

# Similarities Between Sethian Baptism and the Bridal Chamber of Thomas Gnosticism and Valentinianism

Darren Iammarino  
*Claremont Graduate University*

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### **DARREN IAMMARINO**

Darren Iammarino is a PhD candidate at Claremont Graduate University in the field of Philosophy of Religion. His areas of interest are broad within both religion and philosophy and hence, most of his academic work is focused on comparative studies.

He is currently working on his dissertation entitled, *Cosmosyntheism: A Paradigm of Multiple Religious Ultimates*. In addition, he is currently working on two other books, with one, *the Compass Path a Guide to Self Cultivation*, due to be published in early winter.

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*Darren Iammarino*

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SIMILARITIES BETWEEN SETHIAN BAPTISM  
AND THE BRIDAL CHAMBER OF THOMAS  
GNOSTICISM AND VALENTINIANISM

Over the years many theories have been proposed to explain the nature and function of Sethian baptism and the bestowal of the five seals in Gnostic tradition. This paper argues that the rite of Sethian baptism and the reception of the five seals were carried on into later Gnostic traditions, especially the ritual of the bridal chamber. From a critical examination of Gnostic sources, it can be argued that not only are there similarities between the two rites, but conclusions can also be drawn about how Sethian baptism was performed and for what specific purpose.

Section one considers previous scholarship on Sethian baptism, the five seals and the ritual of the bridal chamber. In section two, Sethian baptism is examined by highlighting and interpreting all pertinent references to baptism and the five seals in the *Trimorphic Protennoia*, *Apocryphon of John*, *Three Steles of Seth* and *The Gospel of the Egyptians*. Followed by an attempt to reconstruct the process that leads to the reception of the five seals or unification in the living water/bridal chamber. The third section provides an analysis of enigmatic statements concerning the bridal chamber and the robe in the *Gospel of Thomas*,

*Gospel of Philip* and *Hymn of the Pearl*. Section four contains a brief restatement of the similarities between the two key rites in Gnostic traditions and concluding comments.

## I. PREVIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

Attempting to understand the true meaning of the five seals has proven to be a challenging and contentious pursuit. George MacRae proposed that the references to the five seals in *Trimorphic Protennoia* represent “a Gnostic liturgical fragment probably recited at a ceremony of initiation much in the manner of a Christian baptismal homily or hymn.”<sup>1</sup> J. M. Sevrin believes that the bestowal of the five seals refers to a rite of quintuple baptism. This fivefold baptism is a pre-Christian phenomenon and represents an original Jewish-Sethian baptismal rite.<sup>2</sup> Sevrin points out that there are no explicit references to unction (or eucharist for that matter) and so there is no reason to assume that Sethian baptism and the five seals are related to the five sacraments mentioned in the *Gospel of Philip*.

John Turner takes the preceding ideas and improves upon them by postulating that the ritual represents a single baptismal rite consisting of five stages of enlightenment.<sup>3</sup> However, there are those who still believe that the five seals and Sethian baptism are actually a Christian phenomenon, since the references to the five seals appear in Christian recensions of Sethian texts. For example, Yvonne Janssens argues that the five seals refer to an anointing of the five sense organs, an idea that Alaistair Logan develops further.<sup>4</sup> Logan believes that the “Barbelo-Gnostics actually may have been the first to introduce post-baptismal

1. George MacRae, “Sleep and Awakening in Gnostic Texts,” in U. Bianchi ed., *Le Origini Dello Gnosticismo* (Supplements to *Numen* 12) (Leiden 1967) 468-507.

2. J.M. Sevrin, *Le dossier baptismale Sethien: Etudes sur la sacramentaire gnostique* (Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi, Section “Etudes” 2) (Quebec 1986) 31-38., cf. also 250-258.

3. J.D. Turner, Nag Hammadi Codices XI, XII, XIII (*Nag Hammadi Studies* 28) (Leiden/New York 1990) 452-453.

4. Yvonne Janssens, *La Protennoia Trimorphe* (NH XIII, 1) (Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi Section “Texts” 4) (Quebec 1978), 80

chrism with ointment.”<sup>5</sup>

Following Sevrin and Turner, this essay posits that Sethian baptism and the five seals is actually a pre-Christian rite. However, this schema differs from Sevrin in that the rite does not involve water immersion at all and instead represents an individual ecstatic ascent experience where one is granted five gifts. These five gifts are the four gifts requested by Barbelo and the gift of reunification with Barbelo or the archetypal human. In other words, the five seals do not refer specifically to water immersion, unction, or insignation, although a part of uniting with Barbelo may be a bestowal of divine names on the Gnostic. Furthermore, this pre-Christian rite of Sethian Baptism continues on into later forms of Gnosticism, such as Thomas Gnosticism and Valentinianism, as evidenced by references to the bridal chamber.

