THE GREAT MYSTERY OF MARRIAGE
SEX AND CONCEPTION IN ANCIENT VALENTINIAN TRADITIONS

BY

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My previous work on Valentinian Gnosticism and sacramentalism has raised for me questions about sexual attitudes and practices among these often misunderstood early Christians.¹ Over the course of the last fifty years, scholars have supported three differing positions in regard to this subject. The first position seems to have originated in the work of Hans Martin Schenke who, in 1959, wrote about the “mystery of marriage” and the “bridechamber” in the Gospel of Philip. He understood the bridal chamber to be a ritual event in which the Valentinian couple symbolically enacted the consummation of their marriage through “a holy kiss.”² Even though Schenke did not want to speculate about the ordinary marital practices of the Valentinians based on his interpretation of the bridal chamber, scholars who built on his work did. In 1960, Eric Segelberg agreed with Schenke that the bridal chamber was the “highest mystery” which “can hardly have been anything carnal.” From this he infers that the Valentinians must have been encratitic.³ Yvonne Janssens and D.H. Tripp have agreed.⁴ The most

¹ This paper should be read in conjunction with my previous article, “The True Mysteries: Sacramentalism in the Gospel of Philip,” VC 54 (2001), in which I began mapping a solution to the question of Valentinian sexual practices. An early version of “The Great Mystery of Marriage” was presented at the conference, Taking Off the Holy Shroud: 2000 Years of Gender in the Body of Jesus, New York University, March 23-25, 2001, “The Sexual Savior: Images of Jesus in Valentinian Gnosticism.” I thank especially Elizabeth Clark and Dyan Elliott for their generous comments following the presentation and for the advice of Dale Martin and Teresa Shaw on ancient medical lore. All were very helpful to me in the revision process. My gratitude is extended to Illinois Wesleyan University for awarding me funding to complete this article.


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recent supporter of this position has been Michael Williams who argues that the *Gospel of Philip* is first and foremost a “witness to the practice of spiritual marriage.” He believes that such a “spiritual” marriage was a celibate one and virtually required between Valentinians. Even though Williams argues strongly that the Valentinians considered “ordinary marriage” to be “defiled” and “spiritual marriage” ideal, recently he has conceded that there is evidence that some Valentinians may have been involved in sexual intercourse for procreative purposes.\(^5\)

The second position began as a challenge to Schenke’s interpretation by Robert Grant in 1962 who questioned whether or not the author of the *Gospel of Philip* intended to describe marriage in symbolic terms. He stated that “it is impossible to tell whether these gnostics were describing a human or spiritual marriage, or whether in their minds there is a significant difference between the two”. What we do know from this gospel is that salvation was understood to be “equivalent to marriage” and that marriage was “an archetype of salvation.”\(^6\) Jacques Ménard developed this position in his commentary on the *Gospel of Philip*. He concluded that earthly marriage is “bel et bien un sacrement, un symbole de plenitude” and that it included not only kissing but also “l’union sexuelle des corps.”\(^7\) The work of A.H.C. van Eijk assumes that Valentinian marriage “effectuated” spiritual union.\(^8\) This position was taken up by Gilles Quispel beginning in 1971 when he concluded that human marriages were reflections of the *mysterium coniunctionis*.\(^9\) In a more recent publication, he continues to hold


that "Valentinus and his followers consider couples of man and wife and their copulations to be a symbol of the sacred marriage of the aeons and for that reason they are all in favour of marriage." 10 Jorunn Jacobsen-Buckley also has rallied this position, arguing that earthly marriage is the "condition necessary for eligibility" into the bridal chamber marriage. 11

Elaine Pagels originally adopted the latter position especially as developed by Ménard, but has moved to a more medial position, our third option. 12 Disturbed by the fact that "scholars on opposite sides of the argument, by selecting different sections of the same passage and translating them differently," have "read the same passage as 'proving' opposite conclusions," Pagels has suggested that the author of the Gospel of Philip actually intended to be ambiguous about the subject of whether or not Valentinians should marry or practice celibacy. 13 Her newly formed position seems to have been greatly influenced by the release in 1988 of Peter Brown's book, The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity in which Brown understands Valentinian Christians to be involved in the larger Christian debate about the body and sexual renunciation. 14 In Chapter 5, he seems to be making a case for a two-tiered Valentinianism even though there is little to no evidence for this in the literature. 15

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15 So far the only place I have come across anything remotely like this is in Irenaeus' polemical (and thus suspect) attack on some Valentinians whom he calls "most perfect" because they believed that their election allowed them to engage in all sorts of "forbidden" acts including eating meat sacrificed to idols, participating in pagan festivals and gladiatorial spectacles, and indulging in lustful carnal activities, even seducing married women (Iren., Adv. Haer. 1.6.3).
tier seems to have consisted of neophyte Valentinians who were involved in sexual marriages. The second tier were the “spiritual” Valentinians for whom “sexual intercourse could be abandoned.” Grounding herself in Brown’s discussion, Pagels concludes in her 1991 article that “Valentinian Christians followed no consistent practice: some of them ate meat offered to idols; some attended pagan festivals and were sexually active (which Irenaeus took to mean promiscuous); others claimed to live as ascetics, either in celibate marriages or in solitude.” This means that the Valentinian Christians “demonstrated the same range of practice that we find among other second-century Christians.”

Pagel’s compromise does not resolve this issue for me. I contend that the reason for the supposed “ambiguity” of the Valentinian texts on marriage and sexuality is that they were written by insiders for insiders. Those within the community already knew what a “marriage of purity (περιαλοικοτυπωμα)” and a “marriage of impurity (περιαλοικοτυπωμα)” were (Gos. Phil. 82.4-6) or the “bridal chamber (πνυμαλοικοτυπωμα)” and its “mirrored” counterpart, “πνυμαλοικοτυπωμα” (Gos. Phil 65.13). This means that it is not the Valentinian authors, but the modern interpreters who create ambiguity when they impose their definitions of various phrases on the text. The terms were not ambiguous to the Valentinians who knew what they were talking about. Since they were talking to themselves in these texts, they did not need to make clarifications or compose definitions.

So the question for me is this: can we today recover the Valentinian meaning of these seemingly ambiguous phrases about marriage and sexuality? I think it is possible. But in order to do this we must first start with the assumption that the Valentinians may be using traditional language which other Christian groups also were using; but they may have reinterpreted the meaning of this language so that a traditional image no longer approximated the face-value of that image in other Christian circles. Previous scholarship seems to have assumed the opposite: that the meaning of the traditional image is consistent across different groups. This is a particularly important distinction, for instance, when trying to discern what the Valentinians believed “spiritual” marriage was all about. Was it similar to other Christians who understood it as a celibate marriage? Or was it something else?

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16 Brown, Body and Society, pp. 117-118.
17 Brown, Body and Society, pp. 118-120.
Second, we must cease trying to interpret phrases from Philip or elsewhere in isolation from the larger Valentinian myth and the patterns of the ancient mind, a problem which has plagued much of previous scholarship on this subject and has resulted in our present-day conundrum. The phrases and images must make sense within the broader second-century worldview as well as within the larger theological framework of Valentinian musings about the human plight. I am convinced of this because it not only makes obvious sense, but, in fact, ancient authorities tell us that it was so. Several texts agree that the Valentinians themselves believed that their human marital practices reflected the marriages of the Pleromic aeons. In other words, they felt that their sociology mirrored their mythology.

For instance, Irenaeus explains that the Valentinians interpreted Ephesians 5:32 (“This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the Church”) to refer to “the conjunctions within the Pleroma (τὰς συζυγίας τὰς ἐντὸς Πλερόματος),” seemingly associating Christ with the Anthropos aeon and Church with his aeonic spouse Ecclesia. Thus when Paul was describing the nature of “the conjugal union in this life (τῆς περὶ τῶν βίων συζυγίας),” Irenaeus says the Valentinians believe that he understood them to be a “great mystery” reflecting the conjunctions within the Pleroma (Iren., Adv. Haer. 1.8.4). This idea is repeated by Irenaeus later when he mentions the Valentinian “bridal chamber.” He claims that some Valentinians say that they participate in “spiritual” marriages after “the likeness of the conjunctions above”: πνευματικὸν γάμον φάσκουσιν εἶναι τὸ ὑπ' αὐτῶν γινόμενον κατὰ τὴν ὁμοιότητα τῶν ἄνω συζυγίων (Iren., Adv. Haer. 1.21.3).

Clement uses this idea to contrast the Valentinians with several encratic groups whom Clement vehemently opposes because they have a “hatred for the flesh” which results in their rejection of “the marriage union” (Strom. 3.7.60). He applauds the Valentinians because they “take delight in marriage” since marriage is the γυγγυετα brought down from the divine emanations above: “οἱ μὲν σὺν ἀμφι τῶν Ὀὐσαλεντίνων ἁλοθην ἐκ τῶν θείων προβολῶν τὰς συζυγίας καταγγέλλας εὐαρεστοῦντα γάμῳ”.

When discussing this passage from Clement, both Williams and Pagels have concluded that the marriage mentioned here does not have to be a

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20 Rousseau and Doutreleau, p. 299.
sexual one: it could a “spiritual marriage” such as we find commonly in early Christianity, a marriage in which both partners choose to remain celibate. While this appears at first glance to be a possible way to interpret this text from Clement, it does not do it justice because the passage has been divorced from its context. If we interpret this passage within the context of Clement’s rampage against encratitic groups, it is fairly certain that he is speaking of Valentinian marriage as marriage in which sexual relations occur since he uses the Valentinians’ position on marriage as a contrast to the encratic celibate option.

