



2009

The Valentinian Bridal Chamber in the Gospel of Philip

Gaye Strathearn

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/sba>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Strathearn, Gaye (2009) "The Valentinian Bridal Chamber in the Gospel of Philip," *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity*. Vol. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/sba/vol1/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title The Valentinian Bridal Chamber in the *Gospel of Philip*

Author(s) Gaye Strathearn

Reference *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 1 (2009): 83-103.

ISSN 2151-7800 (print), 2168-3166 (online)

Abstract The *Gospel of Philip*, a Valentinian tractate found in the Nag Hammadi library, has sparked the interest of some Latter-day Saints because of its numerous references to a bridal chamber associated with the holy of holies in the temple (*Gospel of Philip* 69.14-70.4), such as to a “mirrored bridal chamber” (*Gospel of Philip* 65.12) and a sacred kiss (*Gospel of Philip* 59.1-5). The purpose of this paper is to examine the bridal chamber references within their Valentinian context. While there may be some interesting parallels with LDS teachings about eternal marriage, it is important to understand that the Valentinians understood these references in substantially different ways.

THE VALENTINIAN BRIDAL CHAMBER IN THE *GOSPEL OF PHILIP*

Gaye Strathearn

While a graduate student I took several classes in Gnosticism and Thomas Christianity. One topic that came up regularly in both classes was the Valentinian bridal chamber. As a Latter-day Saint, I was intrigued with the subject and so wrote a paper about it for a New Testament seminar. In attendance at that seminar was James M. Robinson, one of the foremost scholars in Gnosticism, who was the moving force behind the translation and publication of the Nag Hammadi library into English. At the end of the seminar, he made a comment that has had a great impact on the last ten years of my life. He said that whenever he gave lectures on the *Gospel of Philip*, one of the texts of the Nag Hammadi library, Latter-day Saints in his audience often came up and asked him how the *Gospel of Philip* compared with the Mormon practice of temple marriage. His answer was always to the effect that he didn't know because he didn't know anything about Mormon temple marriage. Robinson's comment reinforced the notion that the *Gospel of Philip* is of tremendous interest to many Latter-day Saints, especially in its numerous references to the bridal chamber. Some LDS scholars have drawn our attention to some similarities between the concept of marriage in LDS theology and in

the *Gospel of Philip*,¹ but no one has given a detailed discussion of the bridal chamber within its Valentinian context. It seems to me, however, that such a discussion is critical before we can truly evaluate the significance of this text for LDS beliefs about marriage and the temple.

For centuries our major text for a description of the Valentinian bridal chamber was a five-volume heresiology entitled *Against Heresies*.² Irenaeus, an influential early church father, wrote this text toward the end of the second century AD. Clearly Irenaeus had an agenda that was unfavorable toward the Valentinians, the major target of his treatise. It was not until 1945 that scholars had access to texts written by Valentinians that provided an insider account of the bridal chamber. These texts were discovered by Muḥammad ‘Alī al-Sammān, a local field hand, at the base of a cliff in the Nag Hammadi region of Upper Egypt.³ In a jar he found twelve complete papyrus codices, with an additional eight pages from a thirteenth codex that were stuffed inside the cover of the sixth codex. Although until recently it has perhaps not received the same amount of public press, this discovery is as important to the study of Christian origins as the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls was to the study of Second Temple Judaism. In the library eight texts mention the

1. For example, see S. Kent Brown and C. Wilfred Griggs, “The 40-Day Ministry,” *Ensign*, August 1975, 6–11; Stephen E. Robinson, “Background for the Testaments,” *Ensign*, December 1982, 30; Hugh W. Nibley, “Return to the Temple,” in *Temple and Cosmos: Beyond This Ignorant Present* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 54; S. Kent Brown, “The Nag Hammadi Library: A Mormon Perspective,” in *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-day Saints*, ed. C. Wilfred Griggs (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1986), 261–62; William J. Hamblin, “Aspects of an Early Christian Initiation Ritual,” in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 1:212; Richard O. Cowan, “Sacred Temples Ancient and Modern,” in *The Temple in Time and Eternity*, ed. Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 108.

2. Other early texts that mention the bridal chamber are Clement of Alexandria’s *Excerpts from Theodotus* and the *Acts of Thomas*. The scope of this paper does not allow me to examine these texts in detail. For a detailed examination of their portrayal of the bridal chamber, see my dissertation, “The Valentinian Bridal Chamber” (PhD diss., Claremont Graduate University, 2004), 86–116.

3. James M. Robinson, introduction to *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. James M. Robinson, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990), 22–26.

bridal chamber.⁴ Five of these texts are not Valentinian, showing that the bridal chamber concept was not unique to the Valentinians, but as a number of scholars have noted, it was the Valentinians who “made the most of marriage as a ‘mystery.’”⁵ Three Valentinian texts in the library refer to the bridal chamber, but the most detailed, and therefore the most important for our discussion, is the *Gospel of Philip*.⁶

As I examine the *Gospel of Philip* here, I recognize that a number of passages about the bridal chamber are of particular interest to Latter-day Saints. There are many intriguing points of contact with LDS belief about the temple and marriage. However, there are also significant points of divergence. To understand both positions, it is important to read the *Gospel of Philip*'s references to the bridal chamber within their Valentinian context. Therefore, although I will include quotations from Latter-day Saints at the beginning of each section, the discussion of the relevant passages will focus on their Valentinian context.

4. Non-Valentinian texts include *Gospel of Thomas* 75, 104; *Dialogue of the Savior* 138.48–50; *Second Treatise of the Great Seth* 57.10–18; 62.6–10; 65.35–66.8; 67.5–11; *Authoritative Teaching* 22.23–34; *Teachings of Silvanus* 94.19–29. Valentinian texts include *Exegesis of the Soul* 132.2–133.10; *Tripartite Tractate* 93.1; 122.15–16, 21; 128.33; 138.11; reconstructed in 135.31; *Gospel of Philip* 65.1–26; 67.2–27; 69.1–70.4; 70.9–71.15; 72.17–23; 74.12–24; 76.1–5; 81.34–82.26; 84.14–86.18; reconstructed in 75.29.

