Baptism in the bridal chamber
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1. Introduction

The present study aims to develop and test the hypothesis that the GPhil originated as a Valentinian baptismal instruction. It contains analyses of the text, the rituals, and the theology of GPhil, and provides an assessment of these in the context of what can be known of early Christian baptismal instructions and of Valentinian groups. I will first introduce Valentinus and GPhil, and then present my approach to the subject.

1.1 Valentinus

In the first century, ‘Christianity’ originated as a marginal Jewish movement of a few thousand Palestinian and Diaspora Jews. It became a multi-ethnic network of urban communities throughout the Roman and Parthian empires and grew to perhaps some 200,000 followers by the end of the second century. Palestine was devastated in the course of three wars between the Romans and the Jews. The Jerusalem church could no longer exercise any kind of authority, as it probably had done in the days of James the Just. Most Jews and Christians no longer regarded the movement as Jewish, and Christianity assumed a distinct identity of its own. That process took place in similar but not identical ways in leading communities such as Rome, Antioch, Jerusalem and Ephesus.

In Alexandria, early Christianity had first been part of the extensive Hellenistic Jewish community. After the virtual annihilation of Alexandrian Jewry in the messianic war of 115 CE, the decimated church had to reconfigure itself as a non-Jewish movement. In or near Alexandria, around the time of this war or shortly thereafter, a young intellectual named Valentinus became a Christian. Although little of his biography can be determined with certainty, we can at least gain an understanding of the environment in which he developed and taught his ideas.

Valentinus was aware of the philosophical discourse in this period in Alexandria, which combined Platonic, Aristotelian and Neo-Pythagorean concepts. Alexandria pioneered the art of textual criticism and allegorical interpretation of Greek poetic works and mythology. We know that in the first century Egyptian and Jewish mythologies were studied from Grecian philosophical perspectives as well. Christian intellectuals in Alexandria started to apply the same techniques to Christian scriptures. As the Alexandrian church(es) in the 120s CE may have numbered less

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4 Spence (2004), Parting of the Ways: Roman Church; Zetterholm (2003), Antioch; Pritz (1988), Nazarene Jewish Christianity; Luomanen (2005), Nazarenes; Trebilco (2004), Ephesus.
5 Pearson (1999), Gnosticism and (2004), Roman Egypt.
6 According to Eusebius Church History the leader of the uprising was Lucuas, the king-Messiah who would liberate the land of Israel. See Modrzejewski (1992), Juifs d’Egypte, p198-205; Pucci Ben Zeev(2005), Turmoil, pp 123-142; more in general about the background and effects of the wars: Aberbach & Aberbach (2000), Roman-Jewish Wars.
7 Marksches (1992), Valentinus, p. 293.
8 E.g. Plutarch, Isis, and the works of Philo of Alexandria. George Kennedy (1992), Hellenistic Scholarship, argues that Philo was influenced by Stoic allegorising. The history of Hellenistic allegorical interpretation in late antiquity is traced by Peter Struck (2004), Birth of the Symbol; for Philo’s method, see H.A. Wolfson, Philo (1947) and The Philosophy of the Church Fathers (1956).
9 For a comparison between pagan writers, Philo, Valentinus and Clement, see David Dawson (1992), Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria; for Origen’s own method see Elizabeth Ann Dively Lauro (2005), The Soul and Spirit of Scripture within Origen’s Exegesis.
than one hundred adult members.\textsuperscript{10} Valentinus probably knew about Basilides, the Alexandrian Christian teacher who believed that the Jewish creator was not the highest Father revealed by Jesus.\textsuperscript{11} Basilides’ (later) followers declared the believers ‘no longer Jews, but not yet Christians’.\textsuperscript{12} Sometime in the 130s CE, Valentinus travelled to Rome where he established a ‘school’, in the sense of a study group. Tertullian acknowledged his intelligence and learning and, polemically, claimed that Valentinus aimed at a position of bishop in the Roman church.\textsuperscript{13} Origen, the later Alexandrian church father, explained the rise of second-century sects named after men like Basilides and Valentinus as the result of the attempts of ‘several learned men ... to understand the doctrines of Christianity’.\textsuperscript{14} From their philosophical perspective and in the aftermath of the Jewish wars, these teachers needed to solve several issues:

