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# The Gospel of Philip

**Annotated & Explained**

Translation and Annotation by  
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*Foreword by Stevan Davies*

*Walking Together, Finding the Way*

**SKYLIGHT PATHS®**  
PUBLISHING

Woodstock, Vermont

## Foreword. □

Stevan Davies

From the time of the Gospel of Thomas, where we hear that "the Kingdom of the Father is already spread out on the earth, and people aren't aware of it" (saying 113), continuing on into the world of Sufi Islam and other mysticisms today, spiritual people have sought to see underneath and beyond appearances, to find the Divine hidden here. The Gospel of Philip is in this tradition, one where "the world has become the aeon and the aeon is fullness for him ... hidden in a perfect day and a holy light" (section 107).

The author of the Gospel of Philip is fascinated by the occult, by hiddenness, and by the secrets that lie behind and beneath appearances. The Gospel of Philip finds hidden meaning in the world, in the aeon beyond and within the world, and in the sayings of Jesus and the sacramental language of the Gnostic Christian church. Many of the passages in this text are about words, the secret meanings of words, the allegorical significance of parables, and the power of divine names. The author seeks to show the hidden meaning behind what Hinduism calls the names and forms. In section 68 we hear of three physical locations for sacrifice in Jerusalem and how each one allegorically represents an aspect of the Christian faith. In section 80, the only one to mention the apostle Philip, that apostle tells a short tale that is immediately allegorized to explain its secret meaning. We hear in section 105 that while at present we have the things of this creation, behind those appearances "the mysteries of truth are revealed in type and image." We read in section 59 that "truth

did not come into the world naked, but came in types and images," an idea that can be traced to the great philosopher Plato. This Gospel is not just a set of doctrinal truths laid out on the page; it is a set of spiritual exercises helping to train readers to take types and images and find truth within them.

In this Gospel the world is a text (a very postmodern idea from this second-century document), and the duty of the Christian is to read through its allegories to the truth it hides. The Gospel of Philip shows how to interpret the world textually, advocating a hermeneutic approach to spirituality and to reality itself. It argues that there are names and realities behind those names, and that the world itself is an allegory, a set of manifest appearances that we can interpret like a text to reveal deeper and more complex meanings. We must go beyond the types and images to the ultimate source that dwells in them now.

Of all the aspects of the world, sexuality is the one to which most people, including the author of the Gospel of Philip, give most of their attention. The Christianity that became the standard church tended to regard sexuality as akin to the demonic. But the Gnostic Christianity of the Gospel of Philip finds sexuality to be akin to the Divine. We read about a sacramental sexual union between the divine and human in a bridal chamber understood to be the celestial realm. We are told that "everyone who enters the bridal chamber will kindle the light.... If anyone becomes a son of the bridal chamber, he will receive the light" (section 107).

Human mythic history is embedded in a sexual metaphor. Sections 70–71 discuss how it was that Adam (soul) has a companion, Eve (spirit), with whom he was united. But Eve separated from Adam and death came into being. Christ came to "correct the separation that has existed from the beginning, by uniting the two together" in the bridal chamber; there spirit unites with the spirit, the Word with the Word, and so forth. Those who are united sexually in the bridal chamber of the higher reality are able to become human, spirit, Word, and light. "If you become one of those from above, it is those from above who will rest on you" (section 96).

The ritual of the bridal chamber seems to empower a person to give birth to a higher Self, to become what is envisioned in the light of the rite. According to one of the most striking passages in the Gospel of Philip, "In the world of truth, if you see anything of that place you become one with what is there. You saw the spirit and you became the spirit; you saw the Christ you became the Christ.... In that other place you do see yourself—and you shall become what you see" (section 38). This is powerful writing meant to provide a path toward understanding, to guide toward experience.

The Secret Book of John, another Nag Hammadi text, conveys the fundamental Gnostic myth of creation by telling the story of humankind's imprisonment in a dark world apart from the true God. The Gospel of Philip is based on this myth and occasionally refers to important aspects of it. For example, we hear about attempts by the rulers of this world to deceive humankind, and of the holy spirit's turning the tables on those rulers. Through her deception, the holy spirit "accomplished everything through them, as she wished" (section 12). The great difference between the Secret Book of John and the Gospel of Philip is that while the former does eventually end on a positive note, showing humanity saved through the power of God's providence, it is mainly a rather gloomy account of the fall and imprisonment of God's wisdom in this lower place. The Gospel of Philip, in contrast, is filled with rejoicing and happiness at the salvation through Christ that already has taken place.

We read of the wonders of the rite of the bridal chamber and the gift of the holy spirit that cannot be taken away. We read of the future resurrection that depends upon our being raised already now, and how we will surely escape from this world in the future because we have been given the rites and the light that will guarantee our perseverance into the higher world. In this world we receive the truth in types and images; in the higher world we will see it face to face. The Gospel of Philip speaks of and to people who have been and who will be saved from the world; this Gospel is what the Gnostic religion of the Secret Book of John became after a generation or two of integration with Christianity.

