” Christians) could be saved grew stronger.¹³¹ This process of revision happened over several decades. Thomassen concludes:

“It seems clear that this course of events is not best understood as a linear development within a unified movement; rather it suggests a decentralised proliferation of groups and teachers, each of them producing their own version of the Valentinian system based on a common pattern.”¹³²

To put it differently, theological divisions within the Valentinian communities were an additional force of disintegration, thus creating a conglomerate of independent (and unrelated) schools where the possibility for the emergence of a developed system of organisation and authority was extremely low.

As the last point of departure, I would like to probe into the relationship between the Valentinian view on resurrection and their concept of authority and structure. Karl Holl was the first scholar to notice that by emphasizing the bodily resurrection of Christ witnessed by an inner circle of people “proto-orthodox” Christians simultaneously legitimised their special position in the community.¹³³ Unlike the *Great Church*, the Valentinians based their view of the resurrection on their belief in a threefold division of humanity based on the element that prevails within each of the class: psychic, spiritual, and material.¹³⁴ Consequently, they could not follow the idea of bodily resurrection that Paul and the apostles preached in the decades following Jesus’ death.¹³⁵ The Valentinian interpretation of Paul’s theology failed to notice

¹³¹ See: THOMASSEN 2008. p. 492.

¹³² See: THOMASSEN 2008. p. 494.

¹³³ Quoted in: PAGELS 1989. p. 10.

¹³⁴ *TriTrac*. 118; Iren. *Adver. Haer.* 1.6:2.

¹³⁵ Some scholars such as Elaine Pagels are inclined to argue that Paul preached a spiritual resurrection that, by its own definition, would exclude the body. However, I think that the arguments made by scholars such as Robert H. Gundry and Dale B. Martin settled the issue. Historically speaking, Paul was a Jew, and the Jewish anthropology of his day was not dualistic (material vs. spiritual; soul vs. body). As Gundry, analysing the Jewish view of the nature of the human body concludes: “*The soul has a body and the body has a soul and a man as a whole is both, a psychophysical unity – but a unity, not a monad*” – GUNDRY 1976. p. 124. See also: MARTIN 1995. p. 104–137. Consequently, I do not think that Paul’s view of resurrection can be ideologically associated with the Valentinians. Despite that fact, they certainly interpreted Paul’s words in a way that suited their ideology claiming that their beliefs were also Paul’s beliefs.

anthropological unity as an offspring of the Jewish roots of Christianity. It is hard to believe that individuals such as Paul, Peter, or John would believe in Platonic dualism even though later decades and centuries would certainly show how these influences could shape other aspects of the Christian religion.¹³⁶ The Valentinians emphasised that the spiritual element was the only part of the human body that could return straight to the *Pleroma* from where it originated. I want to probe into this question only by looking at the views of Theodotus. Unfortunately, a more detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this paper. At the end of the *Gospel of Luke*, crucified Jesus uttered his last words: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."¹³⁷ Theodotus gave his own interpretation of these words, which can potentially shed some light on the Valentinian conception of authority. According to him, the Spirit that Jesus handed over to God was actually Wisdom, but also the divine spark within a spiritual person.¹³⁸ In other words, Jesus confided Wisdom/ the divine spark to the heavenly father. Furthermore, Theodotus rejects the idea the Jesus really suffered thus neglecting the belief in the doctrine of incarnation.¹³⁹ According to the eastern branch of Valentinianism, Christ represent the body that heavenly (spiritual) Jesus put on as he descended to Earth.¹⁴⁰ Consequently, they believed that only the physical Christ had been crucified. With this belief as a basis for understanding Jesus' nature, Theodotus concluded that the *Gospel of Luke* supported his view thus confirming that the spiritual element (Jesus) left the body (Christ) so that it could reunite with his heavenly father or the Highest God.¹⁴¹ Similarly, Theodotus gave a particular (Valentinian) view of the cross. As he explained it, the cross is actually a symbol of the divide between the inferior material and the superior divine realm. As such, the cross is also the dividing line between true believers (those who follow Valentinian tradition) and unbelievers, who are living by the way of ignorance. By carrying the cross Jesus was in reality carrying the divine sparks of the Valentinians to the *Pleroma* where they initially originated from.¹⁴²

From these theological postulates emerges a belief in the resurrection that clearly contradicts the core beliefs of the first Christians and can be ideologically connected to the belief system of the *Great Church* in the second and third centuries.¹⁴³ Unlike the *Great Church*, Theodotus emphasised

¹³⁶ As a prime example of the way Platonism influenced Christianity, one could point out the Christian belief in heaven and hell. See: EHRMAN 2020.

¹³⁷ Lk 23, 47.

¹³⁸ *Exc. ex. Th.* 1:1-2.

¹³⁹ *Exc. ex. Th.* 61.4.

¹⁴⁰ *Exc. ex. Th.* 59:1-2.