- First, the principal difference between the perfect, impassible (hence inactive) One and this creation. Philosophers saw a huge gap between the true eternal reality of the divine and this material, temporal and everchanging - hence imaginary – existence. They posited intermediary levels to explain concepts like creation and salvation.
- Secondly, the problem of evil. If the divine is good and the ultimate source of our existence, how can this existence be so full of misery and ignorance of divine things? Where in the chain of emanations did something perfect produce something imperfect?
- Thirdly, the position of the anthropomorphic Jewish Creator. As the Creator, he resembled Plato’s Demiurg and not the highest God, who – in Aristotle’s words, was an unmoved mover, a Father rather than a Creator. As the warrior-God of the Jewish tribe, he was compared to the adulterous and interfering deities of the Greeks and Egyptians,\textsuperscript{15} who became images of lower divinities in the development of some sort of philosophical monotheism.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{10} Van Os (2006), ‘Mathematics’.
\textsuperscript{11} Löhrt (1996), Basilides.
\textsuperscript{12} Irenaeus, \textit{Heresies} 1.24.6. The possibly Alexandrian \textit{Epistula Apostolorum}, if it can be dated to the middle of the second century or earlier, is an interesting candidate for further research on this subject.
\textsuperscript{13} Some scholars suggest that Valentinus nearly became the bishop of Rome, or even losing ‘episcopal election to Pius I’, Layton (1987), \textit{Gnostic Scriptures}, p 218. But Tertullian, \textit{Valentinians} 4, only says that Valentinus himself expected to become a bishop, which may simply be polemic to portray Valentinus as a man of disappointed ambition. It is true that Tertullian (ca 200 CE) speaks of an apostolic succession of bishops, but it is not clear whether he believed Rome had always had only one bishop. It seems the idea of apostolic succession was a reaction (promoted by Justin around 155 CE) to the growth of Marcionites and Valentinians. Historians argue that Clement of Rome (ca 100 CE) was one of several bishops in Rome and not necessarily their leader. Eusebius quotes a letter from Irenaeus (ca 180 CE) who seems to outline a succession of church leaders in Rome going back to circa 120 CE, but he calls them presbyters. Somewhere in the second century, the Roman church also adopted the function of a single monarchical bishop, but we do not know when. See Gnïlka (2002), \textit{Petrus und Rom}, pp 242-250.
\textsuperscript{14} Origen, \textit{Against Celsus} 3.12 (3.25-29).
\textsuperscript{15} According to Irenaeus, Basilides taught: ‘Those angels who occupy the lowest heaven, that, namely which is visible to us, formed all the things which are in this world, and made allotments among themselves [a Jewish notion] of the earth and of those nations which are upon it. The chief of them is he who is thought to be the God of the Jews; and inasmuch as he desired to render the other nations subject to his own people, that is, the Jews, all the other princes resisted and opposed him. Wherefore all other nations were at enmity with this nation.’ (\textit{Heresies}, Book 1.24.4). Plutarch, \textit{Isis}, reports the Egyptian idea that the mighty and destructive demon Seth/Typhon, the eternal enemy of the good trinity of Isis, Osiris and Horus, is the ‘father of Hierosolymus and Judaeus’.
\textsuperscript{16} See Athanassiadi (1999), \textit{Pagan Monotheism}. 
Christian intellectuals wanted to make clear how Jesus Christ brings salvation - redemption from this world and ascension to the divine. Basilides focused on the concept of ‘sonship’ as the principle of emanation, revelation and redemption. If we may take the shared opinion of his followers as an indication, it seems that Valentinus emphasized another principle of salvation than Basilides had done. Valentinus seems to have focused on the image of marriage. Evil and deficiency come from generation without a male consort. The original ‘fall’ is described as an act of unilateral generation by the lowest female aspect of divinity (Sophia) without her divine partner. This act both preceded and led to coming-to-be of the corporeal world. As a result, traces of divinity are trapped in creation. Marriage is a metaphor for reunification with the divine. Through the mystery of the bridal chamber the true spiritual person becomes one with his or her divine and immortal self.

For Valentinians, as we will see in this study, the bridal chamber became a metaphor for many things: for the other aeon, for the afterlife, for the inner man, for the cult room and even for the Valentinians themselves. It seems that the word captures something of the essence of Valentinian theology, ritual and self-perception. Peter Lampe reconstructed a Roman marble inscription from the mid-second century, in Greek hexameter verse, as follows:

Co-brothers of the bridal chambers, celebrate with torches the baths for me;
They hunger for banquets in our rooms,
Lauding the Father, and praising the Son;
Oh, may there be flowing of the only spring and of the truth in that very place.

Lampe believes this inscription may have been attached to a Valentinian cult room or house church. The use of the first person (‘me’), probably refers to the Valentinian host, the owner of the villa in which the cult room was located. The cult room features torches, a place for baptism and banquets. It is the place where the brothers and sisters of the bridal chambers convene. One might say that it is an earthly bridal chamber, as an image of the true bridal chamber. That true bridal chamber is the divine plerôma referred to in the first part of a Roman tomb epitaph from the third century:

Longing for the fatherly light, O sister bride, my Sophê,
in the ablutions of Christ anointed with imperishable holy balsam.
You have hastened to gaze upon the divine countenances of the aeons,
upon the great angel of the great counsel, the true Son.
You have gone to the bridal chamber
and ascended to the [...] fatherly and [...].