Scholars’ attempts to unravel the mystery of the bridal chamber have led to even more theories and heated scholarship than their attempts to understand the five seals. One of the earliest discussions of the topic came from E. Segelberg who believed that the references to the bridal chamber could not possibly have referred to an actual carnal act.<sup>6</sup> H.M. Schenke presents a similar view by pointing out that the *Gospel of Philip* frequently rejects marriage as defilement, or an impure substitute to the true bridal chamber.

Other scholars have taken the concept of the bridal chamber more literally. F. M. Grant goes as far as to say that earthly marriage is an archetype of the spiritual marriage.<sup>7</sup> Many scholars seem to have an aversion to attributing salvation to actual rites or mysteries. For example, H.G. Gaffron says, “When sacraments are necessary, for the process of salvation, the step is not too great towards tying the salvation exclusively to the sacraments and to increase their

5. Alastair Logan, “The Mystery of the Five Seals: Gnostic Initiation Reconsidered” in *Vigiliae Christianae* Vol. 51, No. 2, (May, 1997), 188-206.

6. E. Segelberg, “The Coptic-Gnostic Gospel according to Philip and its Sacramental System,” *Nu-men* 7 (1960) 189-200.

7. F.M. Grant, “The Mystery of Marriage in the Gospel of Philip,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 11 (1961) 129-40. See page 136.

singularity and secret character beyond limits.”<sup>8</sup> Gaffron, however, oddly concludes that the bridal chamber is a sacrament given just before death. This seems unlikely. However, it may be true that the dying person prepares to repeat this rite, but this time there will be no descent back into the material world.

J. Menard writes that the Gnostic and the image must be united before death and that salvation is realized and actualized in this life for the Gnostic.<sup>9</sup> The truth of the bridal chamber can be made accessible via imagery alone and receiving a sacrament means that an individual has understood the hidden truth present in the symbol or imagery. Elaine Pagels points out that the difference between the psychical and the pneumatic individual is that the pneumatic person has understood the esoteric significance of the religious symbols and sacraments. “Valentinians, then far from intending to do away with images, understand images and symbols as the only means of pointing to or signifying a reality which is essentially ineffable.”<sup>10</sup>

Jorunn Buckley believes that the bridal chamber represents a secret ritual in which the Gnostic achieves salvation through the “collapse of a dualistic worldview.”<sup>11</sup> He goes on to say, “It is high time to take into account cultic elements in definitions of Gnosticism. Excessive attention has been paid to the items, *knower* and *known*, but not enough to the significance of the *means of knowledge*.” Surely, the means of knowledge should now take precedence in scholarship and, thus, we will see that Sethian baptism is similar to the ritual of the bridal chamber and that salvation comes through this ritual. Uncovering the means of this knowledge is one of our primary tasks and our best information regarding method and technique comes from the Sethian tracts themselves.

## II. SETHIAN BAPTISM AND THE FIVE SEALS

8. H.G. Gaffron, *Studien zum koptischen Philippusevangelium unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Sakramente* (Theol. Dis., Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms University, Bonn, 1969) 75, 286.

9. J. E. Menard, “L’Evangile selon Philippe’ et ‘L’Exegese de l’Ame,” *Les Textes de Nag Hammadi* (ed. J.E. Menard; Leiden: Brill, 1975) 56-67.

10. E. Pagels, *The Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis: Heracleon’s Commentary on John* (SBLMS 17; Nashville: Abingdon, 1973) 119.

11. Jorunn Buckley, “A Cult-Mystery in the Gospel of Philip,” *JBL* Vol. 99, No. 4 (1980) 569-581.

Sethian baptism is about ascension, unification/enlightenment and then descent, just like the ritual of the bridal chamber. In order to approach the meaning of this essential Gnostic rite, we will first look at the text known as *Trimorphic Protennoia*. In this text the main elements of the Sethian rite of baptism are outlined.