Throughout his document, Clement contrasts his position and the position of the Valentinians with the position of the encratites who were all for celibate marriages or none at all. The encratic groups with which he contrasts the Valentinians and himself most often are the followers of Marcion and Julius Cassianus. At one point, however, he states that because Valentinus taught that “Christ’s body was ‘psychic’” he does have some teachings in common with Marcion and Cassianus who also espoused “docetism.” But the similarities stop here since Clement then goes on to describe the encratitic exegesis of the Genesis story in which Marcion and Cassianus taught that marital intercourse is the “knowledge” which Adam and Eve obtained in Eden (Strom. 3.102-104).

Clement also contrasts the famous encratite Tatian with Valentinus on the very issue of the use of the sexual organs. In Clement’s argument against Julius Cassianus, he quotes from Cassianus’ book, Concerning Continence and Celibacy:

And let no one say that because we have these parts, that the female body is shaped this way and the male that way, the one to receive, the other to give seed, sexual intercourse is allowed by God. For if this arrangement had been made by God, to whom we seek to attain, he would not have pronounced eunuchs blessed; nor would the prophet have said that they are ‘not an unfruitful tree’, using the tree as an illustration of the man who chooses to emasculate himself of any such notion. (Strom. 3.91).

Then Clement goes on to say that Cassianus’ teaching on this subject is the “same as Tatian’s” but has “departed from the school of Valentinus” (Strom. 3.92). This clearly puts the Valentinians in contradistinction with the encratitic position held by Cassianus and Tatian. It seems from this exchange that the Valentinians believed that the sexual organs were to be used in their natural way rather than emasculated.

As he argues against the position of the encratites and celibate marriage, Clement takes up the larger issue of enkrateia. Since he favors a life
free of desire, a life reflecting his grounding in Stoic principles, he argues that self-control is an attitude not exclusive to celibacy. He states that "self-control (ἐγκρατεία) applies also to the other things for which the soul has an evil desire because it is not satisfied with the necessities of life. There is also self-control in terms of the tongue, money, or use, and desire" (Strom. 3.4). It is fascinating that Clement takes up this talk again in 3.59 in which he continues to discuss the evil of culinary delights by quoting Valentinus' view on self-control as support for his own:

"Enduring all things, Jesus was self-controlled (ἐγκρατικής ἴν); Jesus worked for a divine nature; he ate and drank in a unique way, without excreting his solids. Such was the power of his self-control (ἐγκρατείας) that food was not corrupted within him; for he himself did not experience corruption" (Valentinus, Letter to Agathopus, in Strom. 3.59)

It appears from this fragment that, like Clement, Valentinus had an inclusive notion of enkrateia. For Valentinus, Jesus was the epitomy of self-control because his body did not defecate normally. In some way, his enkrateia had worked to physically transform his body so that food did not pass out of him as excrement.

Although this idea might seem strange to us today, it is, in fact, based on the principles of ancient physiology where the body parts and their actions were the result of varying combinations of the four elements (fire, earth, air, and water), their corresponding qualities (hot, cold, dry, and wet), and humors (blood, black bile, yellow bile, and phlegm). The crasis or blending of these in proper proportion produced health. The improper proportions in combination produced disease. In fact, Galen speaks of the body working like an oil refinery, including the process of digestion, where everything must be kept in balance or equilibrium. The body was assumed to be an autarkic system capable of functioning on its own "heat" in the ideal situation of equilibrium. It should only need enough food or fuel to keep that heat alive. In such a condition, it would continue in a perfect

22 Stählin, p. 197.
23 Stählin, p. 223.
state, idling along. These ideas form the background for the description of the monk Anthony who after twenty years of encratic behavior was described by pilgrims as follows:

... his body had maintained its former condition, neither fat from lack of exercise, nor emaciated from fasting and combat with demons, but was just as they had known him prior to his withdrawal. The state of his soul was one of purity, for it was not constricted by grief, nor relaxed by pleasure, nor affected by either laughter or dejection... He maintained utter equilibrium, like one guided by reason and steadfast in that which accords with nature (Athan., Life of Ant. 14 [PG 865A]).

Eating too much food was believed to result in a surplus of heat and this would be harmful to the natural state of the body. Defecation, in fact, was often linked to overeating in monastic sources. For instance, John Chrysostom tells us that increasing one's food intake is nothing more than an increase in luxury and results in the undesirable “multiplication of feces.” He warns that eating more food than nature does not result in nourishment, but injury and increased excrement. The excess food causes a “heat of fermentation within” which is sent throughout the body “as from a furnace” and obstructs the blood, liver, spleen, “and the canals by which the feces are discharged.” Some of his monks wonder why God would design the body to carry feces in it at all, to which John replies, “to detach us from luxury” and “to cease gluttony” (Hom. 13 in Tim. 5 [PG 62:570]).

Certainly this view of physiology was influential in the theological discussions about the nature of “perfect” primordial body of Adam and living the life of angels. Some sources suggest that this body was understood to be the human body on idle, a body not fueled by indulging the passions, gluttony at the top of the list (cf. Tert., De Ieiunio 5). It was a body that had no need for food or defecation since it was characterized

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27 These ideas seem to reflect the linking of status and diet in the ancient world. On this, see P. Brown, “Response to R. Grant, ‘The Problem of Miraculous Feeding in the Graeco-Roman World,’” Center for Hermeneutical Studies: Colloquy 42 (Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union, 1982) p. 19.
28 For this theme in early monasticism, refer to P. Suso Frank, Angelikos Bios, Beiträge zur Geschichte des alten Mönchturns und des Benediktinerordens 26 (Munich: Aschendorff, 1964); Shaw, Burden, pp. 161-219.
by a passionless state. Moreover, this ideal body could be achieved over the course of a human's lifetime. So some monks were encouraged to achieve such a body by "cleansing" themselves of evil and by not indulging their passions (i.e., Greg. Nyssa, De an. et res., [PG 46.148A-149A]).

This type of understanding of physiology not only makes Valentinus' statement about Jesus sensible, but also the stories of certain medieval women like the one mentioned by James of Vitry. He refers to a woman recluse who for many years "ate and drank nothing, nor from her mouth nor from any of the other natural organs did anything go out." Roger Bacon tells about a woman who
did not eat for twenty years; and she was fat and of good stature, emitting no excretion from her body, as the bishop proved by careful examination. Nor was this miraculous but, rather, a work of nature, for some balance [constellatio] was at that time able to reduce to a state of almost complete equilibrium the elements that were before that in her body; and because their mixture was from their proper nature suitable to a balance not found in other makeups, their alteration happened in her body as it does not in others.

In Clement's final mention of the Valentinians, he contrasts them with the libertine group, the Carpocratians who apparently participated in licentious sexual acts because they believed they were imitating the primordial powers who had intercourse with one another in order to create the universe (Strom. 3.29). Clement is not upset that they are having sex with each other because they believe they are imitating the primordial powers, (even the Valentinians do this he infers), but that these relations are "carnal and wanton (σαρκικῆς δὲ ὑβρεῖας)" rather than "spiritual (πνευματικάς)." He complains that "if these people performed spiritual intercourse (πνευματικάς κοινωνίας) like the Valentinians, perhaps one could accept their view" (Strom. 3.29).

What did Clement mean by "spiritual intercourse"? Certainly not sex generated by carnal desire since Clement abhors such relations. And not celibate marriage since Clement portrays this encratite option negatively

29 It is interesting that Dicaearchus refers to Hesiod's golden race when humans were like the gods as a time when no one suffered disease nor defecated because their bodies were always kept pure (Porphyry, De abst. 4.2).
30 Historia occidentalis, ed., Hinnebusch, pp. 87-88.
32 Stählin, p. 209.
33 Stählin, p. 209.
throughout his tract. This leaves us with a third option, which Clement tries to promote and contrast with the encratic position and one which appears to depend on Stoic teachings, Musonius in particular:34 marital sex for the purpose of procreation controlled by the will rather than by desire. He tells us that Christians should
do nothing from desire. Our will is to be directed only towards that which is necessary. For we are children not of desire but of will. A man who marries for the sake of begetting children must practice self-control (τῶν ἐπὶ πατρὸτατίων γῆμαντα ἐγκράτειαν ἄσκειν χρῆ) so that it is not desire he feels for his wife, whom he ought to love, and that he may beget children with a chaste and controlled will (Strom. 3.58).35

Are the mysterious marriages of the Valentinians similar to the procreative but self-controlled marriages that Clement prefers?

I. Marriage as a Reflection of Aeonic Conjunctions

In order to answer this question, it would be helpful to examine some details of the Valentinian myth since, as we saw earlier, Clement and Irenaeus tell us that the Valentinians understood their marriages to reflect those of the aeons. How did the Valentinians understand these aeonic conjugations?