5. Robert McL. Wilson, *The Gospel of Philip: Translated from the Coptic Text, with an Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 20; see Robert M. Grant, “The Mystery of Marriage in the Gospel of Philip,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 15 (1961): 131.

6. Early scholars routinely identified the text as Valentinian. See Hans-Martin Schenke, “Das Evangelium nach Philippus: Ein Evangelium der Valentinianer aus dem Funde von Nag-Hamadi,” *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 84/1 (1959): 1–26; Elaine Pagels, “The ‘Mystery of Marriage’ in the *Gospel of Philip* Revisited,” in *The Future of Early Christianity*, ed. Birger A. Pearson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 442–54. Recently, however, this identification has come into question. Martha Lee Turner argues in her preface that the text is “a collection of disparate materials,” although she does acknowledge that it contains some “‘primitive’ Valentinian material,” in *The Gospel according to Philip: The Sources and Coherence of an Early Christian Collection* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 235. I am of the opinion that the bridal chamber was introduced by the Thomas Christians and appropriated and developed by the Valentinians; see Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures: A New Translation with Annotations and Introduction* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1987), 220, 359–60; see also Riley’s comment that the bridal chamber is “a typical Thomas tradition [cf. *Gospel of Thomas* 75] inherited by Valentinus and found in a number of later texts.” Gregory J. Riley, “Second Treatise of the Great Seth,” in *Nag Hammadi Codex VII*, ed. Birger A. Pearson (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 168–69 n. 57,17.

The Teacher Valentinus

Before focusing on the *Gospel of Philip*, it will be helpful to give a brief overview of Valentinus and his school. One modern scholar describes Valentinus as “the greatest Gnostic of all times.”⁷ Our knowledge of his life is, at best, fragmentary and must be gleaned from a number of different ancient sources. According to Epiphanius, a fifth-century heresiologist, Valentinus was born on the coast of Egypt, perhaps somewhere near Carthage, around AD 100. At some point he moved to Alexandria, where he received a Greek education (Epiphanius, *Refutation of All Heresies* 32.2.3). Plato’s teachings became very influential in the development of Valentinus’s cosmology and view of salvation.⁸ Clement of Alexandria says that the Valentinians taught that their founder was also a student of Theudas, who was a pupil of Paul (*Miscellanies* 7). According to Irenaeus, Valentinus “came to Rome in the time of Hyginus [Bishop of Rome ca. 136–40], flourished under Pius [ca. 140–57], and remained until Anicetus [ca. 157–68]” (*Against Heresies* 3.4.3). When he left Rome he apparently went to Cyprus and continued teaching there (Epiphanius, *Refutation of All Heresies* 31). Tertullian tells us that he was a man of genius and eloquence (*Against the Valentinians* 4) who was originally a believer “in the doctrine of the Catholic Church in Rome” (*Prescription against Heretics* 30). There is, however, no indication that Valentinus ever sought to establish a separate church.⁹ In fact, he seems to have worked within the

7. Gilles Quispel, “Gnosticism: Gnosticism from Its Origins to the Middle Ages,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 5:571.

8. Tertullian, *The Flesh of Christ* 20; Tertullian, *Prescription against Heretics* 30. See also G. C. Stead, “In Search of Valentinus,” in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism: Proceedings of the International Conference at Yale, March 1978*, ed. Bentley Layton (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 75–102; and Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, trans. Michael Steinhauser, ed. Marshall D. Johnson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 294–96.

9. Lampe has noted, “Valentinus was never excommunicated by the Roman Christians.” *From Paul to Valentinus*, 294 n. 8. This position is contrary to Tertullian’s statement that he was (*Prescription against Heretics* 30). However, Lampe argues that it was a tradition about Marcion, which was only later applied to Valentinus. *From Paul to Valentinus*, 391 n. 17. Lampe makes a good argument that there was no unified Christian congregation in Rome during the first two centuries. Rather, there were many house churches that varied according to leadership, ethnicity, social status, and even theology.

established system. Irenaeus says that the Valentinians “imitat[e] our phraseology” and that they “hold doctrines similar to ours” (*Against Heresies* 3.15.2), and Tertullian says that Valentinus expected to become a bishop (*Against the Valentinians* 4). Instead of establishing a separate church, the Valentinians seem to have functioned as a school within the Christian church. Before individuals could join the Valentinian school, according to Tertullian, they were required to go through a five-year novitiate and only then were they taught “the mysteries,” which they were forbidden to speak of with outsiders (*Against the Valentinians* 1).

One of the mysteries that the Valentinians taught was the bridal chamber (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.6.4; 1.21.3; *Gospel of Philip* 63.31–65.1; 67.27–30; 71.3–15; 85.22–86.19). Even with the long novitiate, the Valentinian school flourished. Remarkable are the number of famous pupils whose reputations have survived from antiquity, such as Markus, Ptolemy, Heracleon, and Theodotus, just to name a few. Hippolytus also tells us that there was an eastern and a western branch of this school that differed theologically over the nature of Christ (*Refutation of All Heresies* 6.30). Although we don’t have any specific numbers for Valentinus’s followers, there must have been many because Tertullian tells us that they constituted “a very large body” (*Against the Valentinians* 1). According to Peter Lampe, it wasn’t until the time of Irenaeus (ca. 180) that the Valentinians were marginalized from the rest of the Christian community.¹⁰

The Valentinian Bridal Chamber in the *Gospel of Philip*

It is those passages among the Nag Hammadi codices which deal with mysteries and initiations that have generated the most interest among Latter-day Saints. For example, the gospel of Philip describes an initiation in three stages, corresponding to the three chambers of the Jerusalem Temple (69:14ff). In

This situation allowed the Valentinians to maintain a loose relationship with other Christians while maintaining their own unique interpretation. *From Paul to Valentinus*, 359–96.

10. Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 385–91.

the last stage, which was called the Bridal Chamber, a sacred marriage was performed which was believed to be eternally binding (70:19ff) and which had to be performed in mortality (86:1ff).¹¹

Although a number of texts from Nag Hammadi mention the bridal chamber, it is the *Gospel of Philip* that refers to it most often. The importance of the bridal chamber in the *Gospel of Philip* is highlighted by Elaine Pagels: “Interpreting the bridal imagery that dominates [the *Gospel of Philip*] . . . seems to offer an essential key not only for understanding the *Gospel of Philip* but also for reconstructing, so far as our fragmentary sources allow, the Valentinian movement in the history of second-century Christianity.”¹²

The text itself contains twenty-six references to the bridal chamber, and Hans-Martin Schenke has suggested another inclusion in his restoration in 75.29.¹³ Three Greek loan words—*νημφῶν* (*numphōn*), *παστός* (*pastos*), and *κοιτών* (*koitōn*)—are translated as “bridal chamber,” but the Coptic word *μανωελεετ* (*mansheleet*) is not found. Each of these references is scattered throughout the latter half of the text, and although they are found in clusters, *νημφῶν* is the most common term used (see chart 1).

Any study of the bridal chamber in the *Gospel of Philip* is challenged by the nature of the text. It does not exhibit the same flow and linear development of thought found in the canonical gospels. Perhaps the most famous description of its composition was that given by Robert M. Grant in his 1959 Society of Biblical Literature presidential address, where he described it as “chaotic arrangement!”¹⁴ The text’s “chaotic arrangement” does not result in an explicit description of the bridal chamber. Rather we find a loose collection of isolated thoughts

11. Robinson, “Background for the Testaments,” 30.

12. Pagels, “Mystery of Marriage,” 442. See also Jean-Marie Sevrin, “Les noces spirituelles dans l’Évangile selon Philippe,” *Muséon: Revue d’études orientales* 77 (1974): 143.

13. Hans-Martin Schenke, *Das Philippus-Evangelium: (Nag Hammadi Codex II,3)* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997), 461.

14. Robert M. Grant, “The Two Gnostic Gospels,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 79 (1960): 2.

CHART 1

Distribution of “Bridal Chamber” References
in the *Gospel of Philip*

Codex Page Numbers*	ΝΥΜΦΩΝ	ΠΑΣΤΟΣ	ΚΟΙΤΩΝ
65			
66			
67			
68			
69			
70			
71			
72			
73			
74			
75	‡†		
76			
77			
78			
79			
80			
81			
82			
83			
84			
85			
86			

* According to Bentley Layton’s transcription in “Tractate 3: The Gospel According to Philip,” in *Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2-7* (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 1:142–215.

† There is a lacuna in 75.29. Although Layton left the lacuna blank (*Nag Hammadi*, 194), Schenke restored it as follows: $\chi\upsilon\lambda\omega\pi\epsilon\ \epsilon\beta\omicron\lambda\ \epsilon\bar{\mu}\ \pi\alpha\bar{\nu}\nu\upsilon\mu\phi\omicron\varsigma\ \mu\bar{\nu}\bar{\nu}\ \bar{\Gamma}\bar{\nu}\nu\mu\phi\eta\bar{\nu}$ (*Das Philippus-Evangelium*, 461). The context and size of the lacuna lead me to agree with Schenke’s restoration.

from which we have to try to re-create what the bridal chamber meant to the Valentinians.

To further complicate the matter, the *Gospel of Philip* describes marriage and the bridal chamber four times as a “mystery” (64.31–65.1; 67.27–30; 71.3–15; 85.22–86.19).¹⁵ These statements seem to be a reflection on Ephesians 5:31–32: “For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they shall become one flesh. This is a great mystery.” But the statements also reflect the marriage language that was associated with the Dionysiac, Eleusinian, Isiac, and Mithraic mysteries.¹⁶ This all suggests that only those who were initiated into the mysteries could fully understand references to marriage and the bridal chamber.

A Bridal Chamber Ritual?

Scholars have argued over whether the bridal chamber in the *Gospel of Philip* refers to a specific ritual. Early scholars certainly understood it to be one, but more recent studies have questioned that position.¹⁷ Without doubt, bridal imagery was a pervasive metaphor in the ancient world.¹⁸ In Jewish and Christian texts in particular it is frequently used to describe salvation. I would argue, however, that

15. These statements support Irenaeus’s claim that the Marcosians considered the bridal chamber to be a mystery (*Against Heresies* 1.6.4).