And I delivered him to those who give robes, Yammon, Elaso, Amenai and they covered him with a robe from the robes of light; and I delivered him to the Baptists and they baptized him, Micheus, Michar, Mnesinous, and they immersed him in the spring of the water of life. And I delivered him to those who enthrone, Bariel, Nouthan, Sabenai and they enthroned him from the throne of glory. And I delivered him to those who glorify Ariom, Elien, Phariel, and they glorified him with the glory of the Fatherhood. And those who snatch away snatched away, Kamaliel, [... anen], Samblo, the servants of the great holy luminaries and they took him into the light of his Fatherhood. And he received the five seals from the light of the Mother.<sup>12</sup>

What we learn from the above statement is that the baptismal rite consists of enrobing, baptizing, enthroning, glorifying and snatching away. However, there are two stages that precede the enrobing in the life of a Gnostic. These stages are the recognition of a calling via a resonance between the spark inside the Gnostic and the primal logos and the stripping away of the material world in response to the call. This imagery is still vague and enigmatic. Before it can have any meaning, we must look at the protology and cosmogony presented in the *Apocryphon of John*.

After an apophatic discussion concerning the nature and transcendence of the One, Jesus the revealer begins to discourse on the initial process of emanation. Emanation begins when the father beholds his own image on the reflected light surrounding him. "Now this father is the One who beholds himself in the light surrounding him, which is the spring of living water, and provides all the

12. All references from the *Trimorphic Protennoia*, *Apocryphon of John*, *Three Steles of Seth and Gospel of Thomas* are taken from *The Nag Hammadi Library* in English, 3rd revised edition. James Robinson and Richard Smith, eds., San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988. This reference is found in NHC XIII, 1, 48:7-15.



*Nag Hammadi Texts - Codex IV*

realms. He reflects on his image everywhere...The father's thought became a reality and she who appeared in the presence of the father in shining light came forth" (NHC II, 1, 5:28-35). This female emanation is known as Barbelo and she is conceived in living water, which is light. *It is in this living water that the Sethians seek true baptism.*

The important points regarding Barbelo are that she glorifies the invisible spirit, has three names, is paradoxically androgynous and is the image of the spirit. As we saw in *Trimorphic Protennoia*, that glorification is a crucial component of Gnostic baptism and it precedes being snatched away in ecstatic union with the One. After glorifying the Father, we learn that Barbelo requests four gifts: foreknowledge, incorruptibility, life eternal and truth. When we add the union with Barbelo and taking on her name, we have the five seals bestowed upon the Gnostic who achieves ascent and union. After receiving their own personal revelation from the first human (his or her archetypal form), the Gnostic who makes it this far in ecstatic ascent will literally attain a degree of foreknowledge.



This foreknowledge comes because he knows his destiny after death, which is to return to the One. Also, he will be incorruptible, know the truth and have life eternal, in which he will abide in the Good and contemplate the Good.

The only hint at the process that leads to reunification in the *Apocryphon of John* appears when John asks Jesus, "How can the soul become younger and return into its mother's womb, or into the human?" (NHC IV, 1, 27:12-15). The response is, "This soul will be made to follow another in whom the spirit of life dwells, and she is saved through that one" (NHC IV, 1, 27:16-20). This "other" is likely the male heavenly counterpart or "twin" which we will see throughout the Thomas and Valentinian literature. Jesus concludes by saying that the Gnostic will be raised up and sealed in luminous water with five seals, "that death might not prevail over the person from that moment on." (NHC II, 1, 31:25)

Even if we know that the ritual of Sethian baptism consisted of hearing a spiritual call, material renunciation, enrobing, baptizing, enthroning, glorifying and snatching away, we are still left in the dark as to how this rite was performed. Was it a group ritual or a solitary act? Was it a one-time experience or is it a repeatable visionary and revelatory technique? It seems that elements of the rite were practiced or incorporated into group work, but that in its most effective and crucial form, it was something which each individual Gnostic had to perform. It is likely that the process and techniques involved lend themselves to a repeatable ritual that induced visions and revelations. Thankfully, there are two extant texts that shed some light on the process of performing the ritual: *Three Steles of Seth* and *Gospel of the Egyptians*.