Even though the particulars of the Valentinian myth seem to have enjoyed ongoing discussions in the various Valentinian schools, it is clear that all Valentinians believed in a Pleromic world populated by aeons


35 Stählin, p. 222.
which had emanated from a pre-existent source. According to Ptolemy’s school, the emanation of the aeons began when the Forefather cast his seed into the mother, Silence (also known as “Grace” and “Thought”), and Mind, the Only-Begotten Son, came forth along with his spouse, Truth. The description of this initial process of generation is imagined in very erotic language: the Forefather “conceived a plan to emit and deposit (καθότερον σπέρμα τὴν προβολὴν ταύτην) this emission like a seed (ὅπις προβολέσθαι ἐννοοθητο) in the womb of Silence (ὡς ἐν μήτρῃ), the one who co-existed with him. She then, having received his seed, and becoming pregnant, gave birth to Mind (ταύτην δὲ υποδεξαμένην τὸ σπέρμα τούτο καὶ ἐγκύμωνα γενομένην ἀποκύησα Νοῦν)” (Iren., Adv. Haer. I.1).36 In another passage, Irenaeus tells us that Silence is the Father’s “spouse (σουνενίτες)” and together they formed the “first spousal pair (πρώτη συζυγία)” (Iren., Adv. Haer. I.11.5).37 The aeons are emanated in masculo-feminine “spousal pairs (συζυγία)” (Iren., Adv. Haer. I.1.1-2; Adv. Haer. I.2.5).38 Intercourse between subsequent pairs of aeons generates the thirty aeons which make up the fullness of the Pleromic world (Iren., Adv. Haer. I.1.1-2). Tertullian’s language is similarly erotic: the emanation of Mind is the result of God depositing his seed “in the genital region, as it were, of the womb of Silence.” She has an instantaneous conception, becoming pregnant and delivering Nous. The aeons receive “the function of procreation” and conceive through proper conjugal relations (Tert., Adv. Val. 7-8). Epiphanius records a fragment from a Valentinian book which offers comparable language: the male and female couples through intercourse which is “imperishable” and “ageless” produce the aeons that make up the Pleroma (Pan. 31.5.1-6.10).

Through the Ptolemaic exegesis of John 1:1-18, Irenaeus tells us that the Valentinians find support for the procreative nature of the aeons: the first-begotten is the aeon whom John has called both “the only-begotten Son and God, in whom the Father, after a seminal manner (πρωτὴς συζυγίας), brought forth all things” (Iren., Adv. Haer. I.8.5).39 Furthermore, “‘what was made in him,’ says John, ‘is life.’ Here again he indicated conjunction (συζυγίας); for all things, he said, were made by him, but in him was life” (Iren., Adv. Haer. I.8.5).40

36 Rousseau and Doutreleau, pp. 29-30.
37 Rousseau and Doutreleau, p. 180.
38 Rousseau and Doutreleau, p. 31.
39 Rousseau and Doutreleau, p. 130.
40 Rousseau and Doutreleau, p. 132.
Others from the school of Ptolemy posited that the Forefather “first conceived the thought of producing something, and then willed to that affect (πρῶτον ἐννοήθη τι προβαλεῖν, ἔπειτα ἡθέλησε).” Thus through their “mutual intercourse (συγκραθείσον εἰς ἀλλήλας),” the feminine aeon, Thought, and the masculine aeon, Will, were believed to have produced the Only-begotten Son and Truth (Iren., Adv. Haer. 1.12.1). It is most interesting that their relations are qualified: “Thought continually yearned after offspring; but she could not of herself bring forth that which she desired (Ἐννοεῖτο μὲν γὰρ ἤκει ἡ Ἑννοία τὴν προβολῆν, οὐ μέντοι γε προβαλεῖν αὐτῇ καθ’ ἑαυτὴν ἡδύνατο ὑπὲν ἐννοεῖτο). But when the power of Will came upon her, then she brought forth that on which she had brooded (ὅτε δὲ ἦς ὁ Θελήματος δύναμις ἐπεγένετο, τότε ὁ ἐννοεῖτο προέβαλε)” (Iren., Adv. Haer. I.12.1).\footnote{41 Rousseau and Doutreleau, pp. 181-182.} Beneath this text there seems to lay the belief that ideal intercourse is understood as one which is controlled by “will” rather than “desire.” Moreover, it is thoughtful in its procreative consequences, bringing forth a being which resembles the contemplative experience of the partners. This picture is confirmed by the Valentinian text quoted by Epiphanius: the act of intercourse among the Pleromic couples was a matter of will (31.5.6).

This picture of the Pleromic world is confirmed in A Valentinian Exposition where the will of the Father is described in the following manner: “not to allow anything to happen in the Pleroma apart from a σύγγυρ” and to “always produce and bear fruit” (Val. Exp. 36.30-35). The Father initially dwells with Silence and “brings forth” the Only-begotten Son and Life, his partner. The aeons are emanated in pairs, “bearing fruit” until the last, the thirtieth aeon, Sophia, is generated (Val. Exp. 22.20-24.21; 29.25-31.36). The Excerpts of Theodotus state simply, “each of the aeons has its own complement, the partner in its couple (ἐκαστὸς τῶν αἰῶνων ἵδιον ἔχει τι πλήρωμα, τὴν συζυγίαν)” (32.1).\footnote{42 Sagnard, pp. 128-129.} This aeonic coupling is further described in 17.1-3 where the aeons Jesus, Ecclesia, and Sophia are said to be “a powerful and complete union (κράσις) of bodies (σωμάτων).” The result of this union is comparable to human marital intercourse (μίξις) which produces a child from the mixture of two seeds.\footnote{43 F. Sagnard, Clément d’Alexandre. Extraits de Théodote, SC (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1948) p. 90.} Other less popular generation metaphors include the root growing its stems (Val. Exp. 22.33-35) and a spring “gushing” forth (Val. Exp. 23.18, 24.18).
Although the masculine and feminine dichotomy has been softened in the later Valentinian text, the Tripartite Tractate, remnants of this earlier myth and its erotic overtures remain. The pre-existent unbegotten Father, even though reenvisioned as a Monad, is still said to have existed “in Silence” which initially restrained him from bringing the aeons “into their eternal being” (Tri. Tract. 55.35-40). He now “conceives in himself” (Tri. Tract. 56.5) and produces the “firstborn” and “only Son”, his “fruit” (Tri. Tract. 57.19-25), and the Church (57.34-35). The aeons which are generated are called the Father’s “offspring (ζυγο)” which came forth “from the Son and the Father like kisses (πι/πει)” (Tri. Tract. 59.21-25). The Pleroma “subsists in the procreations of innumerable aeons (ἴππι ζυγο Ἰππαλωτ)” (Tri. Tract. 59.6-7), the Father bringing forth everything “like a little child (μη), like a drop from a spring, like a blossom from a [vine], like a [flower]” (Tri. Tract. 62.7-11), proclaiming to them the name “Father” by means of “a voice” so that they might know “what exists through that name” (Tri. Tract. 61.10-20). The aeons are described as “offspring of procreative nature (Ῥαζῳ πε ῳτευφυςις ηρωλεξϊς)”; thus they too have the “procreative nature (τούφυςις ἠρωμε εἷςξις)” and are “roots and springs and fathers” themselves (Tri. Tract. 67.38-68.10). Even though the generative act is often understood in this text to be intellectual involving the thought processes of the Father, the act itself is still described using sexual metaphors: the aeons “only had existence in the manner of a seed (σπερμα),” existing “like a fetus (βεκε/βακκ).” Like the Son, “he begot them, subsisting spermatically (ἄνω δρπή νη ουγαντσερα)” in his thought “as mental substance” which he sowed “like a [spermatic] seed (γω ουγε[ρ]πα πε ῳαντσε[ερα])” (Tri. Tract. 60.30-61.9). The text is consistent that their generation always occurs “by the will (ουλωμε) of the Father” (Tri. Tract. 76.36-77.1).

The Marcionians describe the formation of the aeons as beginning with the “unoriginated, inconceivable Father, who is without material substance, and is neither male nor female.” He “willed (ἐθέλω) to bring forth that

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45 Attridge and Pagels, p. 204.
46 Attridge and Pagels, p. 208.
47 Attridge and Pagels, p. 218.
48 Attridge and Pagels, pp. 206-208.
49 Attridge and Pagels, p. 208.
which is ineffable to him, and to endow with form that which is invisible” (Iren., Adv. Haer. I.14.1).^{50} Relying on the early Jewish mystical ideas associated with alphabet mysticism, Marcus explains the process of emanation in terms of the sounding out of the letters of the alphabet rather than in terms of eroticism (Iren., Adv. Haer. I.14.1-5). But the result is still thirty aeons which, according to Marcus, compose the Body of Truth, the Anthropos (Iren., Adv. Haer. I.14.9).^{51} Human man is formed “after the image of the power above,” reflecting all aspects of the Body of Truth in its composition (Iren., Adv. Haer. I.18.1). Like this divine image, some Marcosians held that the reflection was “masculo-feminine,” first created as a spiritual entity and then molded out of the earth (Iren., Adv. Haer. I.18.2). Because Marcus relies on alphabet mysticism to explain the emanation process, much of the eroticism found in the Ptolemaic version is lost. But, as we shall see below, the erotic adventures of Sophia, the last of the emanations, is still present in Marcus’ rendition of the rupture in the Pleroma.

From this brief overview of Valentinian descriptions of the aeonic world and its generation, a few conclusions can be drawn. The production of the aeons was commonly described using sexual metaphors even when the dominant generative metaphor was one of intellection as in the Tripartite Tractate. As we shall see later in this article, these are not necessarily opposing metaphors. Rather they are complimentary since, according to ancient medical lore, the thoughts of the parents, particularly the mother, were believed to have influenced the conception and development of the fetus. With the exception of Marcus who promulgated generation through the sound of the androgynous father’s voice, the Valentinians taught that the aeons were generated in masculine-feminine pairs, called syzygies, which themselves were “procreative” by nature. The reason for the subsistence of the aeons was to continually produce and “bear fruit” with their partners. This procreative act between the aeons is always perceived as an act initiated out of the will of the aeonic pair, not out of desire. As we shall see shortly, it is, in fact, the downfall of the aeonic world when one of the aeons, without her spouse, decides to bear fruit from the throes of her passion.

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^{50} Rousseau and Doutreleau, p. 207.

