

How Our World Was Made of Sorrow and Fear

Valentinus

This is the 4th and final part of the Gnostic Series. Read Parts [1](#), [2](#), and [3](#).

by [Jillian Becker](#) (November 2023)

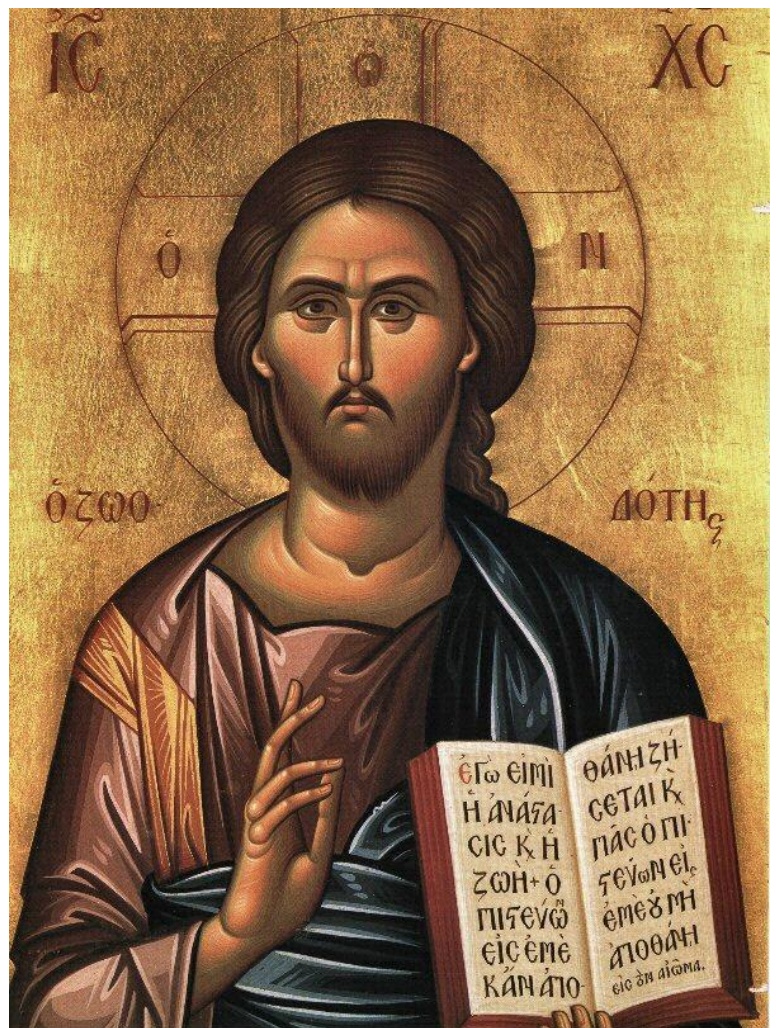


Sophia, the Wisdom of the Almighty, Nicholas Roerich, 1932

Valentinus was perhaps the most eminent of the 2nd century Gnostic leaders. He was born in or about 100 C.E. in Phenobia, Egypt, was educated in Alexandria, and went to live in Rome when he was thirty-six. He returned at an unknown date to

teach in Alexandria; and there he died, a very old man, probably in the year 180.

When he arrived in Rome, he was a Catholic Christian. He was ordained a priest, and so distinguished himself within the Church that he had reason to hope he might be elected Bishop of Rome. (Much later, in the 9th century, the "Bishop of Rome" came to be called "Pope.") But a rival was preferred, and some surmised or gossiped that the disappointment caused him to break away from the Church. Whatever the reason, break away he did. He was still in Rome when he founded his Gnostic religion. It became enormously popular and spread widely through the empire in his lifetime. It lasted for some two hundred years after his death.



Valentinus

Only fragments of his own writings remain, preserved as quotations by other Gnostic teachers and by antagonistic Catholic theologians – chiefly the Church Father, Valentinus's younger contemporary, Irenaeus, in his book *Against Heresies*. In all the various—and in some instances contradictory—accounts of his theogony, it is elaborate and complicated. Followers of the master, both during his lifetime and after, elaborated it further with their preferred additions and adjustments. Even in modern times there have been admirers of Valentinianism who interpret it each in his own way—such as the mystic Carl Jung.

Scholars have been able to draw an outline of Valentinianism with a fair degree of certainty from common elements in descriptions by his admirers and critics, validated to an extent by its similarities to other Gnostic cosmogonies and theogonies of the age. In all of them there was a hierarchy of heavens and the Beings that dwelt in them. The Beings, other than the human sort on the lowest plane, were hypostases of concepts (comparable to the Ideas of Plato and the Archetypes of Jung).