*Three Steles of Seth* is a laudatory hymnal to the triple power of God, which is the Self-Begotten, Barbelo and the Unbegotten Father. In the steles we see that a key aspect of the ascent is incantatory praise to the One, where the Gnostic thanks the One for revealing goodness and truth. As a part of this praise, the members of the community identify themselves with "another race," which stems from the goodness of the One. This shows that the members of the community have heard the spiritual call and are ritually prepared through material

renunciation to begin the ascent. The renunciation likely consists of a period of fasting and abstinence from sex. Next comes the ascent.

It seems that the steles represent a reenactment on a communal level what each individual must go through in order to receive the five seals. The steles allow the community to draw on the power of group work. This text shows that Sethian baptism must at least be performed once on an individual level. However, following the initial performance one can participate in repeated mystical ascent experiences, in which visions and revelations are induced through incantations and invocations of the denizens of the pleroma. “For they all bless these individually and together. And afterwards they shall be silent. And just as they were ordained, they ascend. After the silence, they descend from the third. They bless the second; after these the first. The way of ascent is the way of descent” (NHC VII, 5, 127:12-21). The ritual process itself seems to be rather standard, praising and then silence. It is only through silence that one can enter the highest realms and hear the revelation with lucidity. Fasting, free-form stream of consciousness ecstatic praise, invocations and then silence; this process would likely lead to a profound state of altered consciousness, which is crucial for receiving revelations and visions in all esoteric traditions ancient and modern. However, there is one more technique that Sethians employed and we can see this in the *Gospel of the Egyptians*.

The *Gospel of the Egyptians* contains a baptismal hymn that is spoken by the person receiving baptism. In this hymn there are strings of repeated Greek vowels chanted.<sup>13</sup> This bizarre looking text is really rather common for the time period and numerous parallels can be found in the *Greek Magical Papyri*. The purpose of vowel chanting is to induce single-minded focus and an emptying of mental chatter. In fact, mantrical recitation of simple vowels or words is one of the most ubiquitous techniques for aiding one in entering an altered state of consciousness.

It is possible that the *Gospel of the Egyptians* may include a cipher of some sort, which contains a hidden name for God. We already see the often-used words

13. For example, iiii eeee oooo uuuu oooo aaaa in (NHC III, 2, 66:13-15).

Iesseus Mazarkeus Iessedekus used to open the baptism and these names are likely the three names of Barbelo alluded to in the *Apocryphon of John*. The most likely purpose of the vowels is for focus and entering altered states. However, it seems odd to me that the vowel pattern is broken in the text; where one would expect omicrons there are omegas.<sup>14</sup> It may be that a gematric analysis of the vowels leads to the possibility of another name for God being reconstructed. Even if this is the case, any attempt at solving this riddle is bound to be highly speculative.

We are now ready to attempt a rough reconstruction of what the spiritual life of a Sethian Gnostic looked like. First, it must begin with a spiritual call. The Father or the Son is constantly sending or descending into the material world, to enlighten those of his seed. However, only some hear the call because only the elect have a spark within them that allows for a harmonic resonance. This is similar to the effect observed on two tuned violins; when a note is sounded on one violin, the corresponding string on the other instrument will vibrate. Only the elect contain the necessary string or spark that allows for resonance.

The next step for a Sethian Gnostic would probably consist of entering a Gnostic community where the mythology with its novel philosophical cosmology and theodicy are presented to the initiate via myths and allegories. After the initial instruction, the initiate then accepts this new paradigm and likely seeks to limit their participation in the material world by abstaining from sex and food for an extended period in order to become ritually pure for the coming affirmation of their new beliefs. In contrast to Platonism, Sethianism likely put little importance on the cultivation of morals. This is because morality was viewed as limiting and enslaving and the result of the Jewish law-giver God Ialdaboath. The Sethian needs a more dramatic and emotionally impacting personal experience.

At this point, the initiate is ready to have his first hand experience of the divine. The ultimate affirmation is a personal experience of visionary and reve-

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14. The text reads iiiii uuuuuu ooooooo. It is odd that it goes four vowels, then six and then seven without five omicrons in between, but it could be that it was more important that the vowels be arranged for visual effectiveness.

latory ascent where the initiate receives first hand gnosis and is sealed with the five gifts of foreknowledge, truth, life eternal, incorruptibility and finally reunification with the divine image in Barbelo. In this way, the initiate is now a full-fledged Gnostic, finally having received knowledge (gnosis) first hand.