^{51} For more discussion on Marcus’ Body of Truth and Jewish mysticism, refer to G. Scholem, Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1965) pp. 36-42.
II. The Problem of Suffering

The Valentinians had much to say about the thirtieth aeon, Sophia. Even though the details of her plight varied from school to school, all agreed that the actions of this last aeon inevitably caused the rupture in the Pleroma and the need to create the universe. Thus the calamities of the universe flowed from “the passion which seized upon the aeon (ἡ τοῦ πεποιθότος Αἰῶνος)” Sophia (Iren., Adv. Haer. I.3.1; cf. Tert., Adv. Val. 10).52

Irenaeus explains that according to the Ptolemaic school, Sophia suffered “passion” apart from the embrace of her beloved husband Will (ἐπιθυμεῖν τῷ ἐπιθυμητῷ) since she loved the Father and was “ever stretching herself forward” in her attempt to know the Father’s greatness (Iren., Adv. Haer. I.2.2).53 Some from the school of Ptolemy went as far as suggesting that, because Sophia was driven by her passion to procreate without her aeonic spouse, her solitary procreative activity “birthed an amorphous substance such as her female nature enabled her to beget (τεκείν οὕσιν ἁμορφον οὕσιν φύσιν ἔχειν θηλεῖα τεκείν)” (Iren., Adv. Haer. I.2.3).54 Tertullian states similarly: Sophia could not restrain her desire and passion for the Father, causing her to break away from “her husband Theletus” and to conceive and birth a “female offspring,” an “infirm and feminine fruit,” by herself “without any conjugal help” (Tert., Adv. Val. 9-10).

After a period of being “greatly harrassed by these passions,” she experienced a change of “mind” and tried “to return anew to the Father”: ἐγκαταταγμοῦν ἐν τῷ πάθει λαβεῖν ἐπιστροφήν, καὶ ἐπὶ τὸν Πατέρα ἀναδρομεῖν πειραθήναι (Iren., Adv. Haer. I.2.3).55 At this point, Horos, the Limit of Monogenes, “restored her to her own husband (ἀποκατασταθήσεται τῇ ἵδιᾳ συζυγίᾳ).” Her passion, along with the amorphous substance, her “reflection” (Ἐνθύμησις), were aborted so that they now existed outside of the Pleroma as “an imbecile and feminine (ἀμβλυν καὶ θηλῶν) fruit” (Iren., Adv. Haer. I.2.4-5).56 This amorphous substance is described as “an abortion (ἐκτρωμα)” because Sophia “had understood nothing (τὸ μηδὲν κατεληφθέναι)” (Iren., Adv. Haer. I.4.1).57 Tertullian jokes with his reader that the process of pro-

52 Rousseau and Doutreleau, p. 49.
53 Rousseau and Doutreleau, p. 38.
54 Rousseau and Doutreleau, p. 41.
55 Rousseau and Doutreleau, pp. 41-42.
56 Rousseau and Doutreleau, pp. 43-44.
57 Rousseau and Doutreleau, p. 62.
creation by the female alone which the Valentinians are describing reflects procreative activities of some animals since the hen and the vulture are natural examples of such activities (Tert., Adv. Val. 10).

Setting aside Tertullian’s snide tone, these ideas make some sense when viewed alongside ancient scientific theories about conception.58 Those scientists who believed that the female actually emitted her own seed during the passionate climax of intercourse describe the seed as weaker and more watery than the male seed (cf., Hippocratic Corpus, Nature of the Child 4.1[VII:474]; On Generation 4). In fact, Galen called the female seed scantier, colder, wetter, less refined and imperfect (Usu part. 14.6). The characteristics of the child including the gender were determined by the outcome of the struggle between the male and female seed in the womb.59

The existence of such female seed had obvious implications that at least Aristotle seems to have been aware of, especially since he defined the male as that which generates in another and the female as that which generates in itself (HA 469a9-12; GA 716a4-15).60 In his argument against parthenogenesis, he said that the denial of female seed was intellectually satisfying because it put to rest any fear one might have that a woman, since she had a uterus and could produce menses for the nourishment of the embryo, might put forth her own seed and produce a child without the contribution of a father (GA 1.18, 722b13-14).61

In order for the Valentinian mythology to be reasonable, it would mean that they had to assume what Aristotle feared: that the female emitted a


59 Most believed that each of the parents contributed male-producing and female-producing seeds. On this, see Hanson, “Conception,” pp. 43-44; King, “Becoming Human,” pp. 13-14.


61 Hanson, “Conception,” p. 43.
seed of her own and that this meant it was possible for her to generate a child without the mixing of her seed with male seed. The resulting offspring, however, would be weak and deficient in some way just as the female seed was weaker and imperfect. Some of the Valentinians described this aborted substance as Achamoth, the lower Sophia, and continued to emphasize her passionate state outside of the Pleroma. She could not reenter the Pleroma on account of “that passion (πάθος) in which she had been involved.” So she resigned herself in her loneliness to “every sort of that manifold and varied state of passion to which she was subject.” It was out of “this collection” of passions that the substance of matter which would form the universe was derived (Iren., Adv. Haer. I.4.1-2).

Because of the fragmentary nature of the Valentinian Exposition, the discussion of Sophia’s error is not extant, but her plight outside the Pleroma is available. From this text, we discover that Sophia suffered on account of her error and had to be corrected “since she cut herself off from her consort” (Val. Exp. 34.37-38). She mourns her sole existence outside of the Pleroma, repenting to the Father, “‘Granted that I have [renounced] my consort . . . I deserve the things I suffer. I used to dwell in the Pleroma putting forth the aeons and bearing fruit with my consort’” (Val. Exp. 34.25-30). Clearly the fall within God is identified with Sophia’s abandonment of her husband while the fullness of God is identified with the procreative spousal relationship.

The Marcosians, even though their interpretation of the myth takes place from the position of alphabet mysticism, also identify the error in the Pleroma as “passion.” According to their rendering, the Pleroma consists of three sets of aeons: the first eight, the next ten, and the final twelve. The final twelve, the Duodecad, they call “Notorious” (ἐπισημον) because of the error of “passion” (πάθος) which took place in connection with the twelfth of the final aeons (Iren., Adv. Haer. I.16.1). The passion experienced in the Duodecad was responsible for “all things visible” and was supported by their exegesis of various scriptural passages (Genesis 35:22, 49:28, Exodus 24:4, 28:2, Joshua 3:12, 4:3, and 1 Kings 18:31) which speak of the number twelve (Iren., Adv. Haer. I.13.4).

In the late Tripartite Tractate, there is an attempt to soften the eroticism of the fall of Sophia probably to bring the myth more in line with developing “orthodoxy”. Now it is the Logos, not Sophia, who finds himself

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62 Rousseau and Doutreleau, p. 65.
63 Rousseau and Doutreleau, p. 254.
outside the Pleroma. According to the text, his movement is not to be criticised because it occurred "by the will (οὐχὶ τελείους ζωῆς) of the Father" (Tri. Tract. 76.36-77.11). In fact, the text describes the plight of the Logos as one in which the Father and the aeons are the main actors, drawing away from the Logos so that the "organization which has been destined to come about" could actually take place (Tri. Tract. 76.31-77.11). So "the Pleroma abandoned him" (Tri. Tract. 78.4).

But even in this late, sanitized version, erotic elements remain. For instance, a statement is made in passing that the Logos outside of the Pleroma "became weak like a female nature which has abandoned its virile counterpart (ἀπὸ γυναικὸς μνήματος θεοφυσικής ἰδεών ἀεών θεοῦ θεωμενή κατοικίαν ἐλευθεροποιημένην)" (Tri. Tract. 78.11-13). Because he existed now in "such unstable conditions," he was not able to procreate correctly. Instead of bringing forth glorious aeons, he, like Sophia in other versions, emanated "little weaklings (τοῖς ἀρσενικῶς ἐγκαταληπτοῖς)" (Tri. Tract. 80.31-81.1).

The Valentinians agree that the fall within God is the result of aeonic passion and the abandonment of the spousal relationship. The result is the production of substance which must be aborted from the divine world. Because this substance has been produced by an aeon, however, it has to be redeemed. And so the erotic myth continues.

III. Procreation and Contemplation

Redemption of the amorphous aborted substance becomes the responsibility of the aeon Jesus who was himself "the perfect fruit (τέλειον κορμόν)" of the Pleroma (Iren., Adv. Haer. I.2.6). According to the Ptolemaic school, in order to begin the redemptive process, Jesus exited the Pleroma and took up residence outside with Achamoth, the lower Sophia. Accompanying Jesus were his angels, a special group of spiritual beings who were produced by the Pleroma for the purpose of functioning as Jesus' attendants (Iren., Adv. Haer. I.4.5; cf. Val. Exp. 36.20-29). Achamoth, we are told, at

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64 Attridge and Pagels, pp. 232-234.
65 Attridge and Pagels, p. 236.
66 Attridge and Pagels, p. 240.
67 Rousseau and Doutreleau, p. 48.
68 It should be noted, however, that the Valentinians disagreed about the actual origins of the angelic attendants and the spiritual seeds. The Marcosians suggest that Mother Silence originally produced the "angels who continually behold the face of the Father" and that Sophia, when she lifted her mind to contemplate these angels above,
first took on the etiquette of a proper maiden woman: because she was filled with "reverence" and "modesty", she veiled herself, an action which they say, is mentioned by Paul in his Corinthian letter: "A woman ought to have a veil upon her head, because of the angels" (Iren., Adv. Haer. I.8.2). But she was soon overcome with Jesus' beauty and quickly "ran forward to meet him" (Iren., Adv. Haer. I.4.5).