In 144 CE, while Valentinus was teaching in Rome, a ship-owner named Marcion asked the Roman church leadership to adopt the idea that the Jewish Creator was a lower divinity, and that Jesus (and Paul) had revealed the true and highest Father. But Roman Christianity did not want to denounce the Creator of the Jews in favour of a more ‘philosophically correct’ Father. Marcion then organized a church of his own, with its own canon of scripture, which spread quickly through the harbours of the Roman Empire.

17 Of Basilides’ teaching we have two very different accounts, one in Hippolytus and one in Irenaeus. In both accounts we have a succession of fathers and sons. Most scholars take the version in Irenaeus as the more original. Recently, however, Abraham P. Bos argued for an understanding of Basilides on the basis of Hippolytus’ report. See Bos (2005), “Basilides”, pp 397-418.
Valentinus shared his idea of a higher Father and lower Creator, but unlike Marcion, he did not organize a new church. Rather, he tried to stay within the church with its scriptures and rituals. He went on teaching and inspired a number of intellectual pupils who continued the work of their teacher. His best-known pupils seem to be Ptolemy, Marcus and Heracleon. Valentinians shared a common outlook and approach, but by its nature that approach stimulated further theological speculation. Therefore there was no uniform teaching or movement. Valentinians were not organized centrally, like the Marcionites, or ‘traditionally’, as mainstream Christianity. The name ‘Valentinians’ was used by the church fathers. But this was not a self-designation, as Tertullian observed.

1.2 The Gospel of Philip

*GPhil* is the third document in a codex that was found at Nag Hammadi in 1945, later designated as Codex II. The manuscript is written in Coptic and dated to the fourth century. There is no other textual witness, but there are good reasons to believe that there was a Greek original. The presumed Greek original is variously dated to the late second, early third or late third century. Scholars like Hans-Martin Schenke (1959), Robert Wilson (1962), Walter Till (1963) and Jacques Ménard (1964) translated *GPhil* into German, English and French. Many would follow. At present, the authoritative critical textual edition of the Coptic text is by Bentley Layton, with an English translation by Wesley Isenberg. The most recent and exhaustive commentary is by Hans-Martin Schenke (1997).

*GPhil* is unlike the gospels in the New Testament. Actually, it does not resemble any of the gnostic Christian gospels that have been preserved either. Schenke has conveniently divided the work into 127 so-called ‘paragraphs’, reminiscent of the 114 logia in the *Gospel of Thomas*. But only a few paragraphs can be read as sayings by Jesus. The paragraphs concern wide-ranging topics such as sacraments, ethics, creation, Christ, and disputes with ‘apostolic’ Christians. Most scholars call the document a collection of excerpts, derived from various sources. Some scholars have suggested that this collection may have been used as a kind of catechetic instruction, possibly a baptismal instruction. Wesley Isenberg argues in his dissertation (1968) and subsequent publications that all the excerpts may in fact come from a single catechesis to prepare catechumens for initiation.

In articles and monographs about *GPhil* or aspects thereof, scholars refer to one or more paragraphs as proof texts for supposed Valentinian opinions and rituals. But the enigmatic character of the document has led to numerous disagreements among its interpreters. Some argue for a ritual marriage, a *hieros gamos*, whereas others detect an ascetic outlook. Most scholars now believe that there are references to five rituals, but there is no consensus regarding their content. Some believe that *GPhil* is close to Jewish Christian gospels, and assumes a human father of Jesus, - others do not. Most

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20 Förster (1999), Marcus; Wucherpfennig (2002), Heracleon.

21 By ‘traditionally’ I do not mean that mainstream Christianity had already developed into a centralized hierarchy like that of the present Catholic Church. No single mechanism of authority (synod, pope/patriarch, canon, creed, et cetera) was as yet dominant or even fully developed. But there was certainly a sense of authority associated with scripture, apostolic writers and apostolic succession. In all cases an appeal to ‘tradition’ was an essential element in church disputes. The more credible that appeal was to the group that debated a question, the more likely they were to accept the associated position.

22 Tertullian, *Valentinians* 4: ‘We know, I say, most fully their actual origin, and we are quite aware why we call them Valentinians, although they affect to disavow the name. They have departed, it is true, from their founder, yet is their origin by no means destroyed; and even if it chance to be changed, the very change bears testimony to the fact [that they follow Valentinus]’. 
scholars believe the document to be largely Valentinian, but there is disagreement as to how many currents come together in the document.