In Valentinus's vision, the source of all that exists was called the Pro-Father (Propator). Also the Abyss or the Deep (Bythos). He was surrounded by Silence (Sige), who was female. He and she emanated Mind (Nous), male, and First Thought (Ennoia), female. From them descended the Word (Logos), male, and Truth (Alatheia), female—or, in some accounts, Life (Zoe). Such pairs (syzygies) of hypostases continued through 12 more phases of descent to Primordial Man (Adam Kadmon) and the Church (Ecclesia) —she presumably being the heavenly ideal of Valentinus's own church—from whom descended 13 more pairs. These were the Aeons, also called the Rulers (Archons), of the highest sphere, which was called the Fullness (Pleroma). And there was one more. At the very end of the chain of descent, came a last Aeon. Her name was Wisdom (Sophia). She tried to imitate the Pro-Father by creating a Being and succeeded in

giving birth to a daughter, Sophia-Akhamoth. (The word Akhamoth is related to the Hebrew for Wisdom, hokhma, so the daughter's name was "Wisdom-Wisdom.") Sophia-Akhamoth, the "lower Sophia," is the central figure in the drama of the Valentinian cosmogony. Tempted by the hylic-matter-she reached down for it, fell out of the Pleroma, and found herself "whirling about," "formless," in dark empty space. She tried desperately but in vain to re-enter the heaven where the Pro-Father and his Aeons dwelt.

Wait! Gentle scholars, you say she was tempted by the hylic? But according to your own account, the hylic had not yet been created. She herself, Sophia-Akhamoth, was to be its creator. (The reply can be imagined: to point out contradiction in mysticism is to impose rationality where it does not belong.)

The "higher Sophia" begged the Aeons to pray the Pro-Father to redeem her daughter. But the Pro-Father did the opposite. He emanated a new pair, the Cross and the Limit-symbolized in unity by the letter T – to strengthen the border of the Pleroma specifically against the re-entry of Sophia-Akhamoth. This innovation aroused great rejoicing among the Aeons. They burst out singing paeans to the Pro-Father. And then, *all together*, they emanated the Perfect Fruit which was Christ the Savior. His coming changed everything. He took pity on Sophia-Akhamoth, descended to her in empty space and, in the guise of a light shining upon her, endowed her with a "form." The form was, or entailed, powers, titles, significance in the cosmic scheme: she became "the Holy Spirit of Earth" and "the Mother." His good deed done, the Savior withdrew into the highest heaven. Sophia-Akhamoth, enraptured by the light, tried to follow it, but still the Limit kept her out of the Pleroma.

Then she suffered her deepest anguish. It was so intense that the Aeons of the Pleroma were moved at last to pity her. In the throes of their compassion, they decreed that Christ the Savior would be her spouse at the end of time. And to console

her until then, they gave her the Gnosis, the Knowledge of the True God and his heavenly hosts.

With her newly bestowed powers, she established our world—Earth and its heavens—on three planes: a higher heaven nearest to the Pleroma, where she herself dwelt (the Ogdoad): a lower heaven (the Hebdomad); and at the bottom, the *material Earth*. She made matter (hyle) out of her sorrow and fear.

She engendered Aeons to carry out the work. Chief among them, ruling over them, was the Demiurge. He was also called the Metropator, the Mother-Father. His dwelling place was the lower heaven. He was to be the God of the Jews. To them he would be “the Creator.” They would believe, as he himself believed, that he was the only god.

The Devil dwelt on Earth. He was called the Cosmocrator, the Ruler of the World. In some versions of Valentinus’s teaching, it was he who became the God of the Jews and believed himself to be the only god.

The Demiurge (or the Devil) made terrestrial Man, Adam. At first he was a pathetic worm-like thing squirming in the muck. He had no soul (psyche) or spirit (pneuma). He was raised to dignity by the Demiurge breathing the psychic element into him and the Mother giving him a spark of the pneuma. Thus every human being has a spark of it, but only some discover it in themselves by the Gnosis, which Sophia-Akhamoth bestows on those she chooses.

With or without the Devil being in charge, the Earth was a place of sorrow and fear. The only help human beings could have was the Gnosis. In every individual there was a mixture of the hylic, which was “of the left” and would perish; the psychic, which was “of the right” and not perishable or corruptible but unfit for the highest plane; the pneumatic, which was perfectible in a person’s life on Earth, through the Gnosis. The mixture was in various proportions. There were

those who were mostly hylic—the Pagans who were almost entirely dense, irredeemable matter; those mostly psychic—the Christians who were half-leavened by their dim understanding of the teaching of Jesus; and the Gnostics who were mostly pneumatic.