The Gospel of Philip tells us that the truth cannot be found through words alone. Rather, words and the world are types and images pointing toward the truth. Therefore neither my comments here nor Andrew Phillip Smith's valuable, detailed discussion of the Gospel of Philip should substitute for your own decipherment or for your own engagement in getting beneath the types and images to the reality that lies behind them. Like the Gospel of Thomas and, to a degree, the Gospels of Mark and John, the Gospel of Philip is a spiritual exercise, a collection of riddles and enigmas that should enable us to move above the level of the things that are revealed in this world, to the level of the things that are hidden. Ideally, eventually, through our own effort, the perfect things will open to us. Along with the hidden things of truth, the holies of holies will be revealed, and the bridal chamber will invite us in (section 105).

## Introduction

The Gospel of Philip is one of the most exciting of the Gnostic texts found in Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1945. In comparison with the Gospel of Thomas, which has generated a huge amount of scholarly and popular interest, the Gospel of Philip has, until recently, received relatively little recognition. The Gospel of Thomas is set apart from all of the other texts in the Nag Hammadi library by its strong claim to be as old as the gospels in the New Testament. Many people have read or at least have some familiarity with the New Testament, and the roots of Christianity in the first century and the figure of Jesus fascinate people in a way that the development of Christianity in the second century does not.

The Gospel of Philip cannot claim a first-century date. It belongs to the same second- and third-century period as most of the Gnostic Nag Hammadi texts, but its contents are a good deal more accessible than many of them. Much of its imagery is also found in the New Testament, or in the Gospel of Thomas for that matter. It draws on the imagery of the natural world, the relationships between women, men, and family, and the ancient distinctions between lords and servants, between free people and slaves, and between pagans, Jews, and Christians. The Gospel of Philip represents a genuinely spiritual development of Christianity that uses the same language and sees itself as expressing the same truths as the teachings of Jesus and Paul.

The Gospel of Philip's major claim to fame is its mention of Mary Magdalene as "the companion of the Savior" (section 48). This has been the subject of a good deal of speculation concerning Jesus's marital status, which has culminated in the extraordinarily successful novel *The Da Vinci Code*. As many critics have pointed out, author Dan Brown's claims in

the novel, though fascinating, do not hold up to historical analysis. There is no reason to consider that the Gospel of Philip's references to Mary Magdalene and Jesus are in any way historical. I am sure that the compiler of the Gospel of Philip would have considered historical enquiry to be very far from the purpose of these writings. Yet the Gospel of Philip, along with other ancient texts, does assign a positive and, in many ways, preferential role to Mary. Although it falls rather short of delineating the family tree of Jesus's descendants, or of narrating Jesus's nuptial arrangements, the Gospel of Philip has a refreshingly unembarrassed attitude to sexuality, and in Philip the coupling of the bride and bridegroom represents the culmination of spiritual development.

The hero of *The Da Vinci Code* is a professor of symbology. There is actually no such academic discipline with this name, but Dan Brown has hit the nail on the head here, since symbolism and metaphor are at the heart of the Gospel of Philip. There is scarcely a single section of the Gospel of Philip that is not based upon figurative meaning. So, despite its many inaccuracies, *The Da Vinci Code* may do a great service for the ancient works such as the Gospel of Philip. As scholar Stevan Davies wrote, "Fiction featuring unorthodox ancient texts will continue to populate best-seller lists. One hopes that this will, in turn, give rise to increased interest in the realities behind the fictions, the ancient teachings of Jesus and about Jesus that really were found in 1945 in Nag Hammadi, Egypt, after having been hidden for 1,600 years."<sup>1</sup>

The discovery of this ancient library is a fascinating tale in its own right. In December 1945, Mohammed Ali es-Samman, an Arab camel driver, and his brother Khalifah Ali were out looking for fertilizer and found a large earthenware jar at the bottom of the high chalk cliff of Djebel-el-Tarif. They smashed open the jar, slightly wary of what they might find, only to discover twelve books. (One of the books had another book bound into it, so the books are now numbered as being thirteen in total.)

What the Egyptians had found were twelve codices. A codex is a manuscript book, which was copied by hand before the invention of print-

ing. These are not scrolls, which are continuous sheets rolled up rather like rolls of wallpaper and are still used, for instance, in traditional Jewish religious worship, the best example being the Torah scroll. The codices are made from papyrus cut into sheets and bound between covers. They really are the forerunner of the modern book. Many people, including Dan Brown, confuse the Dead Sea Scrolls with the Nag Hammadi finds, since the two discoveries were made within two years of each other. The Dead Sea Scrolls are, as their name suggests, scrolls that were discovered in 1947 in the region of the Dead Sea in Israel and were manufactured more than three hundred years before the Nag Hammadi codices. Unfortunately—and this is the kind of inaccuracy that does not endear Dan Brown to academic scholars—Brown writes that the Dead Sea Scrolls contain Gnostic gospels (which they do not, since these scrolls are Jewish, not Christian) and that the Nag Hammadi library is written on scrolls (which they are not, although, unlike the Dead Sea Scrolls, they do contain works that are titled gospels).

The covers of the Nag Hammadi codices are of leather with a clasp extending from the back to the front. Thus, they look rather like a modern briefcase or attaché case. The Gospel of Philip is found in Codex II, which also contains the Gospel of Thomas—Philip actually follows immediately after Thomas, starting two-thirds down the final page of Thomas. Other notable works in this most important codex of the Nag Hammadi library include the Exegesis of the Soul, which interprets the Bible and Homer in terms of the ancient and Platonic idea of the soul that has fallen from its previously divine state and must make its way back to God; the Book of Thomas the Contender, which claims to be written by a Matthias who recorded the teaching given by Jesus to Thomas; and a version of the Secret Book or Apocryphon of John, which is probably the most important text of classical Gnosticism. All of the Nag Hammadi codices are written in Coptic, which is the final stage of the ancient Egyptian language, written in Greek letters instead of hieroglyphs, with a few extra letters to represent sounds that are lacking in the Greek language and with an

extensive vocabulary of loanwords from Greek. As far as we know, Greek was the original language of every text in the collection.