The actual ascent itself draws on the full repertoire of available magical and mystical techniques for attaining visions and revelations. It is possible that the actual process is as follows: First, the initiate is called. Second, the initiate gains entry into the group and receives initial education. Third, the initiate begins a period of fasting and sexual abstinence. Fourth, the initiate receives the ritual of spiritual baptism, which utilizes some or all of these techniques: temporary isolation, incantatory praise or prayer, ritual magical tools/paraphernalia and theurgy as evidenced in *Marsanes*,<sup>15</sup> invocations, mantrical chanting and silent meditation. Fifth, the initiate receives visions and revelations in living water. Sixth, the initiate receives sealing. Seventh, the initiate begins descent. Eighth, the initiate experiences repeated ascents in communal worship.

Of all the above steps, it is steps four through six which are crucial and it is during that ritual that one unites a likeness with an image. More accurately, one unites a spark of the substance of the Image with the source of the Image. In so doing, one is saved, receives gnosis and is one of the perfect. Given the above reconstruction, we will now turn to the possibility that this key rite was appropriated by later groups of Gnostics, such as the Thomas Gnostics and the Valentinians.

### III. THOMAS AND VALENTINIAN LITERATURE

Having determined that the purpose of Sethian baptism is reunification and revelation in living water from the original human image, which is Barbelo, we will examine parallels in other forms of Gnosticism. The *Gospel of Thomas*, includes six references to the familiar metaphor of the two becoming one (logia 11, 22, 48, 61, 84, 114). In four out of the six logia, Jesus explicitly speaks of the

15. "...and the waters, and the forms of the wax images, and some emerald likenesses." NHC X, 1:35, 1-3.

two becoming one: "...When you come to dwell in the light, what will you do? On the day when you were one you became two. But when you become two, what will you do?" (log. 11). This first saying is a sort of a warning to the members of the community that you must live a life of the spirit or of matter; you cannot be loyal to both. This concept is reiterated in logion 47 with the image of mounting two horses.

It is a presupposition in the Thomas tradition, as in much of the Mediterranean region during that time, that humans are comprised of both matter and spirit, and that matter weighs down the spirit. Realizing that the spirit represents our true nature is imperative for the Thomas community, but the believer must make matter and spirit one again in order to be redeemed. "When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside...when you make the male and the female one and the same...then will you enter the kingdom" (log. 22). This idea of the male becoming female and vice versa is echoed in logia 114. It is also understood as a likeness uniting with an image. "When you see your likeness, you rejoice. But when you see your images which came into being before you, and which neither die nor become manifest, how much you will have to bear!" (log. 84).

The *Gospel of Thomas* even gives us a term for where this meeting takes place: the bridal chamber. "They said to Jesus, 'Come let us pray today and let us fast.' Jesus said, 'What is the sin that I have committed or wherein have I been defeated? But when the bridegroom leaves the bridal chamber then let them fast and pray'" (log. 104). This saying is extremely important for two reasons. First, we learn that Jesus has full gnosis, he has not fallen pray to "drunkenness" or ignorance of his true home unlike the hero in the *Hymn of the Pearl* to be addressed later. Second, we learn that if the bridegroom leaves the bridal chamber, then he must fast and pray. This is one of the only hints at the actual techniques used by the Thomas community to reestablish unification with our spiritual image. The importance of asceticism is strengthened by logion 75, "Many are standing at the door, but it is the solitary who will enter the bridal chamber."

In the *Gospel of Thomas*, we are still left wondering about the details of the

bridal chamber. However, we do learn that it is in the “light” from saying 11 and that our image or twin is waiting there for us. This repeated reference to light in the *Gospel of Thomas* (11, 50, 77) is similar to the living water of Sethianism, which is identified as light. What man will receive when he returns to the light is cryptically referred to in saying 19:

Blessed is he who came into being before he came into being, if you become my disciples and listen to my words, these stones will minister to you. *For there are five trees for you in paradise which remain undisturbed summer and winter and whose leaves do not fall. Whoever becomes acquainted with them will not experience death* (emphasis added).

It is possible that these five trees are references to the five seals in Sethian baptism, especially since the trees are referred to as if they are gifts to those who are worthy and as bestowing eternal life. The five trees likely reside or can only be reached through the bridal chamber. Fortunately, a Valentinian text known as the *Gospel of Philip*, offers a fuller treatment of the bridal chamber.