A similar analogy is found in the Excerpts of Theodotus. When Sophia saw Jesus, "she ran to him and rejoiced and worshiped." But when she saw the male angels who were sent out with him, "she was abashed and put on a veil." So "through this mystery Paul commands the women 'to wear veils on their heads because of the angels'" (Exc. Theo. 44.1). In the Theodotian analogy, Sophia runs out to greet her Jesus, unveiled as a wife might have greeted her husband within their home. Only when she comes into the presence of the angels who are the companions of her husband, does she, like the shame-filled wife, don her veil.

Jesus, however, does not return the embrace. Rather he separates the passions she is feeling from her and imparts intelligence to her (Iren., Adv. Haer. I.4.5; cf Val. Exp. 35.10-37; cf. Exc. Theo. 45.1; Tert., Adv. Val. 16). Freed from her passions, Achamoth now gazes raptly at the dazzling angels and "in her ecstasy" she "conceives (κοικεω)," bringing forth "spiritual fetuses (κόμψα πνευματικάν)" which are partly after her own image and partly after the image of Jesus' angels (Iren., Adv. Haer. I.4.5). Theodotus defines Sophia's action to be procreative in the true sense of the word. He says that the spiritual seeds were not emanations of Sophia's passions, nor were they her creations. Rather they were her "children (τέκνα) (Exc. Theo. 41.1). Tertullian relates:

generated "us as their images" (Iren., Adv. Haer. I.13.6). Other Valentinians, perhaps associates of Theodotus, taught that it was Sophia herself who emanated both "males" and "females." The males are the "elect" angels while the females are the "invited (η καλὴμη)" or the spiritual seed (Exc. Theo. 21.1) One wonders if Clement has confused the issue, wrongly identifying the "elect" with the angels and "the called" with the spiritual seed. Usually the spiritual seed is "the elect," while "the called" refers to the psychics. At any rate, the idea that Sophia generated both the male angels and the female seed is found here. This idea, Clement tells us, the Valentins derived from their exegesis of Genesis 1:27, "He created them in the image of God, male and female he created them." The duty of the male angels is more complicated than that which was promoted by the Ptolemaic school. Rather than being mere functionaries with Jesus, the male angels must "correct" the spiritual seed by restraining them from entering the Pleroma before the proper time and to pray for their remission (Exc. Theo. 35.1-4).

69 Rousseau and Doutreleau, p. 75.
For warmed with the joy of so great an escape from her unhappy condition, and at the same time heated with the actual contemplation of the angelic luminaries (one is ashamed to use such language, but there is no other way of expressing one's meaning), she during the emotion somehow became personally inflamed with desire towards them, and at once grew pregnant with a spiritual conception, at the very image of which the violence of her joyous transport, and the delight of her lewd excitement, had imbibed and impressed upon her (Tert., Adv. Val. 17).

According to the Valentinian Exposition, this production completes the "zyzygy": Sophia and Jesus are a "consort" as are the angels and their images, the spiritual beings or "seeds" (Val. Exp. 39.10-16). These "seeds," eventually become the spirits of humans. As human spirits, the "seeds" have the opportunity to mature and develop intellectually, creating the optimal conditions for their gnosis and redemption.

In the schema set forth in the later Tripartite Tractate, elements of this erotic myth remain but in a sanitized version. The aeons together produce the Son and his "army" by contemplating the "countenance of the Father" as well as their own "countenance" and "face." The Son therefore bears the Father's image, while his army, the faces of the aeons (Tri. Tract. 87.17-26). After the "king" and his "army" leave the Pleroma, they engage in battle with the defective substance and separate the Logos from it (Tri. Tract. 88.1-90.19). The Logos rejoices at his good fortune and gives praise, glory, and thanks to them for their aid. Because of his great admiration, "he birthed (απο) manifest images of the living visages" (Tri. Tract. 90.24-32). The images, however, were not perfect because they had resulted from the mingling of the Logos entirely "with himself" rather than by mutual "agreement" with the Son (Tri. Tract. 90.32-91.6).

Clearly, the erotic overtones of earlier Valentinian mythology are evident, suggesting that the ideal procreative act according to Valentinian thought is one that occurs between spousal partners. It is fascinating that even though the masculine Logos has been substituted here for the feminine Sophia, the title "bride (μετατ)" is still given to the Logos because he is the "joy" of the Son and "the hope of fruit from the union (θεανικ ἱκαρπος ἦπτετ)" with the Son (Tri. Tract. 93.1-5).

Thus we discover that the Valentinians seem to have understood the conception of the spiritual beings to be the result of contemplative activities in which Sophia, for instance, raises her thoughts to a higher level, focusing her attentions on the beauty of Jesus' attendant angels. The con-
sequence of such contemplation is procreative. Sophia bears spirits which resemble herself and the spiritual objects of her higher contemplation, the angels. The problem again seems to be that the procreative act of Sophia or the Logos was a solitary act rather than one of intercourse. This means that the spiritual seeds are “weak” and “immature,” unable to rejoin the Pleroma immediately. The redemptive saga is now drawn out further since the seeds need both the means and the time to mature and be perfected.

IV. The Role of Marriage in the Redemptive Process

So this precosmic situation sets up the conditions for an extended period of redemption before the Pleroma “will come to be in unity and reconciliation” (Val. Exp. 39.34-35; cf. Tert., Adv. Val. 31). Only when Sophia marries her consort Jesus and the matured spiritual seeds marry their angels will the Pleroma be able to “receive Sophia” again (Val. Exp. 39.30-33). This final marriage is understood to be eschatological, an endtime event for which the universe is both a preparation and an image. It is called, in Valentinian literature, “the bridal chamber.”

In the Ptolemaic version, once the seed has had time to be perfected, Achamoth reenters the Pleroma and receives her bridegroom (τὸν νυμφίον αὐτῆς) and they are wedded (πνευμα γένησαι). They are announced as “Groom and Bride”: τοῦτο ἐνία νυμφίον καὶ νύμφην. The Pleroma in its entirety becomes their “bridal chamber (νυμφῶν)” (Iren., Adv. Haer. I.7.1).72 They assert that this expectation can be found in the gospel story of Anna who lived with her husband for a short while before being widowed. She remained a widow until she saw Jesus and recognized him. Like Anna, Sophia had looked upon Jesus and his attendants and then had waited for Jesus to return to her and restore her to the Pleroma and her spousal relationship (Iren., Adv. Haer. 1.8.4).

In addition to the great aeonic marriage between Jesus and Sophia, another eschatological wedding would take place. But first, there would be a great marriage feast where those who were saved would become acquainted with their intended grooms. Then the brides, the spiritual seeds, having matured into “intelligent spirits (πνεύματα νοερά) would enter the Pleromic bridal chamber and be given as “brides (νύμφες) to Jesus’ attendant angels (Iren., Adv. Haer. I.7.1; I.7.5).73 Some Valentinians believed that the souls of the spiritual seeds would be their “wedding garments (ἐνδύματα γάμων)”

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72 Rousseau and Doutreleau, p. 101.
73 Rousseau and Doutreleau, p. 101.
The spiritual seeds would strip off their wedding garments, their souls, just before entering the bridal chamber. They would pass into the bridal chamber apparently naked, led by the Mother and her “bridegroom” Jesus, and their “grooms,” the angels. Now having become “intellectual aeons (αἰώνες νοεροί) they finally are joined “in the intellectual and eternal marriages of the συζυγία (εἰς τοὺς νοερούς καὶ αἰωνίους γάμους τῆς συζυγίας) (Exc. Theo. 64.1; cf. Tert., Adv. Val. 32).75 Souls of the non-elect would be safeguarded by the Demiurge until the last day when they would be allowed to enter the intermediate place (Exc. Theo. 63.2; cf. Tert., Adv. Val. 32). This type of tradition probably resulted from Valentinian exegesis of parables of Jesus such as those found in Matthew 22:1-14 and Luke 14:16-24.

According to the Marcosians, Sophia will be instrumental in the wedding between the spirits and the angels. She will be responsible for gathering together the spirit brides, conducting them into the bridal chamber, and handling them off to their angel grooms (Iren., Adv. Haer. I. 13.6). According to other Valentinians, it is Jesus who is the bridegroom with whom the brides rest prior to the wedding (Exc. Theo. 27.5; cf. Tert., Adv. Val. 32). He is both “the door” through which the spiritual seeds enter the Pleroma and the escort of the seeds into the bridal chamber (Exc. Theo. 26.2-3; cf. 41.2). As the escort, he is the one who unites them with their angels in the Pleroma so that “the many” can become “one” through their consorting (Exc. Theo. 36.1-2). In the Excerpts of Theodotus, at the eschaton, the male angels are gathered together with Jesus, referred to here as the Logos. Then the feminine spiritual seeds which have matured or “become men” are married to the angels and allowed entry into the the Pleroma: “therefore, the woman is said to be changed into a man, and the church here on earth into angels” (Exc. Theo. 21.1-3). According to Tertullian, the spirits become “brides” whose destiny ends in “the sanctification of wedlock” in “the bridal chamber of the Pleroma” where they will become parents through their nuptials with the angels. Tertullian attributes this idea to Valentinus himself (Tert., Adv. Val. 32). G. Quiipel has brought to light a previously understudied passage from Tertullian’s Scorpion which confirms this. Valentinus appears to have taught that, at death, the soul leaves its

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74 Sagnard, p. 182.
75 Sagnard, p. 186.
body and ascends past the archons to the eighth heaven where its Theletos, its beloved bridegroom, his true self awaits him (10).76