After their discovery, the volumes eventually made their way into the hands of scholars, though their route was not very straightforward. Their journey was complicated when the brothers who had found the manuscripts took revenge on the man who had killed their father. They murdered their father's murderer and had to go into hiding. They left the books with a Coptic priest whose brother, having some inkling of their potential value, sold a volume to an antiques dealer. Through a variety of sales, attempted sales, and peregrinations from country to country, the entire collection was ultimately preserved at the Cairo Museum.

The original manuscripts had already partly disintegrated due to their extreme age and the lack of care that followed their discovery, and so we have holes in the pages or we lack parts of the pages where the papyrus has crumbled away. Where the missing material cannot be reconstructed, these lacunae (or gaps in the manuscript) are indicated by ellipses in the text. Other lacunae are not indicated in this translation because scholars have come to a reasonable consensus about which words can be used to fill the gaps.

The Gospel of Philip, rather like the Gospel of Thomas, presents a series of discourses, parables, and sayings that often have much in common with the New Testament. Certainly there are a few references to specifically Gnostic terms that might seem meaningless out of context, especially when they are often translated by reproducing their Greek names instead of rendering them into English. Terms like *Echmoth* (Syriac for wisdom), *pleroma* (fullness), *Sophia* (wisdom), and *aeon* (the realm of eternity) occur often enough to confirm that the Gospel of Philip is indeed Gnostic, but not enough to make it as initially impenetrable and off-putting as some of the Nag Hammadi texts.

The mass of interesting material that we find spread out through this text may draw us away from a fundamental question: What is the Gospel of Philip? Why is it called a gospel? It isn't a gospel in the sense of the four

canonical gospels in the New Testament, which tell stories, however symbolic or miraculous, of the life and teachings of Jesus. The Gospel of Thomas isn't a gospel in that sense either, yet it claims to be "the esoteric sayings of the living Jesus" and is clearly a collection of sayings attributed to Jesus. Most scholars nowadays are happy to classify the Gospel of Thomas as a gospel, but the Gospel of Philip hardly ever makes its way into collections of Christian gospels. It is only a gospel by virtue of its title.

The Gospel of Philip is actually an anthology of material written by Valentinians, the most subtle and appealing of early Christian movements. Once we see the Gospel of Philip as an anthology, excerpted from a group of related writings, we can understand why it jumps around from one theme to another, repeating images and subjects without warning, containing different and often contradictory twists in its approaches. At first it may seem disappointing to learn that this is an anthology, as if this format might lessen the importance of the text, or make its authenticity questionable. But this actually makes the text richer. As well as the point of view of the compiler, we have material from a variety of sources, possibly including the Gospel of Thomas.

### Valentinus's Influential Gnosticism

Some of the terms in the Gospel of Philip show that it is Gnostic. We might expect that the simple fact that the Gospel of Philip was found at Nag Hammadi with other Gnostic texts should indicate its Gnosticism, but the Nag Hammadi codices also contain a fragment of Plato's Republic, the Sentences of Sextus, which is neither Christian nor Gnostic nor Jewish, Hermetic material such as Poimandres, and the Gospel of Thomas, which lacks Gnostic technical terms and perhaps has more in common with Jewish Wisdom literature.

Philosophically, the term *Gnostic* can be used to describe a great variety of material, ranging from the prophetic books of William Blake to the premises behind the movie *The Matrix*. But historically it is used to describe

the second- and third-century Christian groups that were criticized by church fathers such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Hippolytus. The writings of these church fathers are consistently negative, in contrast to the creative expression of Gnostic writers. But the form of Christianity championed by the church fathers won the battle for Christianity, and their writings survived, while Gnostic writings did not. Still, even among educated Christians, few have read the tedious and self-justifying writings of the second- and third-century fathers. By a quirk of fate, they are studied today primarily for the information that they give us concerning Gnosticism, and many more people now read Gnostic texts than have ever read the church fathers.

There were many varieties of Gnostic groups, and few of them even seem to have referred to themselves as Gnostics. We might look at the term *New Age* by way of comparison. Marketing aside, many people don't wish *New Age* to be applied to them, nor do many modern spiritual groups wish to be lumped in with other *New Age* groups. *New Age* can even be used as a term of abuse, as Gnostic certainly was. Gnosticism is a complex of communities and ideas, and the scholar Michael Williams has shown that it is very difficult to identify any common set of beliefs or characteristics that could include all of the groups and writings labeled as Gnostic.<sup>2</sup> Yet it remains a useful, if imprecise, category.