16. For a discussion, see Strathearn, “Valentinian Bridal Chamber,” 222–28.

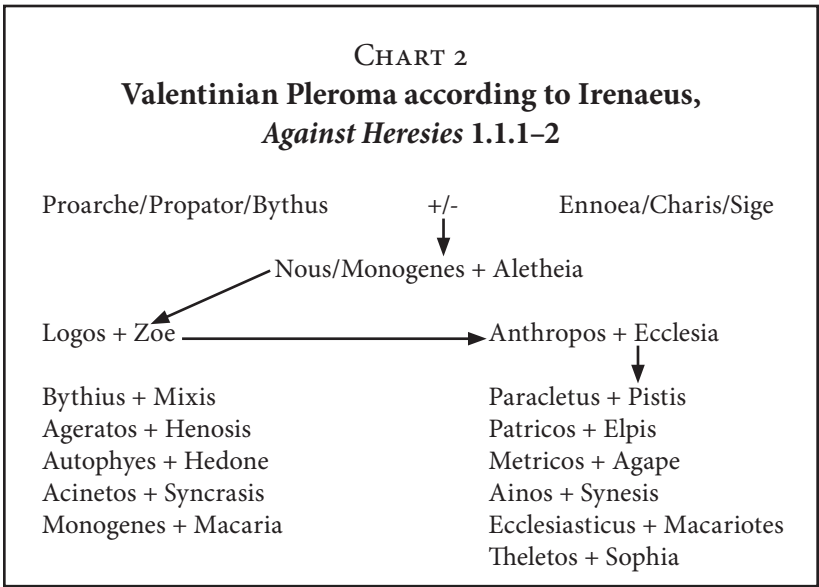
17. Some examples of those who understood the bridal chamber to be a ritual are John D. Turner, “Ritual in Gnosticism,” in *SBL Seminar Papers, 1994* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1994), 136–81; Risto Uro, “The Bridal Chamber and Other Mysteries: Ritual System and Ritual Transmission in the Valentinian Movement,” in *Sacred Marriages: The Divine-Human Sexual Metaphor from Sumer to Early Christianity*, ed. Martti Nissinen and Risto Uro (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 457–86. In contrast, Pagels argues that ritual is a blanket term for the initiation consisting of baptism, chrism, and the eucharist. “Ritual in the *Gospel of Philip*,” in *The Nag Hammadi Library after Fifty Years: Proceedings of the 1995 Society of Biblical Literature Commemoration*, ed. John D. Turner and Anne McGuire (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 281. Einar Thomassen argues, “The fact that the notion of the bridal chamber may be associated with baptism and anointing as well as with the eucharist suggests that it does not represent a separate ritual event, but that it is rather an implied aspect in the process of initiation.” *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the “Valentinians”* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 100.

18. See generally Nissinen and Uro, *Sacred Marriages*.

the Valentinians did practice a bridal chamber ritual, although it still remains difficult to determine the exact nature of that ritual.

Irenaeus, an influential Christian writer in the second century who wrote about the Valentinians (and other “heretics”), recorded, “For some of them prepare a [bridal chamber, *νυμφῶνα*] and perform a sort of mystic rite (pronouncing certain expressions) with those who are being initiated, and affirm that it is a spiritual marriage [*πνευματικὸν γάμον φάσκουσιν εἶναι*] which is celebrated by them, after the likeness of the conjunctions above” (*Against Heresies* 1.21.3).¹⁹ The “conjunctions above” refers to Valentinian cosmology, in which heaven, or the Pleroma, is in a state of balance because it consists of a number of paired, male-female divine beings that emanated from the high God (see chart 2). The Valentinian bridal chamber ritual is,

19. With the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library in 1945, some scholars have increasingly criticized Irenaeus’s work by arguing that his polemical writings have skewed Valentinian teachings. For example, see Elaine H. Pagels, “Conflicting Versions of Valentinian Eschatology: Irenaeus’ Treatise vs. the Excerpts from Theodotos,” *Harvard Theological Review* 67 (1974): 35–53; Morton Smith, “The History of the Term *Gnostikos*,” in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism: Proceedings of the Conference at Yale, March 1978*, ed. Bentley Layton (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 2:796–807; Hans von Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Church: Combined Edition of The Fathers of the Greek Church and the Fathers of the Latin Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 20. While Irenaeus’s polemical bent is not in question, that does not mean he does not include accurate information. His account of the cosmogonic myth has much in common with the account in the *Apocryphon of John*, discovered in the Nag Hammadi library. In addition, Irenaeus insists that he gave accurate information about his opponents. He got his information about them from personal contact with Valentinians and through study of their writings (*Against Heresies* 1.preface.2). He also declares that a person who is going to “undertake their conversion, must possess an accurate knowledge of their systems or schemes of doctrine. . . . This was the reason that my predecessors . . . were unable . . . to refute the Valentinians satisfactorily, because they were ignorant of these men’s system; which I with all care delivered to thee in the first book” (*Against Heresies* 4.preface.2). For Irenaeus, unlike many of his successors, the Valentinians “were not historical artifacts but living and dangerous realities”; see Terrance Tiessen, “Gnosticism as Heresy: The Response to Irenaeus,” in *Hellenization Revisited: Shaping a Christian Response within the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Wendy E. Helleman (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994), 339. Any gross misrepresentations would surely have evoked strenuous denials from his opponents that would have, in turn, undermined Irenaeus’s credibility; Tiessen, “Gnosticism as Heresy,” 340; Alastair H. B. Logan, *Gnostic Truth and Christian Heresy: A Study in the History of Gnosticism* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 1.



therefore, a way to re-create that balance and to prepare individuals to return to the Pleroma and become a part of that state.

In the *Gospel of Philip* it is clear that not everyone participated in the bridal chamber, but rather that it was reserved for a select few. “A bridal chamber is not for the animals, nor is it for the slaves, nor for defiled women; but it is for free men and virgins” (69.1–4). There are also a number of passages, many of particular interest to Latter-day Saints, which strengthen the idea that the bridal chamber was a ritual. The first reads, “The Lord [performed] everything in a mystery, a baptism and a chrism and a eucharist and a redemption and a bridal chamber” (67.27–30). Henry Green describes this passage as “the most remarkable list of rituals” of Valentinian Gnosticism.²⁰ Bentley Layton also uses this passage to argue that the Valentinians “accepted the usual sacraments of the second-century church.”²¹ Nevertheless, while Layton’s assertion may be true for the rituals of baptism, chrism, and the eucharist, it is much more difficult to make a case for “redemption” and the bridal

20. Henry A. Green, “Ritual in Valentinian Gnosticism: A Sociological Interpretation,” *Journal of Religious History* 12 (1982): 120.

21. Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 270.

chamber as separate rituals.²² Perhaps it is this fact more than any other that has led more recent scholarship to attempt to refute the idea that the Valentinians practiced redemption and the bridal chamber as separate salvific rituals.