According to the Gospel of Philip, on the last day, there will be a complete “restoration” (ΑΠΟΚΤΑΣΤΑΣΙΣ) when the spirit of the person finally will enter the bridal chamber and marry his angel (67:16-20).77 Until that time, the bridal chamber, the Holy of Holies, remains hidden behind the veil (84:20-26). At the eschaton, however, the veil will be rent “from top to bottom” (85:10) and the interior of the Holy of Holies will be revealed (84:25-26). The believers who “belong to the order of the priesthood” because they have prepared themselves sacramentally for entry into the Temple, will “go within the veil” led by Jesus “the High Priest” (ἐπουλοῦνται τινες οί πόροι τοῦ μάρτυρος του Θεοῦ τα ἀγαθά οἱ πάντες τοις πόροις τοῦ Θεοῦ ἀποκτάστασις) (85:3-5).78

The Tripartite Tractate tells us that, in addition to the spirits who share in the essence of the Savior and enter the bridal chamber, the souls will be first elevated to the intermediate place where the Logos had waited before being joined with the Pleroma. Thus the souls will be witnesses to the great eschatological marriage, rejoicing at the door of the bridal chamber and glad at “the intercourse of the bridegroom and the bride (παρθένος η εὐφρενία τοῦ γαμπροῦ και της νυφῆς)” (Tri. Tract. 122.14-27).79 Then a trumpet will blast, proclaiming “the great complete amnesty from the beauteous east, in the bridal chamber which is the love (μονα) of God the Father” (Tri. Tract. 138.9-14).80

This idea seems to be very old and characteristic of other Valentinian versions of this myth, since Clement tells us that some believed that “after the entry of the Mother with the Son and the seeds into the Pleroma,” those left in the intermediate place will “receive the power” and “position” of Sophia (Exc. Theo. 34.2). These souls are called the “master (διδάσκαλος)” of the feast, the “best man (συμβολοφος)” of the wedding, and the

79 Attridge and Pagels, p. 312.
80 Attridge and Pagels, p. 336.
“friend of the bridegroom (τοῦ Νυμφίου δὲ Φίλος), standing before the bridal chamber and hearing the voice of the bridegroom, rejoicing greatly” (Exc. Theo. 65.1-2). The Tripartite Tractate, however, develops this position in a substantial way, a way that must represent some controversy the Valentinians were having over the ultimate fate of the psychics. According to this text, the body of Jesus is the Church containing both the pneumatics and the psychics. So all the members of his body must be eventually restored into the Pleroma itself (Tri. Tract. 123.11-23). This restoration will not take place until the very end and is described as a gradual “ascent [to] the degrees which are in the Pleroma” (124.14-25). We are told that “the end will receive a unitary existence just as the beginning is unitary, where there is not male nor female, nor slave and free, nor circumcision and uncircumcision, neither angel nor man, but Christ is all in all” (132.20-28).

Clearly, the role of marriage in the redemptive process is cornerstone. Sophia’s solitary acts of procreation, her passions, and her separation from her husband are identified by the Valentinians as the major errors which bring about this universe. Sophia’s continued solitary acts of procreation resulted in the production of weak and immature spirit beings that prolonged and complicated the redemptive process. The final restoration of the Pleroma, therefore, is understood in strict matrimonial terms. Jesus is not a celibate or passionate aeon. Rather he is the husband of Sophia, the sexual Savior who will eventually consummate his marriage in the eschatological bridal chamber. By marrying Sophia, Jesus redeems her. Moreover, the spirits of humans are redeemed when they finally marry their angels and unite with them in the bridal chamber.

V. Human Marriage in Valentinian Circles

This overview of the mythology of aeonic relationships suggests that the Valentinians believed that the nature of the aeons essentially was procreative. Since aeonic procreation is associated with acts of contemplation and the intellect, there is a potential problem with this procreative nature. The aeons can produce defective offspring just as easily as not. In other words, the object of their thoughts during the procreative moment determines the nature of the beings generated. Sophia’s focus on her desire and passion to “know” the Father resulted in an amorphous nasty abortion. Sophia’s

81 Sagnard, p. 188.
focus on the beauty of Jesus' attendant angels resulted in the production of spirit beings which were beautiful reflections of the angels.

The connection between contemplation and procreation is very ancient, stemming as far back in time as ancient Israel, and even influenced husbandry practices. According to Genesis 30:37-39, Jacob placed peeled branches near his herd's water trough so that, when they bred in front of them, the flock would bear striped, spotted, and speckled offspring.

Reproductive theories from at least as early as the 5th century BCE in Greece reflect this concept. Empedocles, a Greek scientist and philosopher of the 5th century BCE, is credited with the opinion that the embryo is shaped by the imagination of the mother at the moment of conception. This is proven to him by the fact that women who have fallen in love with statues often give birth to children that resemble them (A 81). So it was commonly accepted among the ancients that the characteristics of a child would be largely determined by the thoughts of the parents, particularly the mother, at the time of intercourse. For instance, in Soranus' *Gynecology* he remarks,

What is one to say concerning the fact that various states of the soul also produce certain changes in the mold of the fetus? For instance, some women, seeing monkeys during intercourse have borne children resembling monkeys. The tyrant of the Cyprians who was misshapen compelled his wife to look at beautiful statues during intercourse and became the father of well-shaped children; and horse-breeders during covering, place noble horses in front of the mares. Thus, in order that the offspring may not be rendered misshapen, women must be sober during coitus because in drunkenness the soul becomes the victim of strange fantasies; this furthermore, because the offspring bears some resemblance to the mother as well, not only in body but in soul. Therefore it is good that the offspring be made to resemble the soul when it is stable and not deranged by drunkenness (1.39).

He goes on to remark that a woman must remain very calm and sensible throughout her pregnancy. If she did not, she risked not only miscarriage but even producing a malformed child in body and mind because of her anxieties (1.47).

In addition to statues, paintings were also suspect as we see in Heliodorus' *Ethiopian Story*. The birth of a white daughter to black parents is explained

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in these words, “During intercourse with my husband the picture of Andromeda (making love to Perseus painted on the bedroom wall) presented her image to my eyes, showing her entirely nude, just as Perseus was taking her down from the rock, and it had thus by ill fortune given to the seed a form similar in appearance to that of the heroine” (4.8). In fact, the physician Galen did not allow images to be painted in bedrooms because “a monster ... can be caused by a special action of the imaginative power of a woman having sex. It is possible that when such a figure springs to mind, the fetus will be disposed in accordance to it.” These notions are found in texts well into the late Middle Ages. For instance, in a 14th century text there is the story of a woman freed from the suspicions of adultery when it was determined that her child resembled her bedspread.

Certainly these ideas are based on a combination of two ancient beliefs, one having to do with theories of vision, the other with theories of conception. A predominant theory of vision stated that the image beheld was captured by the eye, traveled along the optic nerve, and literally stamped itself on the soul, transforming it: “The pleasure which comes from vision enters by the eyes and makes its home in the breast; bearing with it ever the image ... it impresses it upon the mirror of the soul and leaves there its image” (Achilles Tatius, *Clitophon and Leucippe* 5.13). This idea is as old as Plato who suggested that the vision of the object touched the eye and was transmitted to the soul. In fact, he uses the image of the soul as a block of wax upon which a vision received is imprinted like the stamp of a signet ring (*Theaetetus* 191a-196c). The Stoics as well as most ancient physicians attributed sight to the stretching of the person’s “innate” pneuma in the eye. As it was impressed with the object of vision, the pneuma along the nerves carried this communication to the soul where it was then imprinted (*i.e.* Herophilus, ed. von Staden, 204).

The second had to do with theories of conception which were developed largely to explain family resemblances and to give function to some

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of the anatomical structures they knew about.\textsuperscript{88} One popular theory held that the father implants his seed into the female, much like a farmer sows seed in the ground. The mother’s uterus provides the environment for the seed to grow and be nourished by her menses (\textit{i.e.}, Aristotle, \textit{GA} 4.1, 763b30). As we saw earlier, there were a few scientists who thought that the mother actually provided seed from her own “testicles” and it contributed to the formation of the child. These scientists generally talked about the womb being a battleground for these two seeds and the outcome of the battle determined whether or not the child resembled the father or mother more. This meant that the balance of four elements, qualities, and humors in the body of the parents would ultimately contribute to the formation of the fetus. In fact, the determination of the child’s sex could be influenced by the parents’ diet and even the temperature and frequency of the baths the parents might take. At any rate, it was believed from both these perspectives that the condition of the mother’s physical and mental state throughout pregnancy would impact the fetus’ development.

Given this reproductive theory, it is not surprising that the Valentinians prescribe a “correct” way for the aeons to procreate: the aeons must work together as a couple, a \textit{syzygy}, usually envisioned as a masculine and feminine pair (or, as in the case of the Marcosian version as an androgynous being). Because the “fruit” of their intercourse reflects the attitude of their minds, when the aeons focus on the Father during their coupling, they will produce perfect offspring.

This means that there is an “incorrect” way for the aeons to procreate as well. In this scenario, an aeon who acts without its spouse, brings forth offspring through a solitary act of procreation. The offspring will always be less than perfect because it only has one parent. Even more horrendous problems occur when the single parent is also procreating out of passion. Then the offspring will reflect that passion, having neither form nor beauty.