Luckily, we can apply a more specific name to the movement that produced the Gospel of Philip: Valentinianism. This movement takes its name from its founder, Valentinus, one of the most brilliant Gnostics. Valentinus was born on the Egyptian coast around the beginning of the second century, was educated in Alexandria, and moved to Rome halfway through the same century, during the reign of Antoninus Pius. Valentinus was in Rome at around the same time as the Christian apologist Justin Martyr. According to a tradition preserved by the heresy-hunting church father Hippolytus, Valentinus said that the Word or the *Logos* appeared to him as a newborn child. This revelation—which I suspect is more a metaphorical description of a spiritual experience than a vision, per se—prompted Valentinus to begin teaching his spiritual understanding to

others. Valentinus and his followers were in many ways less radical than other Gnostics and more balanced in their approach. For the most part, their interpretations of the Hebrew Bible were not hostile to Jewish culture and traditional interpretations of the Hebrew Bible in the way that many Gnostic interpretations were. Valentinians mingled with members of the proto-orthodox church and kept many or most of the external rites and practices of Christianity. Their tendency to take part in the conventional forms of Christian worship while seeing a deeper spiritual significance in the rites led to them being called “wolves in sheep's clothing.” Valentinus himself apparently hoped to become a bishop in due course and clearly hoped to influence Christianity from within, but he failed in this regard, and he was never elected as a bishop.

Most of what we know about Valentinianism comes from its critics, who are so hostile to it that we should take everything they write with a pinch of salt. For instance, Valentinus's student Marcus was accused by the church father Irenaeus of seducing his female followers, but on a closer reading this turns out not to be a sexual seduction but a doctrinal seduction.

According to Clement of Alexandria, the third-century church father who had some sympathy for and affinities with Gnosticism, Valentinus was taught by a certain Theudas, who had been taught by Paul himself. Thus, the Valentinians could make the same claim to apostolic succession as could the proto-orthodox Christians. Even if Paul had never met the earthly Jesus, he had a direct connection to the risen Christ. And even if the proto-orthodox tried to discount that, Paul had still received approval from Peter, John, and James, “the brother of the Lord.”

One of the most accessible and beautiful of the Nag Hammadi writings, the Gospel of Truth, is tentatively ascribed to Valentinus, along with some poetic fragments that can be extracted from the heresiologists. One of the Valentinians' most notable characteristics was the way in which they read scripture. The Valentinians interpreted the Bible allegorically and spiritually. We shall see that there is good evidence that this kind of interpretation goes back to the earliest Christianity.

### Philip the Apostle

The Gospel of Philip is, of course, named not after Valentinus but after Philip. Who is this Philip, its purported author? As with many, if not most, of the writings that belong to early Christianity, the Gospel of Philip has no likely connection to the figure after whom it is named. Philip is mentioned only once, in section 80, and this is likely to be the entire extent of the association between Philip the apostle and the Gospel of Philip. Thus, the Gospel of Philip is an example of pseudoepigrapha, or "false writing." This was a common-enough practice in early Christianity and in the ancient world in general. Many scholars would maintain that we don't know the true name of the author of any of the gospels, including those in the New Testament. In this book, I follow the rather odd convention of scholarship in referring to the author or compiler of the Gospel of Philip as "Philip," even though no serious scholar thinks that this was the author's name.

Philip the apostle appears in the list of the twelve disciples in Mark, Matthew, and Luke, but those synoptic gospels say no more of him. It is only in the Gospel of John that he receives specific mention. According to John, Philip was from Bethsaida, as were the brothers Andrew and Peter. Andrew and an unnamed man were disciples of John the Baptist, and they met Jesus and began to follow him. Jesus then found Philip and also told him to "follow me." Philip in turn recruited Nathaniel. Before Jesus feeds the crowd, in John 6, Philip points out somewhat practically that even two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread to feed the multitude assembled there.

Philip is a Greek name that became popular because of Alexander the Great's father, Philip of Macedon. There was a fair amount of Hellenization in all areas of the Near East, including Galilee and Judea, and there was no particular contradiction in a Galilean having a Greek name. In an odd sequence in John 2, some Greeks approach Philip in Jerusalem and request that they see Jesus. When Philip and Andrew (which is also a Greek name) relay this to Jesus, he responds, "The hour has come for

the son of man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." This is strongly reminiscent of the Greek mysteries, with their emphasis on seasonal rebirth and the symbolic ear of corn. At the Passover meal, in John's gospel, Philip demands of Jesus, "Lord, show us the father, and we will be satisfied." In the discourse that follows, Jesus promises that he will ask the father to send the Paraclete, who is the spirit of truth. The spirit is of primary importance in the Gospel of Philip, and there are many references to the Gospel of John in its passages.

Philip pops up again in the Acts of the Apostles, where he takes up a fair amount of chapter 8. He goes down to Samaria, ridding people of unclean spirits. There, he encounters Simon Magus, who is practicing magic and, in an interesting twist, converts Simon and teaches him. The irony here is that anti-Gnostic writers claimed that Simon was the founder of Gnosticism (and it is worth noting that by making this claim, the heresiologists are placing the origin of Gnosticism in the time of the apostles and, despite their antagonism toward Gnosticism, show that it goes back beyond the second century). So in Acts we have Philip converting to Christianity a man whom the church fathers reviled as a Gnostic, and yet Valentinian Gnostics could happily use Philip's name for a piece of Gnostic writing.

Another unusual episode follows from this in the Acts of the Apostles, where Philip meets an Ethiopian eunuch. Philip is directed by an angel of the Lord to go on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza into the desert. The angel directs Philip to enter the chariot of the eunuch, who is in the service of Queen Candace of Ethiopia. The eunuch happens to be reading from Isaiah, as the queen appears to be a Jewish convert. Philip explains to the eunuch about Jesus and, at the eunuch's request, baptizes him. This episode is the subject of the painting on the cover of this book.