At the end of time, the Pneumatics, male and female, freed from their material bodies, will rise as pure spirits through the lower heavens to the Pleroma and become the spouses of the Aeons.

Sophia-Akhamoth will be allowed at last to enter the Pleroma, which will be as a bridal chamber for her, where she will espouse Christ the Savior. The Bride will be joined to the Bridegroom.

The Demiurge, who is not irredeemable because on hearing of the Savior he will hasten joyfully to be near him, will rise with his Aeons, to the upper heaven of the lower world, until then the dwelling place of the Mother. There the Psychics will find rest with him.

Last of all, at the will of the Aeons united with the Pneumatics, the fire which is in all things will flame forth and consume the Earth, all matter, the Devil, and the Hylics. They and the material world to which they are tied in life and death will pass into nothingness.

Most of the Gnostic cults that arose in the 2nd century, including many or most of the innumerable groups inspired by Valentinianism, taught that because this earth is vile, anything generally regarded here as bad is good and vice versa. Gnostics had a sacred mission to disobey the laws and moral rules of civilization. Doing the forbidden was a positive duty. Their holy rites were acts of “sin.” Pneumatics had to try to commit every kind of “sin” and “abomination”

called such by the Psychics, whom the Gnostics saw as half-ignorant Christians unaware that this world is evil.

Acts of extreme licentiousness were practiced as “spiritual exercises”: orgies with drugs, anal and oral sexual intercourse, ritual feeding on menstrual blood, semen, and aborted fetuses. Normal copulation was rare because to bear children was to add matter to the appallingly material world, and if a child was conceived it was aborted and eaten. The more “sin” was practiced, the sooner evil would be “used up.” When it was all gone, the end would have been reached, the goal accomplished: the complete destruction of this base world.

Did Valentinus himself preach and practice sinning as the way to salvation? Scholars say that he was generally held in high esteem and would not have been if he had taught defiance of the laws and mores of his time. Some of his followers, they say, were known to participate in Catholic worship. Nevertheless, to Irenaeus he was a heretic.

Basilides, Marcion, and Valentinus—called “Christian Gnostics” because Christ played a vital part in their theogonies—presided over the biggest Gnostic churches of their time. Their beliefs owed almost nothing to Judaism. Building their visions on the fabulous claims of Simon Magus, adding ideas from Greek philosophy and ancient rites of pagan worship, they were the pioneers of Gnosticism. They also influenced each other. Valentinus and Basilides were friends in Alexandria and must surely have exchanged ideas. (Some say Valentinus was a pupil of Basilides.) Whatever Gnosticism became—cults of magic, snake worship, even suicide—the pattern of their cosmogonies and theogonies was set by the three innovators.

The Gnostic cults that proscribed the conception of children were not likely to last long, and they didn't. The church of Valentinus survived until Catholic Christianity was adopted as

the state religion of the Roman Empire in the late 4th century, then it faded away. Valentinianism, however, ran on underground, emerging among thinkers from time to time right up to our own era.

From the time of Constantine, the first Christian Roman Emperor, Gnostic cults began to dissolve, and by the dawning of the 5th century, most of those that were within the empire had gone. Catholic Christians judged them – not without reason – to be cults of evil. Christians believed in one god “in three persons,” Gnostics believed in two gods. That was blasphemy. Christians believed in redemption *from* sin, Gnostics believed in redemption *by* sin. And that was heresy.

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Jillian Becker writes both fiction and non-fiction. Her first novel, *The Keep*, is now a Penguin Modern Classic. Her best known work of non-fiction is *Hitler's Children: The Story of the Baader-Meinhof Terrorist Gang*, an international best-seller and Newsweek (Europe) Book of the Year 1977. She was Director of the London-based Institute for the Study of Terrorism 1985-1990, and on the subject of terrorism contributed to TV and radio current affairs programs in Britain, the US, Canada, and Germany. Among her published studies of terrorism is *The PLO: the Rise and Fall of the Palestine Liberation Organization*. Her articles on various subjects have been published in newspapers and periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic, among them *Commentary*, *The New Criterion*, *City Journal* (US); *The Wall Street Journal* (Europe); *Encounter*, *The Times*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Telegraph Magazine*, *The Salisbury Review*, *Standpoint*(UK). She was born in South Africa but made her home in London. All her early books were banned or

embargoed in the land of her birth while it was under an all-white government. In 2007 she moved to California to be near two of her three daughters and four of her six grandchildren. Her website is www.theatheistconservative.com.

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