The question of a bridal chamber ritual in the *Gospel of Philip*, however, is complicated by the nature of the text. Pagels has rightly noted that “the author of Philip is obviously no Hippolytus; instead of detailed description of ritual acts he interprets them impressionistically.”²³ In coming to this conclusion she is influenced by Michael Williams’s argument that the *Gospel of Philip* “employs sacramental imagery with a great deal of freedom, as though . . . viewing the initiation process as a continuous whole, rather than insisting upon analytically isolating the precise contribution of each sacrament.”²⁴ Certainly the *Gospel of Philip* suggests a close relationship between the rituals because they are often portrayed as overlapping in scope. Thus we find individual sacraments associated with others: baptism and chrism (57.22–28); baptism, redemption, and the bridal chamber (69.14–70.4); chrism,

22. We know very little about this “redemption.” Irenaeus says that the Marcosians practiced a rite of redemption. Although he does not seem to know precisely what it is, he gives two examples. He first describes it as a higher form of baptism: whereas water baptism is *psychikon* and limited to the “the remission of sins,” he describes redemption as *pneumatikē* (*Against Heresies* 1.21.1). He also describes redemption as the means of bypassing the cosmic judge. Redemption renders an individual “incapable of being seized or seen by the principalities and powers” and thus “their inner man may ascend on high in an invisible manner, as if their body were left among created things in this world, while their soul is sent forward to the Demiurge” (*Against Heresies* 1.21.5). In this instance he seems to be referring to the Homeric helmet of Pluto. In the *Tripartite Tractate* redemption seems to be associated with the putting on of a garment: “for those who will put it on and those who have received redemption wear it” (128.22–24). In the *Gospel of Philip*, we learn only that “redemption is ‘the holy of the holy’” in the temple and that it “takes place in the bridal chamber” (69.23–27). Wesley W. Isenberg, “The Gospel of Philip (II,3),” in *Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 180–81.

23. Pagels, “Ritual in the *Gospel of Philip*,” 281.

24. Michael A. Williams, “Realized Eschatology in the Gospel of Philip,” *Restoration Quarterly* 14 (1971): 13. Turner suggests that baptism, chrism, and eucharist were “included in the same initiation ceremony” but suggests that “the redemption and bridal chamber constituted a sort of second baptism . . . and were capable of repetition.” “Ritual in Gnosticism,” 150.

baptism, and the bridal chamber (74.12–24); baptism, eucharist, and chrism (74.25–75.2); and eucharist and baptism (75.14–24; 77.2–15).

In recognizing the connection between the sacraments and the fluid boundaries of these rites in the *Gospel of Philip*, we must not, however, ignore the fact that all five are mentioned individually in 67.27–30. This passage suggests to me that each ritual must have provided a unique dimension to the overall initiatory process. In addition, as we shall see in our second passage, all parts of the initiatory experience do not appear to be of equal importance. Rather, the bridal chamber is described as being superior to both baptism and redemption (69.14–29).²⁵ It does not seem coincidental that the bridal chamber is the last in the list of five. This strengthens Schenke's initial assessment that "of the Valentinian sacraments, which are spoken in the Gospel of Philip, it is the mystery of the bridal chamber that is most highly valued."²⁶

A second passage that suggests to me that the bridal chamber was a specific ritual is the description of the Jerusalem temple in 69.14–70.4. Of this passage Schenke notes, "That the saying of the Gospel of Philip comes to speak here of the Jerusalem temple is so surprising that one has good reason to see it as a milestone."²⁷

There were three shrines of sacrifice in Jerusalem. The one opens to the west. It is called "the holy." Another opens to the south. It is called "the holy of the holy." The third, which opens to the east, it is called "the holy of holies," the place where the high priest enters alone. Baptism is the house which is holy. Redemption is the holy of the holy. The holy of the holies is the bridal chamber. (69.14–70.4)

The emphasis here on only the three sacraments of baptism, redemption, and the bridal chamber indicates that this pericope probably originated from a different source than the earlier reference to five sacraments.

25. Although the text is riddled with lacunae, the overall sense of the passage suggests that it is superior to baptism and redemption.

26. Schenke, "Das Evangelium nach Philippus," 5.

27. Schenke, *Das Philippus-Evangelium*, 403.

The text continues: “Baptism leads to resurrection and redemption. For redemption (takes place) in the bridal chamber” (69.25–26). The three shrines of the temple mentioned in this passage are consistent with the tripartite architectural structures found in many Near Eastern temples, including the Jerusalem temple. According to John Lundquist, this architectural phenomenon symbolized the idea of “a successive ascension toward heaven.”²⁸ Thus Schenke translates line 25 as “baptism *leads to* resurrection and redemption.”²⁹ Baptism, therefore, is not equivalent to the bridal chamber, but leads or ascends to it.

The fact that the bridal chamber is the holy of holies suggests that it represents the place where God dwells. George MacRae recognized this when he wrote the following:

The allegory seems to identify these [shrines] with three different sacraments in the sacramental system of the Valentinian Gnostics. But I think it is more than that. It is more than that because it builds on the concept that one moves toward the divine presence as one moves successively through the outer courts of the temple toward the inner Holy of Holies, to which only the priest had access. Consequently the order in which the courts are identified with the sacraments becomes very important. The initiatory rite of baptism is the outermost one. The rite of redemption, whatever that may have consisted of, is the second one. And it is the bridal chamber, the rite of which was the supreme rite for the Valentinian Gnostic, which is the approach into the presence of God himself.³⁰

28. John M. Lundquist, “What Is a Temple? A Preliminary Typology,” in *The Quest for the Kingdom of God: Studies in Honor of George E. Mendenhall*, ed. H. B. Huffmon, F. A. Spina, and A. R. W. Green (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 211.

29. Schenke, *Das Philippus-Evangelium*, 49. Others have translated ΟΥΤΙΓΕΝΑ ΜΜΑΧΥ as “includes”; see Isenberg, “Gospel of Philip (II,3),” 151.