Another Nag Hammadi text named after Philip is the Letter of Peter to Philip in Codex VIII. (This tract incidentally shows that Peter was not always a bogeyman for the Gnostics.) The Letter of Peter to Philip was written around the same general time as the Gospel of Philip, but since

Philip is only named as the receiver of the letter, this text gives us little extra information concerning Philip. The late Gnostic text *Pistis Sophia* tells us that Philip was the scribe who took down the words of Jesus.

The Acts of Philip is one of a series of second- and third-century accounts of the lives of the apostles, which survived in various manuscripts. The Acts is very much in the tradition of ancient romances, full of magic and dangerous travels, and is not a Gnostic text. In one of the episodes Philip travels to Greece and disputes with three hundred philosophers, who in turn write to Ananias, the high priest from the gospel stories. Ananias travels from Jerusalem with five hundred men, and Philip and Ananias enter a dispute. Jesus appears in the sky; Philip performs miracles that are clearly magical and that even use magical formulas. He utters the words "Zabarthan, sabathaban, bramanouch," which is a magical spell in pidgin Hebrew. Magic was part of the common culture of the ancient Mediterranean world, but perhaps Philip's association with magic stems from his encounter with Simon Magus in the Acts of the Apostles.

According to the Acts of Philip, Philip died in Hierapolis, crucified upside down on a cross along with Bartholomew. The church historian Eusebius also preserves a tradition that Philip was buried there. Although the Acts of Philip is certainly not Valentinian, there is some relationship between the Acts of Philip and the Gospel of Philip, since a few sayings pop up in both. Probably the Acts is familiar with some of the traditions in the Gospel of Philip.

### The Question of Mary Magdalene

If one figure in the Gospel of Philip is responsible for its being more widely known than other Nag Hammadi texts, that person is Mary Magdalene. Mary occurs in two sections. In section 28 we read, "There were three Marys who walked with the Lord at all times: his mother and his sister and the Magdalene, who is called his companion. So his mother and sister and companion are called 'Mary.'" Section 48 states, "And the companion of the savior is Mary Magdalene. The Lord loved Mary more than the other

disciples and kissed her often on her [mouth]. The rest of them saw him loving Mary and said to him, 'Why do you love her more than us?'"

In both of these, Mary is referred to as Jesus's companion. The Coptic word used in the original text is *koinonos*, a loanword from Greek. The range of meanings includes companion or partner, but not necessarily in a sexual sense. Mary Magdalene acquired her loose reputation when she was identified with "the woman who was a sinner" in Luke 7, and the traditional figure of Mary Magdalene is a composite creation made up of various Marys and unnamed women from the canonical gospels.

Mary probably came from the city of Magdala on the Lake of Galilee. In all four of the canonical gospels, Mary Magdalene is given a special role in finding the empty tomb or witnessing the resurrection. The original ending of the earliest gospel, the Gospel of Mark, concluded with Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome in the empty tomb. Mary Magdalene also has an important role in the Nag Hammadi Dialogue of the Savior, the Gospel of Thomas, and the Gnostic Gospel of Mary. We know nothing of Jesus's marital status, and there is no real evidence either for or against the possibility that he was married. As a Jewish man in the first century it was quite likely that he was married, since this was the norm, but there was also room within the culture for him to be celibate. We also know nothing of Mary Magdalene's marital status. For all we know, she may have been single, or happily married to someone else. (See the annotations to sections 28 and 48 for more on this subject.)

### Interpreting the Gospel of Philip

Since the Gospel of Philip is not the place to go for historical information about the life of Jesus, how *should* it be interpreted? I believe that the text itself tells us how we should do this. Section 59 tells us, "Truth did not come into the world naked, but came in types and images." And section 105 says, "The mysteries of truth are revealed in type and image." That is, the contents of the Gospel of Philip are not meant to be taken literally, but metaphorically. The Gospel of Philip offers a symbolic, esoteric,

and allegorical interpretation of Christian and biblical material. It piles metaphor on metaphor. Terms like *bridal chamber*, *light*, *fire*, *water*, *chrism*, *animals*, *slaves*, *sons*, and *rest* are repeated through the Gospel of Philip.

Why is the truth expressed indirectly? Because, according to Philip, "the world cannot receive it in any other way. There is rebirth and an image of rebirth. It is truly necessary to be born again through the image. Which image? Resurrection. The image must rise again through the image. Through the image the bridal chamber and the image must enter into the truth: this is the regeneration" (section 59). Thus, "rebirth" itself is the actual spiritual experience of rebirth; the image of rebirth is only the word *rebirth* or the metaphor of rebirth. An image is spiritual reality put into words or pictures. Much of the commentary that accompanies the translation in this book is concerned with this kind of interpretation.

Of course, the problem with allegory and other interpretive methods is that they can make a text say anything that the interpreter wants it to say. We cannot pretend that all allegorical interpretations of the Bible have agreed with one another. A glance at the appropriate section of any bookstore will reveal a variety of books that offer competing and incompatible interpretations of scripture. Conservative scholars particularly have argued that Gnostics are perverting the literature of the Bible by interpreting it symbolically and not literally. While we may not be able to argue in an absolutely historical way that the kind of interpretation that is central to the Gospel of Philip derives directly from Jesus, the interpretive methods of allegory, typology, symbolism, and parable are central to early Christianity. If we look, we can find examples of this sort of thing in the New Testament.