Martha Lee Turner (1996), *Philip*, has analyzed the work from a literary perspective in the light of what she calls ‘the interpretative impasse’. She realizes that studies about the meaning, role and context of *GPhil* presuppose an understanding of the character of the work. She concludes that it is a collection of excerpts, connected only through the distinctive interests of the compiler. Most of it ‘lacks rhetorical, logical, and thematic continuity’ (page 10). Turner explicitly denies the idea of a single perspective such as there would be if *GPhil* were a baptismal instruction. She sees no grand composition and supposes that the document consists of two different collections. She concludes on page 255:

The importance of these findings for the interpretation of the *Gospel according to Philip* is obvious. If there was no one author, and if the materials derive from multiple communities of faith, we cannot talk meaningfully of the document’s position, its author’s beliefs, or its community’s practices...

1.3 The plan of this study

This study originated as a reaction to the work of Turner. In my opinion, she presents a good case for reading *GPhil* as a ‘sourcebook for (gnostic) speculation’, but I could (and can) not agree with her statement that it has little or no rhetorical, logical, and thematic continuity. When I set out to test her claim, I observed markers in the text that pointed to the composition of various textual units. I also noted that these textual units had parallels in themes, language and structure with the catechetical instructions of Cyril of Jerusalem. My preliminary conclusion was that Turner had not convincingly disproved Isenberg’s thesis. It was necessary to further develop Isenberg’s hypothesis, which for the purpose of this study I have restated without Isenberg’s careful reservation. The baptismal instruction hypothesis to be tested in this study, then, is as follows:

*GPhil* as a whole reflects the structure and themes of the Valentinian baptismal instruction from which it originated.

With regard to the terms used, I note the following:

- Valentinian: The word ‘Valentinian’ is not a self-designation. The people who produced the *GPhil* considered themselves true Christians, and called the others ‘the Hebrews, - that is the apostles and apostolics’ (§17). Both groups, it seems, laid claim to the name ‘Christian’, while denying it to the other. In this study, I use the term ‘gnostic Christians’ and ‘mainstream Christians’, with only the C capitalized. Where Valentinians need to be distinguished from other gnostic

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23 In his introduction in to the critical edition in Layton (1989), *Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2-7 volume 1*, Nag Hammadi Studies XX, p 133, he writes: ‘If the genre of the *GPh* is a collection of excerpts, then the person responsible is more aptly called a compiler-editor than an author.’ On page 134, he resumes: ‘Because of the contents of the *GPh* and the literary types it displays, it is probable that the compiler-editor has taken his excerpts chiefly, if not entirely from a Christian Gnostic sacramental catechesis.’

24 I chose the term mainstream Christianity for three reasons. (i) It avoids the inherent anachronism of terms like ‘proto-Catholic’ or proto-Orthodox’. (ii) The word ‘stream’ has the connotation of development and allows for diversity within a sense of belonging together. (iii) The word ‘mainstream’ reflects the experience of gnostic Christians that they were different in essence and marginal in numbers as compared to the non-gnostic majority of the larger Christian movement (see chapter 7.2.4 below).
Christian groups, I have retained the name Valentinians as both mainstream Christians and also rival gnostic Christians did.\textsuperscript{25}

- **Baptismal.** With ‘baptism’ I refer to the entire initiation ritual, which, as we shall see, consisted of baptism itself, anointing and partaking of the eucharist (and in a mystical way of the resurrection and the bridal chamber).
- **Instruction.** The word ‘instruction’ refers to the complex of oral instruction of candidates for initiation, be it before, during or after initiation.

In order to develop the hypothesis, we need to assess whether \textit{GPhil} reflects a conscious composition, and also whether that composition shares some of the formal characteristics of contemporary baptismal instructions: How can the present written text relate to an oral instruction of baptism candidates? The following two chapters in this study, on \textit{Composition} and on \textit{Genre}, develop an understanding of the format of the original oral baptismal instruction if such instruction indeed underlies the present \textit{Gospel of Philip}. These two chapters conclude with an evaluation which hypothesis provides the best explanation for the formal characteristics of the present text: the collection hypothesis or the baptismal instruction hypothesis? Following these chapters I provide a translation of the text, presented as notes for a series of baptismal instructions.

If the present text reflects an oral baptismal instruction, then we need to test not only the formal aspects of the text, but also its key messages. Chapters 4 and 5, on \textit{Rhetoric} and \textit{Ritual}, address the following questions: (1) Is there a coherent rhetorical strategy to persuade, instruct and encourage the baptism candidates? And (2), does a single initiation ritual underlie the various ritual elements referred to in \textit{GPhil}?

The context of the document must be evaluated in order to assess whether the baptismal instruction may have functioned within a specific group. In chapters 6, 7 and 8, I assess the ritual context, the social setting and the theological position of \textit{GPhil}. In chapter 9, I consider whether the various indicators of time and place in \textit{GPhil} can be combined in a plausible scenario regarding the provenance of \textit{GPhil}. In the conclusion, chapter 10, I briefly summarize the main findings and suggest some implications and opportunities for future research.

\textsuperscript{25} Cf the \textit{Testimony of Truth} (NHC IX,56.1-5).