30. George MacRae, “The Temple as a House of Revelation in the Nag Hammadi Texts,” in *Temple in Antiquity: Ancient Records and Modern Perspectives*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1984), 184–85. For a discussion of the three rituals in relation to the ritual practice in the Israelite temple, see April D. De Conick, “Entering God’s Presence: Sacramentalism in the Gospel of Philip,” in *SBL Seminar Papers, 1998, part 1* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1998), 489–523.

Thus we can understand this passage in the *Gospel of Philip* to refer to a cultic journey that begins with baptism but which finds its culmination in the bridal chamber, or the holy of holies in the temple. This again suggests that *baptism* and the *bridal chamber* are related, but not equivalent, terms.

The rest of this passage in *Philip* is heavily damaged, so it is difficult to make much sense of what is going on. But it does make mention of the veil of the temple being torn from top to bottom. The veil here has reference to the veil that separated the holy place from the holy of holies. It represented a barrier that separated humans from the presence of God. It is also understood in the *Gospel of Philip* that under the Mosaic law only the high priest could enter the holy of holies. The fact that our text describes the veil as being completely torn indicates that this barrier had been removed. For Valentinians, the primary situation that kept them from returning to the presence of God was their ignorance of “who we were, and what we have become, where we were or where we were placed, whither we hasten, and from what we are redeemed, what birth is and what rebirth.”³¹ Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that the temple veil here represented ignorance. The fact that it was completely torn indicates that they had received knowledge that enabled them to break through the barrier of ignorance and thus enter the bridal chamber, or the presence of God.

A third indication that the bridal chamber was a ritual is a number of passages that mention sons or children of the bridal chamber (ΠΩΗΡΕ ΜΠΟΥΜΦΩΝ). The *Gospel of Philip* teaches that children of the bridal chamber are designated as the “free” (72.20–23) and that they are the “true race” (76.3–5). There appears to be a process of transformation that brings them to this state. They were not originally children of the bridal chamber but came into being “from water and fire and light” (67.3–5) since, as Ristro Uro argues, “this expression is clearly an epithet for those who have passed through an initiation of some kind.”³² He links this phrase to a second-century inscription found on the Via Latina that also mentions brothers of the bridal

31. See Clement of Alexandria, *Excerpts from Theodotus* 78.2, in Robert P. Casey, *The Excerpta ex Theodoto of Clement of Alexandria* (London: Christophers, 1934), 89.

32. Uro, “Bridal Chamber and Other Mysteries,” 475.

chamber in connection with ritual baths.³³ In addition, the *Gospel of Philip* also reinforces the transformative nature of the bridal chamber by teaching, “If anyone becomes a child of the bridal chamber, he/she will receive light” (86.4–5). This light must be received here in mortality and is necessary to prevent the sons of the bridal chamber being detained or tormented in their journey back to the Pleroma (86.6–14). It appears that this state is achieved over a period of time because we learn that the children of the bridal chamber are permitted to enter the bridal chamber every day (82.15–17).

So, although the *Gospel of Philip* contains no extensive discussion of a bridal chamber, it has significant pointers to strongly suggest a bridal chamber ritual associated with the holy of holies in the temple and that it was the means whereby a person was transformed and received the light needed to enter the eternal realm. All of these concepts are intriguing for Latter-day Saints as they consider the doctrine of temple marriage. As we try to determine the nature of the ritual, however, we will see that there are also some very significant differences.

The Kiss

The *hieros gamos* [i.e., the sacred marriage] is represented by a holy kiss.³⁴

When Schenke first published the *Gospel of Philip* and noted the prominence of the bridal chamber, he concluded that the kiss was *the* bridal chamber ritual. He based his conclusion on another passage that might be of interest to Latter-day Saints. “For it is by a kiss that the perfect conceive and give birth. On account of this we also kiss one another. We receive the conception from the grace that is in one another” (59.2–6).

The conception that takes place through the kiss must refer to a spiritual rather than physical birth.³⁵ Hans-Georg Gaffron links the

33. Uro, “Bridal Chamber and Other Mysteries,” 475; Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 298–99.

34. Hugh Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 2005), 526.

35. It is possible that outsiders who came across a saying like this may have taken it out of context and assumed a sexual act. Perhaps this may have been the case with Irenaeus, although it is also possible that there were abuses of the spiritual ideal. We

kiss with a later discussion in the *Gospel of Philip* of the relationship between Jesus and his companion (κοινωνος) Mary Magdalene (63.30–64.9),³⁶ a point sensationalized in one of Dan Brown's novels.³⁷ Although there are a number of lacunae at the end of page 63, it seems clear the disciples are put out because they think Jesus loves Mary more than them because he "kiss[ed] (ακιμαζε) her [often] on her [. . .]" Layton has supplied ηελεε in the lacuna to indicate that the kiss was not a single event, but was repeated often.³⁸ Gaffron argues that their relationship is strengthened by the fact that immediately after the discussion of the kiss in 59.2–6 comes a discussion of Mary Magdalene, who is described as the lord's κοινωνος.³⁹ While it would certainly be helpful to have such a connection between the two passages, there is in my mind a significant problem with such an assumption. In 59.3 the word *kiss* is a correct translation of the Coptic word η. In line 63.36, however, the Coptic word for *kiss* is a translation of the Greek word ἀσπάζομαι. While it is possible to translate this word as *kiss*, it refers more specifically to a greeting or embrace.⁴⁰ Thus C. J. de Catanzaro reads 63.26 as "[he] greeted her."⁴¹ Further, Wesley Isenberg notes, "although *kiss* may be correct, the Coptic construction found here is not normally used in this sense."⁴² Therefore, to be truer to the Greek sense, it seems best to me not to link these two passages.⁴³

What does the kiss represent? It seems clear that the author of this passage understood the kiss to be different from Paul's holy

know of cases where misunderstandings took place as non-Christians heard the language of the Christian sacrament; see Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 9.6.