Parables, of course, are a famous aspect of the teachings of Jesus in the gospels. If Jesus was anything, he was a teller of parables, and the subtlety of the parables of Jesus is unmatched. A parable isn't necessarily allegorical itself. A parable isn't even necessarily a story. The *Oxford Companion to the Bible* offers a succinct and useful definition: "A parable is a picturesque figure of language in which an analogy refers to a similar but

different reality." Some parables in the gospels are allegorized. We are told in the Gospel of Mark, for example, that the Word is the seed. But more often a parable leaves us to find an application for it. Augustine of Hippo produced a notorious interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan in which every element of the parable mirrors something in church doctrine; he even goes so far as to state that the apostle Paul is the innkeeper in the story. While I wouldn't dispute that a parable may have been created with a specific meaning in mind, or even that certain symbols had specific meanings that were used fairly consistently throughout early Christianity, Augustine's example really does seem to be making the parable of the Good Samaritan say something that it was never intended to say.

The very earliest parts of the New Testament are the letters of Paul, which are dated to the 40s and 50s of the first century. The canonical gospels and the Gospel of Thomas are generally dated to the last quarter of the first century. Paul gives us our earliest glimpse of Christianity and hence—though many people shrug this off—our most authentic picture of the earliest Christianity. Most people prefer to think of the gospels as giving us the most authentic picture of early Christianity, since they are concerned with the life of Jesus, but the gospels are later and more elaborate than Paul's letters. There are many references to Paul's writings in the Gospel of Philip, and some of these are noted in the commentary.

Paul uses metaphor flamboyantly. Part of the reason that he can sometimes be so confusing is that he switches between the literal and symbolic meanings of a word. As Paul says in the King James Version, "the letter killeth, the spirit giveth life." Or as the Valentinian Theodotus put it, "Paul teaches in two ways at once." For Paul, as for the Gospel of Thomas (and to some extent Philo of Alexandria, and even books in the Hebrew Bible such as Isaiah), the notion of physical circumcision (which was not then unique to Jews, as it is not now either) is eclipsed by a metaphorical spiritual circumcision (see the annotation to section 103). Death in Paul's writings, while it sometimes denotes the death of the

body, is more often a reference to the spiritual death of not having Christ within oneself. Paul specifically provides allegorical interpretations of some of the stories from the Hebrew Bible. He refers to the old Adam and the new Adam, tells us that the rock that follows Moses is Christ, that the crossing of the Red Sea is a type of baptism, that Ishmael and Isaac represent Judaism and Christianity, and so on.

The Gospel of Philip quotes from Paul as much as it quotes from the canonical gospels. In recent times Paul has acquired the reputation of being the person who twisted the original intentions of Jesus and turned a spiritual teaching into an organized religion, but the Gnostics revered him as "the great apostle." Elaine Pagels devoted an entire book, *The Gnostic Paul*, to Valentinian interpretations of Paul's letters.

Beyond Paul, we find examples in the Gospel of Mark—the first of the New Testament gospels to be written—that indicate that the surface meaning of his gospel is not the most important level of meaning. Parables and proverbs are repeatedly accompanied by the injunction, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." The twelve disciples are told, "To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those who are outside, all things come in parables" (Mark 4:11). When the second feeding of the multitudes occurs in Mark 8, Jesus insists that the two feedings have a meaning that the disciples do not understand, a meaning that is based on number symbolism. We are so used to reading the New Testament that we see nothing significant in the repetition of imagery. This repeated imagery is somewhat clearer in the Gospel of Thomas, since it lacks the narrative elements and is less familiar to us.<sup>3</sup>

Among the other New Testament texts that clearly use symbol and allegory, the Epistle to the Hebrews should be mentioned, as it takes a profound look at the symbolism of the Jerusalem Temple, as does the Gospel of Philip. Also worth noting is the Revelation of John, which scholars agree is symbolic, even if there is little agreement on what the symbolism means. The Epistle of James is also a wonderful example of early Christian imagery and metaphor.

### Soul and Spirit in the Bridal Chamber

One of Philip's most striking features is the complex of material that has as its hub the concept of the bridal chamber. A bridal chamber is a bedroom, and some translations of Philip use this word. However, "bridal chamber" is used throughout this translation because it has a more mythical sound and connotation and emphasizes that the bridal chamber is where the marriage is first consummated. This is a beautiful image: the husband and wife making love within the bridal chamber.

Images of bride, bridegroom, and weddings are surprisingly persistent throughout early Christianity. Several parables in the New Testament are based around weddings, as is the famous miracle at the wedding at Cana in the Gospel of John. The imagery of the bridal chamber is intimately connected with the distinction between male and female. Sometimes these are definitely allegorized, as in II Clement 4:2, a second-century pseudepigraphic proto-orthodox epistle, where "The male is Christ, the female is the church." The imagery of husband and wife, of male and female elements that combine to form a unity, is widespread and expands to include the entire range of (hetero)sexual relationships, or at least those that were available to the ancient world. A woman can be a virgin, a daughter, a whore, a mother, a wife. A man can be a father, a son, a celibate, a seducer, a husband. A legitimate coupling is a uniting, where the two are made into one, and this coupling takes place in the bridal chamber. An improper union involves adultery or prostitution. Although the Gospel of Philip is quite open about sexuality, no one could accuse it of impropriety in these matters.