Since the Valentinians believe that the universe and all it contains is an “image” or reflection of the Pleromic world above, it is not surprising that they understand their human physical marriages to be “images” of the aeonic intellectual marriages. Therefore, the Valentinians probably envisioned two types of human marriage just as they did of aeonic marriage. Human marriage would have been procreative, but one form of it would have produced more perfect offspring than the other. The higher form of marriage probably would have included some sort of consciousness raising

\textsuperscript{88} See n. 58 above.
during sexual relations to insure that the children would resemble God. Physical intercourse would not have been driven by passion but would most likely have been understood as a matter of the will. The lower form of marriage would have been less desirable, nay, probably undesirable. It would have been a form of human marriage in which sexual relations were carnal, based on the passionate feelings of the couple. It would not have embraced consciousness raising and thus the offspring that it produced would have been thought to be defective in some way. Better for the couple to remain celibate than produce such error!

It is not surprising to find behind Irenaeus’ polemic against the Valentinians fragments of this very ideology of marriage and sexual activity. He claims that the Valentinians believe themselves “to be perfect,” “the elect seed” because they possess “grace” which has “descended from above by means of unspeakable and indescribable intercourse” (άναθεν ἀπὸ τῆς ἁρμίτου και ἀνωνόμαστον συζυγίας καταληπτικῶν ἔχειν τὴν χάριν). Thus the Valentinians maintain that “in every way it is always necessary for them to practice the mystery of intercourse (διὸ καὶ ἐκ παντὸς τρόπου δεῖν αὐτοὺς ἀκί το τῆς συζυγίας μελετῶν μυστήριον).” But for the non-elect, sexual intercourse is dangerous because it is not performed as a sacral union but as an expression of sexual desire. Irenaeus quotes them as saying, “Whosoever being in this world does not so love a woman as to become one with her (οὐκ ἄν ἐν κόσμῳ γενόμενος γυναῖκα οὐκ ἔφιλησεν, ὦστε αὐτῇ κρατήσῃ), is not of the truth, nor shall attain to the truth. But whosoever being of the world (ὁ δὲ ἀπὸ κόσμου ἄν) has intercourse with a wife (κρατεῖς γυναῖκι), shall not attain to the truth, because his intercourse with his wife resulted from desire (διὰ τὸ ἐν ἐπιθυμίᾳ κρατήσῃ γυναῖκι)” (Iren., Adv. haer. 1.6.4).

Those in the world but not of the world are the Valentinians who will attain to the Pleroma. They are expected to be involved in sacral sexual practices as married couples. The ψυχικά or ordinary Christians, however, are of the world. In order to attain to the “intermediate habitation” or the dwelling place of the Lower Sophia, they must practice “continence and good works (ἐγκράτειαν καὶ ἄνθρωπος πράξειν)” (Adv. haer. 1.6.4). If they are sexually active, even during their marriages, they are involved in impurity and sin because their minds are focused on fulfilling the pleasures of their bodies. Tertullian reports similarly that the pneumatikoi, “for the purpose of honoring the celestial marriages,” are required “to contemplate and cele-

89 Rousseau and Doutreleau, p. 99.
90 Rousseau and Doutreleau, pp. 98-100.
brate the mystery always by cleaving to a companion, that is to a woman; otherwise (they account any man) degenerate and a bastard to the truth, who spends his life in the world without loving a woman or uniting himself to her.” The *psychics* are advised to bear the “yoke of discipline,” growing in the works of “holiness and justice” (Tert., *Adv. Val.* 30). Epiphanius states, tongue in cheek, that the *pneumatics* can do anything whatsoever without concern or fear because they will be saved from everything while the *psychics* save themselves “by labor and just deeds” (Pan. 31.7.8-9).

We should not be surprised that the *Gospel of Philip* identifies the “mystery” of marriage with procreation: “Great is the mystery of marriage! For [without] it the world would [not exist] (ἡγησίας ἡ μαρτυρίαν ἀνπαντὸς εὐνομεῖ τὴν ἀνάτυχην τερπον ἐν τοῖς κοινοῖς μαθηματικοῖς)” (64:31-32). Like Irenaeus and Tertullian, Philip knows of two kinds of human marriage, one that he calls the “marriage of purity” (*πνευματικὴ ἡμετέρω* 82:5) and the other, the “marriage of impurity” (*πνευματικὴ ἀπειρία* 64:36-37; 82:5). The ideal human marriage is the marriage that is based on “pure” (τέλη) thoughts rather than mere “carnal” (καρπίκον) activity, “belonging not to desire, but to the will” (ἐὰν ἄπειρημα ἀλλὰ εὐδαιμονίαν) (82:9). Even in the carnally-based marriage, the marriage of impurity, the private moment of procreation was a “mystery” (*ἡγησίας*). If procreation within the marriage of impurity is a mystery, how much more mysterious is conception between partners who enjoy marriages of purity where procreation is a matter of will rather than desire: “If there is a hidden quality to the marriage of impurity, how much more is the marriage of purity a true mystery!” (ἐὰν ἄπειρημα ἀπειρίας ἐὰν ποιεῖς οὐδὲν πνευματικὸς ἡμετέρως ὑγιείας ἄμωμι 82:4-6)

*Philip* states that, in the “marriage of purity”, during sexual intercourse the thoughts of the couple must not be adulterous, focusing on another lover. For if this were unfortunate enough to happen, the child conceived would resemble the lover rather than the spouse: “The children a woman bears resembles the man who loves her” (78:14). Nor must the couple’s thoughts be focused on the world. For if this were unfortunate enough to happen, the child who is born would resemble the world (78:20-25). What *Philip* proposes is that the couple direct their love to God so that the child conceived will resemble the Lord:

Now you who live together with the son of God, love not the world, but love the Lord, in order that those you will bring forth may not resemble the world,

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91 Layton, p. 170.
92 Layton, pp. 170 and 204.
but may resemble the Lord (Ῥωμ. 1:30) ἦν πῆρα ἄννουτε ἀνὴρ πρὸς ἄνερ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνευμὸνε ἐγένοτε ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα εὐνομομένε εὐερείζε ἀνὴρ ἀνήρ) (78:20-25).93

“To resemble the Lord” did not refer to the offspring’s ethical or moral self. Rather it was a redemptive concern based on a Christological premise. The Valentinians were very advanced in their discussions of the binitarian problem, more so than many other second-century Christian theologians. They had pondered carefully the relation of the human and divine aspects of Christ and, like rabbis, had differing opinions and emphasized different aspects of the equation. But from the literature we have, it seems that the discussions among them focused on a Jesus of Nazareth who was made up of a combination of things: he had a corporeal body but one that, as we saw earlier, appears to have been transformed by his enkrateia to the point that it was not necessary for him to defecate. He had a psyche or soul given to him by the Demiurge. He had a spiritual seed implanted in his soul by Sophia. And either at his birth or baptism, the Valentinians argued this point, the Holy Spirit, the aeon from the Pleroma, entered him.94 What the Valentinians seem to be saying when they write that they want to birth children who “resemble the Lord,” is that they want to bear children whose souls, like Jesus’, contain spiritual seeds.

This important passage in Philip continues: when the husband and wife have focused their minds on God rather than on the passion of the moment, it was believed that they would draw a spirit or thought or light or angel down from the heavens which would then join their own spirits or thoughts or light or angels:

Spirit mingles with spirit, and thought consorts with thought, and [light] shares [with light] (τοιεὶ τε εἰς ἑνὸν πνεύμα ἄνα ἄννα ἄνερ πνεομός ἡνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνευμόνε ἐγένοτε ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ π

If you become [a spirit], it is the spirit which will be joined to you (ἐγένοτε ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀ

If you become thought, it is thought which will mingle with you (ἐκ [ἐγένοτε ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢ

If you become light, it is the light which will share with you (ἐκ [ἐγένοτε ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀ

If you become one of those who belong above, it is those who belong above who will rest upon you (ἐγένοτε ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ πνεομός ἢνα ἁπετακτικοῦ ἀνὴρ π

93 Layton, p. 198.
95 Layton, pp. 198-200.
Thus Philip states regarding this mysterious moment of conception: “It belongs not to the darkness or the night but to the day and the light” (82:9-10). During intercourse, the mingling of the parent’s spirits or angels together with the spirit or angel from above somehow seems to have resulted in the actual conception of the child’s spirit-seeded soul.

We also read that if the married couple has drawn down the spirit or angel, it joins with them during sexual relations and protects them from the unwanton advances of evil spirits which would otherwise be free to fondle and defile them (65:3-26). Why were the Valentinians concerned about avoiding the sexual advances of the demons? A few passages from the Pseudo-Clementina assist us in answering this question. In this corpus, we are told that a married couple must observe “the law of intercourse” given by Moses and sow the seed at the proper time in order to conceive a healthy child. Sex at the improper time, during menstruation, “naturally produces a multitude of evils,” including certain diseases and deformities in the child. The child’s nature is thusly influenced by this particular “sin of ignorance” on the part of the parents (Hom. 19.22). Why would the sin of the parents affect the fetus’s formation? Because demons lurk in the souls of the sinful parents and have encouraged the parents to use their bodies for pleasure. One such pleasure, overeating, produces an excess that harms the soul and acts as a “dreadful poison” to the parents’ bodies (Hom. 9.10). The gratification of lust, another pleasure, continues to give harbor to demons and their “noxious breath” (Rec. 9.9). It appears that the Ebionites believed that the poisons and unbalanced humors produced by this “excess” in the parents damaged the fetus at conception and harmed its further development. “Therefore,” the author of the Recognitions concludes, “parents are responsible for their children’s defects” (Rec. 9.9). In order to avoid this situation, the Ebionite Christians prescribe proper marital sex as that which does not occur during menstruation. If the couple meets this condition, not giving into their untimely lusts, the children that they bear will not suffer certain diseases and deformities.