36. Hans-Georg Gaffron, "Studien zum koptischen Philippusevangelium unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Sakramente" (Inaug.-diss., Rheinische-Friedrich-Wilhelms Universität, Bonn, 1969), 214.

37. Dan Brown, *The DaVinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 245–46.

38. Layton, transcription of "Tractate 3: The Gospel According to Philip," 1:168.

39. Gaffron, "Studien zum koptischen Philippusevangelium," 212.

40. Geoffrey W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961), 245–46.

41. C. J. de Catanzaro, "The Gospel According to Philip," *Journal of Theological Studies* 13 (1962): 47.

42. Isenberg, "Tractate 3: The Gospel According to Philip," 1:169 n. 63:36, emphasis in original.

43. So also Schenke, *Das Philippus-Evangelium*, 265.

kiss (φιλημα ἁγιον) in the New Testament.⁴⁴ According to William Klassen, Paul's kisses were "a public declaration of the affirmation of faith: 'In Christ there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free' (Galatians 3:28)."⁴⁵ But in our passage, the kiss represents the means of conceiving and giving birth. The passage is embedded in a discussion on the contrast between the children of the heavenly man and the earthly man, Adam. On the one hand, the children of Adam are many and will die. On the other, the children of the perfect man (i.e., Christ; 55.11–12) do not die "but are always begotten" (58.17–22). The kiss is related to the nourishment of the word that also comes from the mouth (58.30–59.2).⁴⁶ In this way the kiss symbolizes the transference of the life-breath from one to the other—hence the notion that the kiss leads to birth.⁴⁷

There are some difficulties linking the kiss of our passage with the bridal chamber. First, the connection is never made explicit in the *Gospel of Philip*. In fact, the bridal chamber is not introduced until much later in the text. If, however, we could link the "children of the perfect man" with the "children of the bridal chamber," then we could

44. This point is contra Grant, who says that the kiss in the *Gospel of Philip* "was taken over from the Church. We first encounter it in the Pauline epistles and in 1 Peter. None of the apostolic fathers mentions it, but this silence is accidental, for it reappears in Justin's first apology and flourishes thereafter." "Mystery of Marriage," 139.

45. William Klassen, "Kiss (NT)," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:92.

46. Compare similar teachings in the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Truth*. "Jesus said, 'Whoever drinks from my mouth will become like me; I myself shall become that person, and the hidden things will be revealed to that one'" (*Gospel of Thomas* 108). "Truth appeared; all its emanations knew it. They greeted the Father in truth with a perfect power that joins them with the Father. For, as for everyone who loves the truth—because the truth is the mouth of the Father; his tongue is the Holy Spirit, . . . since this is the manifestation of the Father and his revelation to his aeons" (*Gospel of Truth* 26.28–27.7), in Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, 44.

47. See Genesis 2:7; cf. Elisha's restoration of the young child to life when "he put his mouth upon his mouth" (2 Kings 4:34). See also the *Odes of Solomon* 28.7–8, "And immortal life embraced me, and kissed me. And from that (life) is the Spirit which is within me. And it cannot die because it is life"; see *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 2:760. Many have noted the parallels between the kiss in the *Gospel of Philip* and the Mandaean and Manichean literature; see Jacques É. Ménard, *L'Évangile selon Philippe* (Montreal: Université de Montréal, 1964), 149, and Gaffron, "Studien zum koptischen Philippusevangelium," 216–17.

link the kiss with the bridal chamber, but the disparate nature of the *Gospel of Philip* text makes this connection difficult. Second, there is no other Valentinian text that relates a kiss with the bridal chamber, and although a kiss is often a part of modern wedding ceremonies, it is almost nonexistent in depictions of ancient weddings.⁴⁸ One exception is the apocryphal work *Joseph and Aseneth*. Although not a Valentinian text, it does bring together themes that are important in the *Gospel of Philip*: spiritual awakening, initiation, and marriage. Most significantly, *Joseph and Aseneth* specifically mentions the kiss in a ritual context of Aseneth's transformation and conversion, and the story culminates with a kiss as part of a marriage ceremony.⁴⁹

The "Mirrored Bridal Chamber"

Some writings mention a secret and sacred ordinance of the "mirrored bridal chamber" associated with "the Holy of Holies."⁵⁰

According to the *Gospel of Philip*, the separation of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden resulted in two adverse consequences, both of which are rectified in the bridal chamber. The first consequence is paralleled in the Bible: it brought death into the world. "When Eve was still in Adam death did not exist. When she was separated from him death came into being" (68.22–26). Likewise, "If the woman had not separated from the man, she should not die with the man. His separation became the beginning of death" (70.9–12; cf. Genesis 3:19). If, however, "he enters again and attains his former self, death will be no more" (68.25–26). This reunification takes place in the bridal cham-

48. In her extensive discussion of marriage in the rituals of Greek religion, Aphroditia Avagianou makes no mention of a kiss in any of the rituals. *Sacred Marriage in the Rituals of Greek Religion* (New York: Lang, 1991). Nor does Michael L. Satlow in his discussion of ancient Jewish wedding rituals. He does, however, admit that, because of the paucity of material from the Second Temple period, his discussion concentrates on rabbinic sources. *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), xxii–xxiii.

49. See my discussion in Strathearn, "Valentinian Bridal Chamber," 212–15.

50. Donald Q. Cannon, Larry E. Dahl, and John W. Welch, "The Restoration of Major Doctrines through Joseph Smith: Priesthood, the Word of God, and the Temple," *Ensign*, February 1989, 12–13.

ber. “Therefore Christ came that he might correct again the separation that happened from the beginning [i.e., the division of Adam and Eve] and unite the two, and give life to those who died in the separation and unite them. But the woman is always united with her husband in the bridal chamber. Indeed those who are united in the bridal chamber will no longer be divided. Thus Eve separated from Adam because she was not united with him in the bridal chamber” (70.13–22).