Valentinians differ from the Thomas and Sethian communities in that they have five sacraments, three of which can take an exoteric form. The Valentinians seem to perform water baptisms, chrismations and the eucharist, but none of these outer rituals compare to redemption and the bridal chamber. In fact, it is through this ultimate process of individual ascent associated with Sethian baptism that one achieves resurrection and salvation.

It appears in the *Gospel of Philip* that water baptism and chrism are important, but there are constant allusions that one must take on the names and powers of God for themselves. “The bridegroom and image enter through image into truth, which is restoration. It is right that those who don’t have it take on the name of the father and son and holy spirit. But they have not done so on their own. If you do not take on the names for yourself, the name Christian will be taken from you. You receive them in the oil of chrism.”<sup>16</sup> This statement makes

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16. All the references from the *Gospel of Philip* are taken from *The Gnostic Bible*, Willis Barnstone and Marvin Meyer, eds., Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2003. This first reference is found on page 277.

it appear that one becomes a Christian via your standard chrismation, but in a later passage, the *Gospel of Philip* explains what is meant by chrism. “No one will be able to look at oneself either in water or in a mirror without light, nor see in light without water or mirror. So it is fitting to baptize in light and water. Now the light is the chrism.”<sup>17</sup> In order to actually become a Christian one must be baptized in the light and this happens in the bridal chamber.

The bridal chamber in the Valentinian community is actually the same type of ascent ritual that we have encountered in the ritual of Sethian baptism in living water. In fact, all that matters in Valentinianism is the bridal chamber, which subsumes all other sacraments:

Baptism is the holy building. Redemption is the holy of the holy. The holy of the holies is the bridal chamber. Baptism includes resurrection and redemption. Redemption happens in the bridal chamber, but the bridal chamber is part of something superior to it and the others because you will find nothing like it. Those familiar with it are those who pray in spirit and truth for they do not pray in Jerusalem ... It was right for some below to ascend.<sup>18</sup>

Here we see that the bridal chamber is the ultimate goal and it is reached through rigorous prayer. Similar to the *Gospel of Thomas*, we read in the *Gospel of Philip* that the “undefiled marriage” which takes place in the bridal chamber is a solitary and personal experience. “If a marriage is open to the public, it has become prostitution, and the bride plays the harlot ... let her show herself only to her father and her mother and to the friend and attendants of the bridegroom.”<sup>19</sup> This saying seems to echo logion 75 of *Thomas*, where only the solitary can enter the bridal chamber and it also bolsters the likelihood that the bridal chamber is an esoteric, non-communal ritual.

Is it possible that the five sacraments of Valentinianism are the same as the five seals of Sethianism? This question is important because if the answer is yes,

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17. *The Gnostic Bible*, 280.

18. *The Gnostic Bible*, 280-81.

19. *The Gnostic Bible*, 294.



then we will be able to recreate a much more precise picture of the communal and ritual life of the Sethians. However, it is unlikely that the non-Christian Sethians would care about such practices, especially eucharist, which would have no historical precedence for the disgruntled Jewish Sethians. Furthermore, the Sethians most likely did not have as large a congregation as the Valentinians and the need for multiple sacraments or graded initiation was less likely to be of importance.

It is also worth mentioning that in the *Gospel of Philip*, there appears to be little evidence to support the claim that the bridal chamber refers to a literal sexual act. Although it is true that some groups of Gnostics such as the Borborites, Caininites and possibly the Carpocratians participated in ritualistic sex acts, it doesn't appear that the Thomas community or the Valentinians did so. Later occult groups such as the Ordo Templi Orientis and modern-day Satanists, among others, advocate the liberating power of transgressing cultural taboos, yet all the signs in the *Gospel of Thomas* and *Gospel of Philip* point to the importance of asceticism and solitariness.

The best representation of the journey of the Gnostic's soul is found in the *Hymn of the Pearl*, which belongs to the larger Thomas community tradition. In the *Hymn of the Pearl*, we encounter even more imagery similar to that found in the Sethian works. A central image in the *Hymn of the Pearl* is the robe: "They took away from me the jewel studded garment shot with gold that they had made out of love for me and the robe of yellow color tailored to my size."<sup>20</sup> Note that the robe is tailored to the prince's size and is yellow. In other words, it is a mirrored image in the living water, which is light.