This sexual imagery demands interpretation. The notions of male and female in the Gospel of Philip do not seem to involve the Jungian sense of anima and animus, where each person has elements of the feminine and masculine within him or her, but a specifically allegorical sense, where the female represents a specific cosmic level, and the male a different level. Philo, the first-century Hellenistic Jewish philosopher, who wrote long works that interpret scripture allegorically, thought that what

is female in a person is that which is concerned with the outer senses and outer experience, whereas what is male in one is what is turned, or can turn, toward God. While we can no longer agree with these notions of gender, these concepts are very helpful in deciphering other ancient texts. On a different level, a female figure can be higher than the male, as with the feminine holy spirit.

A more exact interpretation of male and female symbolism requires that we have some understanding of ancient notions of body, soul, and spirit. These three elements make up a human being. The body needs little explanation: it is the physical body and to it belongs all that is usually called carnal. Modern notions of soul and spirit, however, are considerably less distinct than were the ancient concepts. Soul and spirit are clearly different from each other, but the difference isn't one that is familiar to the modern mind. In ancient thought, spirit is a divine level and is often specifically referred to as the holy spirit. As Paul wrote, "God is a spirit." Soul is rather more complex. The soul is what is most distinctively ourselves. Everyone has a soul, and it comes from a higher level than the body, but in its present fallen state, it no longer looks inward and upward, but looks outward, toward earthly things. It is united with the body. The soul has whored with the things of this world.

In the Nag Hammadi text the Exegesis of the Soul, which appears in the same volume as the Gospel of Philip and the Gospel of Thomas, the soul, an androgynous virgin, left the father and came down into the body, where she was set about by thieves and was used by wanton men. As Plato, whose writings had a strong influence on Gnosticism, wrote, "Once the soul had wings, but the soul lost her wings." This is also the point of the story told in the beautiful Hymn of the Pearl, which is contained in the Acts of Thomas, another of the apocryphal acts of the apostles. But the soul has the capacity to unite with the bridegroom in the bridal chamber, by the grace of the father, and to be restored and regenerated. This theme of fall and return is also the story of Sophia, or Wisdom, who plays such a significant role in so many varieties of Gnostic texts, as well as in the parts of the

Hebrew Bible and Apocrypha that comprise the Wisdom tradition. In rabbinical writings, God is sometimes described as the groom, while the seeker of God (who is almost always a man in the ancient world) is the bride.

Gnosticism has often been interpreted as being a system of philosophy or cosmological myth, but what is presented in the Gospel of Philip cannot be merely a question of imagery, but must have referred to some kind of spiritual experience. As the Gospel of Philip puts it, "You saw the spirit and became the spirit; you saw the Christ, you became the Christ; you saw the father, you shall become the father" (section 38). Paul wrote, "But he who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him" (1 Cor. 6:16-17).

From the point of view of ancient Gnosticism, not only were all people composed of the three elements body, soul, and (potentially) spirit, but individuals could be classified according to which of the three was predominant in them. Those who were concerned only with the physical world, for whom the body and its needs and appetites were of sole importance, were called "hylics," after the Greek word *hyle*, which means "matter." Those whose identity was in the *psyche*, the soul, were known as "psychics." For Valentinians, ordinary Christians were psychics (which, though it shares the same root, has nothing to do with modern notions of psychic powers.) The soul was believed to have fallen and united with the body, but it still had the potential to rise and return to the Father, though it had not yet done so. Gnostics also thought of Jews as psychics, whereas pagans seem to have been considered hylics. This is a key to the use of the term *Jew* or *Hebrew* in the Gospel of Philip. Conventional Jews and Christians possessed many of the same scriptures and traditions as Gnostics but did not have the experience of the spirit. The third category were known as "pneumatics," from *pneuma*, which means "spirit." Pneumatics were those who had spirit, or contact with the spirit, and had thus to some extent realized their potential and were united with or had begun to return to the Father.

The imagery of male and female and their relationship to the soul and the spirit leads inexorably to the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis. Interpretation of Genesis was practiced by all of the writers in each thread of

tradition mentioned above. Many of these interpretations are noted in the appropriate sections of the commentary. Paul refers explicitly to the story of Adam, to a first Adam and second Adam, and to the serpent.<sup>4</sup> Jewish midrash explained difficult or contradictory elements of the original text in Genesis, and a considerable body of Jewish tradition added to the sparse originals. The Gospel of Thomas uses "imagery from the first couple of chapters of the book of Genesis. The state to which we must aspire is the state from which we have fallen. It is light, it is the spirit, it is the beginning. Just as Jesus says that life is movement and rest [Gospel of Thomas 50], so the spirit moves across the face of the waters on the third day, and God finds rest from work on the Sabbath, the seventh day in Genesis."<sup>5</sup>

The more revolutionary Gnostic groups flipped the account in Genesis on its head and held that the serpent, often called Samael or Yaldabaoth, was the demiurge, the jealous God of this world. Some elements of this radical tradition of reinterpreting Genesis show up in Philip, but for the most part Philip's interpretation of Genesis, which is quite extensive, has more in common with that of Paul or the Gospel of Thomas or Philo than with the revolutionary interpretations of the Apocryphon of John.