I imagine that the Valentinians held a similar belief, namely that the demons lurking in the bodies of lustful parents whose marriage was “impure” produced an unbalanced condition in the parents’ bodies which then harmed the developing fetus and made it impossible for a spirit-filled soul to enter the child. Thus, according to the Valentinians, those involved in a marriage

96 This is an old idea reflected in Genesis 6 and 1 Corinthians 11.
of "purity," which is called "the mirrored bridal chamber" (πύργας Ρήγικονικός) (65:13), draw to themselves a special spirit or angel rather than a demon. Only children conceived in this type of marriage would be able to be filled with a spirit-seeded soul.

Further, conception is associated with kissing in Philip: "Through the kiss, the perfect conceive and beget. Because of this, we kiss one another. We conceive (εν ουσίᾳ ΑΜΟ) out of the grace which is in one another" (59:2-6). The idea that life or the spirit could be transferred or exchanged by a kiss is a very old idea and probably underlies this particular behavior and interpretation. It was through the kiss, not intercourse itself, Philip seems to say, that the perfect spirit-filled soul of the child was somehow conceived and transmitted to the embryo.

These ideas about conception may seem far-fetched to us today, but they actually reflect knowledge of ancient theological, philosophical and medical discussions. There were at least three prevailing theories about the origin of a person's psyche or soul. The most common theory among Greek theologians was creationism: each individual soul was created independently by God at the moment of its infusion into the body (cf. Cyril Hieros., cat. 4, 18-19; Epiph., ancor. 55; Cyril Alex., in Ion. 1.9; Pelagius., libellus fidei 9). Another theory was traducianism: each soul was believed to be generated from the souls of the parents, somehow transmitted through the semen which functioned as the "channel" (traducem) (cf. Tert., De anima 9, 20, 27; Adv. Marc. 2.15; Test. Animae 3; Greg. Nyssa, De hom. opif. 28-29; Aug., de Gen. ad litt. 10, 23-end; ep. 166, 6-12; 190, 14-15; De lib. arbit. 3, 56-59). The third theory was pre-existence: all souls had been created by God and pre-existing their assignment into individual bodies (cf. Origen., De Princ. 1.8.3-4; 2,9,2; 3,4,1; Didymus the Blind, Comm. In Iob. 3, 3-5; Leo., ep. 15, 10; Victorinus., In Eph. 1, 4).

The Valentinians held to this last view: the psychic and the pneumatic stuff were pre-existent and, in fact, pre-cosmic. After the Demiurge fashioned the psychic bodies, Sophia (or the Logos) implanted pneumatic seeds into some

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97 Layton, p. 170.
98 Layton, p. 156.
of them. These seeds "worked like leaven, uniting what seemed to have been divided, soul and flesh." Because of these inserted seeds, these souls were different from the rest and are known in the Valentinian myth as the "elect" or "pneumatic" souls (Exc. Theo. 2-3; cf. Tert., Adv. Val. 29).

How did the Valentinians think an elect soul actually became embodied? As we just saw, an angel or spirit was involved. It appears that again we are dealing with ancient theories about the origin of the soul. Clement of Alexandria, a contemporary with the Valentinians, speaks of angels who assist at procreation:

An old man said that that which is in the belly is living. For the soul enters the womb, which has been prepared for conception by purification [menstruation] and is introduced [into the womb] by one of those angels provided to oversee birth, who know in advance the time of conception to push the woman toward intercourse, and when the seed has been deposited, as it were, the pneuma which is in the seed is adapted and this takes part in the formation [of the embryo] . . . And if the angels bring good news to barren women, so also do they infuse souls at conception. In the gospel, 'the babe leapt' [means that it is] ensouled . . . And because of this barren women are barren, since the soul is not infused, accompanying the depositing of seed for the retention of conception and birth (Ecl. 50 1-3).

The angels, according to Clement, encourage the woman to have intercourse with her husband when the time of conception draws near. After the semen has been ejaculated into the womb, the angels then deposit the soul at the moment of conception. In fact, barrenness is due to the absence of angelic intervention, not some problem with either parent!

Such ideas were quite popular and persisted well into the Middle Ages. For instance, in the Kabbalistic text, the Zohar, we find that "when a man begins to consecrate himself before sex with his wife with a sacred intention, a holy spirit is aroused above him, composed of both male and female. And the Holy One, Blessed Be He, directs an emissary who is in charge of the human embryos, and assigns to him this particular spirit, and indicates to him the place to which it should be entrusted . . . Then the spirit descends together with the image (tselem), the one in whose likeness (diyokna) [the spirit] existed above. With this image, man grows; with this image he moves through the world" (343a-b).101 Again in the Zohar it is stated, "at the moment of sex, the Holy One, Blessed Be He, sends a likeness that has the physiognomy of the person who is about to be formed imprinted

and etched upon this image, and it stands over the act of intercourse. And were the eye allowed to see, he would observe above his head an image formed like the physiognomy of that person, and in that same image man is created (3: 104b).\textsuperscript{102} Even Maimonides, in his writings, knows about the popular view that an angel enters the womb and helps form the fetus.\textsuperscript{103} Maimonides argues that the traditional assisting angel should not be understood as a fiery supernatural being but the work of the “Active Intellect”:

If you told one of those men who purport to be the Sages of Israel that the Deity sends an angel who enters the womb of a woman and then forms the fetus, that would impress him and he would accept it as an expression of God’s greatness and power and an instance of his wisdom—although still convinced that an angel is a body of flaming fire one third the size of the entire world—supposing that all this was perfectly possible for God. But if you told him that God placed a formative power in the semen, by which the limbs and organs are shaped and demarcated, and that this is the angel, or if you told him that the forms of all things are the work of the Active Intellect and that this is the angel constantly mentioned by the Sages as the magistrate of the world, he would bolt at such a view. For he does not understand the real meaning of greatness and power (Guide II 6, Munk 2, 17ab).

So popular and widespread was the idea of angelic involvement in conception that we even find it in medieval art. Hildegard of Bingen, for instance, left us with two fascinating illuminations showing the soul being infused into the body. One from the Scivias manuscript, depicts a great angel with outspread wings taking care of the souls in heaven. A beam issues down from the angel into the head of the person as a soul is transmitted to him. In the other illumination also from the Scivias, a beam of light transports a soul from heaven directly into the fetus which can be seen in the cross-section of the mother’s womb.

Why were the Valentinians so concerned about conceiving souls implanted with divine pneuma? The Excerpts of Theodotus tells us that once the Valentinian couples were married, they were having sex specifically for the purpose of procreation in order to insure that all of the pneumatic seed would be incarnated and ultimately redeemed. They supported this doctrine with their exegesis of Jesus’ saying to Salome that death will reign as long as women bear children. The Valentinians said that Jesus did not speak here in

\textsuperscript{102} Cf. Tishby, Wisdom of the Zohar, volume 2, p. 770.

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“reproach” of birth because birthing “is necessary for the salvation of the believers.” Rather birth must continue until all of the “seed” incarnates. So, the Valentinians posit that Jesus, in this saying, was alluding to Sophia to “the woman on high whose passions became creation when she put forth that which was without form.” Before Jesus descended to earth, the humans who were born are called “children of the female only.” These humans were born out of “base intercourse (αισχρᾶς συζυγίας)” and are “incomplete”, “infants”, “senseless”, “weak”, “without form”, and “brought forth like abortions.” But because Jesus came to earth “to drag us out from passion” and grant humans “form” just as he had done with Sophia, the Valentinians stated that “we have become children of a husband (οὗνδρός) and a bridal chamber (νυμφῶνος)” (Exc. Theo. 67).104 A bit later, Clement also states that the Valentinians say that as long as their own spiritual “seed (σπέρμα) is immature, it is the children of the female (Θηλείας τέκνων).” But after Jesus came, “it was formed, it was changed to a man and becomes a son of the bridegroom (υἱὸς Νυμφίου)” (Exc. Theo. 79).105

VI. Closing Remarks

The Valentinians were not ambiguous about sex at all. In fact, their understanding of sex and conception does not seem to be even unique to them. As we have seen, the Valentinians were part of a larger “mythology” about sexual relations held by the ancients, and their reinterpretation of this larger “mythology” served to redeem God. Any alleged ambiguity is the result of scholars removing texts from the larger context of the Hellenistic world, interpreting certain passages in isolation from the broader Valentinian myth, and making assumptions that the mention of “spiritual” or “pure” marriage dictates a celibate one.

The Valentinians believed that sex was more than a physical activity with physical consequences.106 The thoughts of the sexual partners either raised intercourse to sacred heights or drew it down to the depths of sin. Unlike the psychics whose marriages were “carnal,” their marriages were supposed to be “pure,” imitating the marriages of the “spiritual” aeons. By this they meant that the sexual relations between husband and wife

104 Sagnard, pp. 190-192.
106 Their belief is very similar to that held by the Hermetics as I have argued elsewhere: on this see, DeConick, “True Mysteries,” pp. 250-252.
were supposed to be a matter of “will” for the purpose of procreation rather than recreation. At the moment of conception the husband and wife were supposed to raise their thoughts on high so that their spirits could mingle with the angels and draw down a soul that contained a spiritual seed.

This was the great mystery of their marriages—to conceive a child who would resemble the Lord, a child with a spirit-infused soul. In this way, the pre-existent *pneumatic* seed would be drawn down from the heavens above to sojourn on earth. Here it would mature and finally be harvested at death. Sexual intercourse between Valentinian spouses was to continue until the last spiritual seed was embodied and harvested. On that great day, the Bridal Chamber would open and their spirits would reunite with God. How important was sex to the Valentinians? The coming of the final day and the redemption of God depended on it.

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