After descending into the material world, the prince becomes lost in Egypt, and it is not until he hears a call in the form of a letter that he begins to regain his memory. "Arise and become sober out of your sleep. Listen to the words written in this letter. Remember that you are a child of kings."<sup>21</sup> The content of the

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20. All references to the *Hymn of the Pearl* are taken from Bentley Layton's, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, New York: Doubleday, 1987. We will retain the customary Syriac numbering for the *Hymn of the Pearl* (HPrI). This first citation is from HPrI, 108:9-11.

21. HPrI 110:43-44



letter is actually emblazoned on the heart of the prince, implying the need for a degree of the silencing of the mind and an inward transcendence. After hearing the call, the prince gets the pearl and then strips off “the dirty clothing” and leaves it behind. This “dirty clothing” refers to the material body and we find the beginning of the ascent experience. The ascent is accompanied by a female or the letter, which is to be viewed as a female wisdom figure and guide for the prince. The prince then passes through the “Labyrinth and the Meson” or the intermediate realm, which alludes to the Gnostic’s ascent past the archons and beyond the eighth sphere.

Finally, the prince sees his former robe. “When suddenly I saw my garment reflected as in a mirror, I perceived it in my whole self as well, and through it I recognized and saw myself. For though we were derived from one and the same we were partially divided; and then again we were one, with a single form.”<sup>22</sup> The garment or robe has grown in proportion to the prince and literally “mirrors” him. Here we have the enrobing process of Sethian baptism. Next the robe actually discourses, “It is I who belong to the one who is stronger than all human beings and for whose sake I was designed by the father himself.”<sup>23</sup> This speech compels the two to fully come together as the prince puts on the garment and is thereby transported “into the realm of peace which belongs to reverential awe.”<sup>24</sup> In this realm of peace we find glorifying: “I bowed my head and prostrated myself before the splendor of the father who had sent me.”<sup>25</sup> There also may be a reflection of enthroning as the father takes delight in the prince and “receiv[es] him in the palace,” where “all his subjects were singing hymns with reverent voices.”<sup>26</sup> The story concludes with the prince making an appearance before the king himself.

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22. HPrI 112:76-78

23. HPrI 113:91

24. HPrI 113:98

25. HPrI 113:99

26. HPrI 113:103

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

The *Hymn of the Pearl* succinctly describes all the key elements of the journey of the soul in Gnosticism. In the Thomas tradition, we find images and metaphors similar to those presented in the Sethian tradition. For example, we find calling, stripping, archons and realms, enrobing, glorifying, light/living water and five trees/five seals. It appears that there is sufficient evidence to support the claim that there are parallels between the end goals of the Sethian and Thomas systems. The end goal is the reunification of the spirit with the realm of light. The main point of the gnosis is to realize that you are actually from the race or seed of the light or that you contain a piece of the divine within you.

The two schools of thought did operate from quite different mythological systems to explain the fall and entrapment of light in matter. Regardless of this fact, they both seem to have a rite of ascent that led to a mystical vision and revelation. Both ascent programs were likely preceded by fasting and ascetic practices. What we do not learn from the Thomas literature is the actual procedure to attain this state. In fact, the only thing we learn from the Thomas tradition that we cannot gather from the Sethians is that one must be solitary and that fasting and prayer are crucial when the one has become two. It is quite possible that vowel chanting, magical paraphernalia and lengthy incantations were less common and instead the ascent experience was the result of lengthy and fervent prayer while fasting in temporary isolation in both the Thomas tradition and the Valentinian school.

From the *Gospel of Philip* we learn that Christians cannot be considered saved unless they have entered the bridal chamber, which is the new imagery for the living water of Sethian baptism. Thus, a major difference between the Valentinians and the orthodox Christians of the day is exposed. The Valentinians need direct experience of the One through the bridal chamber and they do not “borrow names at interest.” (NHC II, 3, 64:25) This direct experience leads to the reception of four spiritual gifts: resurrection, light, cross and holy spirit. To these four we can add a fifth gift, which is the title of Christian or unionization with

the image. This is similar to the four gifts requested by Barbelo from the One: incorruptibility, life eternal, truth and foreknowledge plus the merging with the archetypal human, and the corresponding reception of the divine name(s).