¹⁴¹ *Exc. ex. Th.* 62.

¹⁴² *Exc. ex. Th.* 55.1.

¹⁴³ By this I do not mean that every single belief that the *Great Church* held in the second or third centuries can be found in the New Testament literature. My only contention is that those beliefs constitute the "conceptual expansion of the contents of the Christian faith" that was widespread among the existing Christian communities before the emergence of Gnosticism. See: MCGRATH 2010, p. 28. James D. G. Dunn concludes that the first Christian generation did not produce single and united kerygma, but several different forms sharing a common core belief such as the belief in

discontinuity between Jesus (the Saviour) and earthly Christ that was ultimately created by the God of the Old Testament. During the crucifixion of the earthly Christ, Jesus led the divine sparks of true believers towards the *Pleroma*. According to Theodotus, salvation does not come through faith in Jesus' redemptive death and resurrection. Rather, it is based on the idea of the return of the divine sparks to the Highest God. To put it bluntly, the spiritual element dominated within the Valentinians, and their final destination was also the place from where they originated – *Pleroma*. They could achieve this through the knowledge that Jesus brings. Heavenly Jesus came to Earth as the Saviour to initiate the process of salvation by transmitting the basic postulates of the Valentinian *gnosis*. To know and accept them means to be saved and the determining factor in the process of knowing and accepting is the element that dominates within each individual.

For the Valentinians, the resurrection, interpreted and connected with the knowledge of one's own origin and the return of the divine spark/spirit to the *Pleroma*, presupposes an immediate and personal relationship with the Highest God. By emphasising a spiritual (dualistic?) concept of resurrection that can be gained in present through the experience and knowledge, the Valentinians essentially rejected not only the legitimacy of the special witnesses of Jesus' resurrection but also the future as such.¹⁴⁴ Why would one accept the idea of apostolic succession (which was legitimised based on the idea that twelve apostles saw the resurrected Jesus), and the future resurrection of believers, if the resurrection is primarily understood as a process of liberating the spiritual element from the body that has already begun? Based on that belief, it is unnecessary to postulate the future resurrection. Consequently, those who legitimise their position through Jesus' apostles (e.g. bishops) are to be rejected like any source of authority. In other words, there seems to be a strong link between the Valentinian conception of resurrection and their rejection of the hierarchy and the social organization that was developed within the *Great Church*.

Conclusion

One of the most important features of the early Christian world was a strong polemic and conflict between various communities that considered themselves true followers of Jesus and his apostles. As history undoubtedly demonstrates, the *Great Church*, as one of the streams of Christianity, eventually triumphed. By no means was this outcome predestinated. In this paper, I tried to show *Valentinian Gnostic School*, perceived by the intellectual

the continuity between the historical Jesus and the resurrected Christ. See: DUNN 2006. p. 245. I would even go as far as to say that one has to include the strong continuity between the Old Testament God and God depicted in the New Testament literature in the core belief system. This continuity and respect for the Jewish tradition which was incorporated into the belief in Jesus as the Messiah and the resurrected Son of God represented another important reason for the triumph of the *Great Church*. Unfortunately, this aspect is beyond the scope of this paper.

¹⁴⁴ *GPh*. 56: 21-34.

leaders of the *Great Church* as the most dangerous example of heresy, lost the battle in the field of the early Christian world primarily because of the concept of authority and the organisation system they propagated. Unlike the *Great Church*, the Valentinians never developed anything similar to the idea of apostolic succession and monepiscopacy. However, this should not surprise scholars because, as I tried to demonstrate, there was a powerful link between the basic ideological features of the Valentinians (e.g., splitting of divine beings, threefold classification of humanity, and a strong contrast between the soul and the body) and their concept of authority. Consequently, they remained a conglomerate of independent communities based on individual teachers without a strong universal identity. In other words, Valentinian theology was exceptionally subversive in relation to any form of church hierarchy which left them in a disadvantageous position *vis-à-vis* the *Great Church*. Emiliano R. Urciuoli, referring to the various Gnostic groups within the early Christian world, provides an excellent summary:

“These ‘enlightened’ persons held to a triadic anthropology, optimistic soteriology, and a ‘concentric’, soft ecclesiology. Their view of religious knowledge power did not include monopolistic claims on the government of congregations. Personal career plans did not imply exclusive rights to all church leaderships. This weakly-developed conception of governance was a serious challenge to those who, like Irenaeus, were intent on constructing and policing an institution tailored so that they might hold leading positions. Such a programmatic invisibility and indifference to institutionalised prominence, which blurred the ecclesiastical space of representation, was an affront to the church’s emergent hierarchy. Their claimed ‘gnoseo-ontological’ capital infiltrated structures that hierarchs wished to control by means of juridico-apostolic capital. From Irenaeus’ standpoint, these people were worse than enemies: they were false friends and deceivers.”¹⁴⁵

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