### Mystery and Meaning in Sacraments

Not everything in the Gospel of Philip is absolutely metaphorical. Even pneumatics lead earthly lives, eat and drink (although Valentinus claimed, no doubt metaphorically, that Jesus did not defecate), take part in the activities of their cultures, and engage in Valentinian practices. The church fathers sometimes give us specific details of Valentinian practices, though they are often seen through the distorting lens of a jealous orthodoxy.

Many scholars have been particularly fascinated by the references to sacraments in the Gospel of Philip. A sacrament is a specific rite in Christianity. The Latin *sacramentum* was used in the vulgate translation of the Greek New Testament to translate the Greek *mysterion*, which occurs in its Coptic form in Philip and is translated here as "mystery." Philip in sec-

tion 60 tells us that "the Lord did everything in a mystery: a baptism and a chrism and a eucharist and a redemption and a holy bridal chamber."

The rites of baptism and the Eucharist, the taking of bread and wine, have inarguably been part of Christianity at least since the time of Paul, and they owe their rationale to events that are said to have happened in Jesus's lifetime. Chrism, redemption, and the bridal chamber discussed above may also have been sacramental rites. Exactly what ritual of redemption or ransom the Gospel of Philip might refer to, no one really knows, but a chrism is an anointing with oil. Irenaeus, who is always suspect in these matters, wrote that Marcosians, who were a branch of Valentinians who followed Valentinus's student Marcus, pour a mixture of oil and water "and want this to be the redemption." It is more likely that oil and water symbolize redemption in some way, though any connection with the notion of having one's debts paid, or being bought back from captivity, are unclear.

Whether or not the Gospel of Philip has in mind actual rites for each of the five sacraments, Valentinians undoubtedly practiced some of the same rituals as the Christians, who Valentinians referred to as psychics, or merely of the soul. Presumably—and there is ample evidence for this in the Gospel of Philip—Valentinians saw in these rituals hidden meanings and a relevance to the human situation, where others saw only conventional ritual.

Irenaeus tells us of a Valentinian initiation ritual conducted by the Valentinian Marcus. In his typically hostile way, he writes of a poor woman being made hysterical by the rite and presents it as a clever conjuring trick by which a larger cup is filled with wine by a smaller cup so that the larger cup overflows.<sup>6</sup> Irenaeus seems to think that this should terrify any poor neophyte who undergoes the initiation. But put yourself in the position of the initiate. Simply being in the role of an initiate during such an important ceremony would give you a heightened sense of awareness. As, against all expectations, the leader of the ritual continues to pour when the cup is already full, and the red wine flows out over the lip of the cup and

onto the floor, you would be vividly aware of the present moment. As someone who has seen a Fourth Way teacher spontaneously overfill a glass of wine at a formal dinner, the table set with silver flatware, fine linen tablecloth and napkins, and beautiful flower arrangements, I can testify to its efficacy. The creation of a heightened sense of being aware of the present moment is at the foundation of all genuine spiritual teaching.

The Gospel of Philip tells us repeatedly that names are not reality, but are only pointers to reality that can be misused or misinterpreted, just as the Zen monk told his student not to look at his finger but at what it was pointing to. The image of rebirth is not rebirth itself. To be born spiritually in a second birth brings one into a new world, a world of the spirit that is as startlingly different to the world of the body and soul as the world of air and light is to the darkness of the womb.

The Gospel of Philip offers us an insight into the spiritual interpretation of scripture that is at the foundation of Christianity. In studying it we can obtain a greater insight into ancient Gnosticism and the New Testament. But above everything the Gospel of Philip wishes that the reader should develop the higher levels of consciousness to which it refers: "You saw the spirit and became the spirit."

### Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Stevan Davies for putting me in touch with Skylight Paths.

## A Note on the Translation

The translation is based on the critical Coptic text established by Bentley Layton. I have drawn considerably, though cautiously, on Paterson Brown's interlinear translation from Walter Till's earlier edition of the text. I have mainly used the translations of Bentley Layton, Wesley Isenberg, and H. M. Schenke and R. McL. Wilson, but I have also consulted the David Cartlidge and David Dungan translation, Wilson's earlier translation, Jean-Yves LeLoup's interpretive translation, and Willis Barnstone's felicitous reworking of Isenberg's translation. I have adopted Bentley Layton's division of the text into sections, but it should always be borne in mind that these divisions are artificial and are not in the original Coptic text; there is actually no standard way of referring to the text apart from page and line numbers. Schenke, for instance, has adopted a system of numbering that is equally influential. In some cases I have further divided sections into subsections, purely for ease of reference. Since the components of the Gospel of Philip are not really sayings, I refer to them neutrally as sections.

The Gospel of Philip has many lacunae—gaps in the text—that are mostly due to the deterioration of the manuscript. Where these can be filled with reasonable certainty, or where there would be no controversy in filling them, I have filled in the missing material without comment. When the lacuna is too extensive, or where it cannot be reliably filled, I have indicated it using the ellipsis enclosed in brackets. Isenberg's translation in Codex II by Layton indicates all lacunae for those interested in further investigating this.

This is not a gender-neutral translation. Coptic has no neuter gender, and so every noun and pronoun is grammatically either male or female.