The second adverse consequence of Adam and Eve’s separation was that it made their descendants vulnerable to the attacks of evil spirits. This scenario is based on the Valentinian belief that the Pleroma is balanced by the series of divinely paired male/female emanations mentioned above. Before Adam and Eve were separated, they represented the male/female emanations of the Pleroma, but when they separated, not only was death introduced but the separated beings became exposed. “The forms of evil spirit include male ones and female ones. The males are they that unite with the souls which inhabit a female form but the females are they which are mingled with those in a male form. . . . When the wanton women see a male sitting alone, they leap down on him and play with him and defile him. So also the lecherous men, when they see a beautiful woman sitting alone, they persuade her and compel her, wishing to defile her” (65.1–7, 12–19).⁵¹

The only way to counteract these attacks, according to the *Gospel of Philip*, is to “receive a male power and a female” (Ⲫⲓ ⲛⲟⲩϥⲒⲐⲐⲛ ⲛⲉⲣⲟⲩⲩⲧ ⲙⲛ ⲛⲟⲩϥⲒⲓⲙⲉ).⁵² This power is described as “the bridegroom and the bride” (65.9–11). Williams argues that this power comes from an “actual social joining of man and woman” and understands that joining to be a “spiritual marriage.”⁵³ Yet in coming to this conclusion, he follows Isenberg’s translation that an individual must receive “a male power or a female power.”⁵⁴ The Coptic, however, reads ⲙⲛ (“and”) instead of ⲛ (“or”).

51. For narrative accounts of humans being attacked by malignant spirits, see *Acts of Thomas* 42–43; 62–64.

52. Isenberg translates this phrase as “receive a male power or a female power” (“Tractate 3: The Gospel According to Philip,” 1:171).

53. Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 149.

54. Isenberg, “Tractate 3: The Gospel According to Philip,” 1:171.

Therefore I have chosen to translate the phrase as “receive a male power and a female.” Jean-Marie Sevrin is probably correct to interpret the power as coming from the combined androgynous power of a male *and* a female.⁵⁵ This reading not only makes better sense of the Coptic, it also fits better with the idea that the malevolent spirits have power because of the separation of male and female. It seems reasonable to assert that the power to overcome the separation would be a unified power.

The *Gospel of Philip* teaches that this unifying power is received in the *eikonikos* (εἰκονικός) bridal chamber (65.12). Isenberg translates this phrase as the “mirrored bridal chamber.”⁵⁶ I am persuaded here, however, that we should not imagine a bridal chamber with mirrors on opposite walls. Rather, as Williams has argued, it would be better translated as duplicate bridal chamber, which should be understood as a representative of a divine reality.⁵⁷ Williams’s interpretation is based on the frequent belief in antiquity that in many respects earth is merely a copy or image of divine reality. Plato taught that the earth must be “a copy of something” (*Timaeus* 28–29). One text from the Nag Hammadi library describes the creation of this world as being “after the pattern of the realms above, for by starting from the invisible world the visible world was invented” (*Hypostasis of the Archons* 87.8–11). In the Bible, we learn in a number of places that the tabernacle or the temple is a copy, usually of the heavenly temple (Exodus 25:9, 40; Hebrews 8:1–5; 9:23).

The power received in the *eikonikos* bridal chamber in our passage is described as a play on words, “if the image (εἰκων) and the angel are united with one another, neither can any [evil spirit] venture to go in to the man or the woman” (65.24–26).⁵⁸ Here the image refers to the mortal as an image of a divine double, sometimes described as an angel. Just as Adam and Eve were separated in the Garden of Eden,

55. Sevrin, “Les noces spirituelles,” 154 n. 36; see also de Catanzaro, “The Gospel According to Philip,” 48–49.

56. Isenberg, “Tractate 3: The Gospel According to Philip,” 1:171.

57. Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism,”* 149, 295 n. 28.

58. Cf. *Gospel of Philip* 58.11–14 where images (εἰκων) are united (εὐφρῆ) with angels by those “who have joined (εὐφρῆ) the perfect light with the holy spirit.” See also *Gospel of Philip* 72.14 where *eikonikos* is used again and also *Apocryphon of John* 14.13–15.13.

Valentinians believed that when they came to earth they were also separated from their divine reality and thus became images. Irenaeus taught that when Valentinians “at last achieve perfection, [they] shall be given as brides to the angels of the Savior” (*Against Heresies* 1.7.5). Rather than being a marriage where a man and a woman are united, the Valentinian bridal chamber was a place where individuals were united with their divine self, their angel.

Conclusion

The Valentinian bridal chamber shares a number of interesting parallels with Latter-day Saint teachings about eternal marriage. The bridal chamber seems to be the culminating ritual in a series of rituals required for individuals to return to the Pleroma. This ritual, which re-creates the balance and harmony of the Pleroma, must be performed on earth. It is associated with the holy of holies in the temple, and it may or may not have been associated with a sacred kiss. But if we are to maintain a historical perspective of the Valentinian bridal chamber, these interesting parallels must also be understood in conjunction with the dissimilarities. Although certain passages in the *Gospel of Philip* use the language of a man and a woman being united in the bridal chamber, they must be understood in the context of the Valentinian theology of angels and images. The reunification that takes place in the bridal chamber is not the union of a husband and wife as we understand it, but the union of an individual with his or her angel, or divine alter ego. In addition, the so-called “mirrored bridal chamber” was not understood by the Valentinians to be a room with mirrors on either side to represent eternity. Rather it represented a re-creation of the heavenly bridal chamber, just as the ancient temples were understood to be a re-creation of the heavenly temple.

Gaye Strathearn is an assistant professor in the Department of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University.

