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Recognizing the Valentinians – now and then

The title of this essay is intended as a play on the different meanings of the verb “to recognize” on the one hand, and those of the expression “now and then” on the other. To begin with “to recognize,” the verb can both be used for identification, especially of someone whom one has seen or met before,¹ and for denoting acceptance, either in terms of acknowledging a fact, a problem, etc., or in terms of approval. Used in the latter sense, recognition is often linked with institutions that can grant and deny official approval of something or express official appreciation of someone. Nevertheless, recognition can also take place between individuals. This occurs, for instance, when one is willing to admit that a discussion partner has a point, even though one does not agree on that point, or on some other issues. In such acts, there are obviously different levels, ranging from non-existent through weak to full forms of recognition.

Taking into account the scale from non-recognition to recognition can provide us with a valuable new perspective on the study of ancient texts. It goes without saying that attempts to place individual authors on such a scale are unavoidably based on scholarly constructs of these authors’ overall views and intentions, and there is much variation in such constructs. Nevertheless, as will be demonstrated below, there are indeed clear differences in how much early Christian authors were willing to credit their opponents’ views. A scale from non-recognition to at least moderate forms of recognition can be constructed easily, even though there is and will be considerable variation as regards where exactly individual authors should be placed on that scale.

The expression “now and then” in my title can also be understood in two ways. It can be used as referring to present and past, but it also means “from time to time, occasionally.” Those knowledgeable about Valentinian sources and scholarship are well aware that recognizing Valentinians, even in the “weaker” sense of identification, was then, and is now, a vexing problem. The Valentinians are now customarily placed in the group of “Gnostics,” and thus effectively removed

1 Understood in the former sense of identification, recognition was a popular feature in ancient literature: “The recognition type-scene belonged to the storyteller’s standard repertory in ancient Greco-Roman narrative and drama, especially in epic, novel, tragedy, and comedy, where motifs of hidden identities, veiling and revealing, *Sein* and *Schein*, deception and discovery often played a central role in the plot.” K.B. Larsen, *Recognizing the Stranger: Recognition Scenes in the Gospel of John* (Biblical Interpretation Series 93; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 1.

from what is conceived to be “true” Christianity. There is, however, a marked move away from this essentializing identification of Valentinians as “Gnostics,” and towards other designations. One of the points I seek to make in this article is that the distinction between the Valentinians and (true) Christians was far less obviously “then,” that is, in the early Christian period, than it is “now,” that is, in scholarly imagination.

The Valentinians conceived of themselves first and foremost as Christians, and sought to be acknowledged as such. Moreover, it was difficult for ordinary second-century Christians to differentiate between Valentinians and other kinds of Christians. Irenaeus wrote his five-volume anti-Valentinian work *Against Heresies* (c. 180) precisely to distinguish between the Valentinians and what he conceived to be orthodox Christianity. While Irenaeus was adamant about not finding any value in Valentinians and their theology, other early Christian teachers, such as Clement and Origen, were engaged in a much more constructive dialogue with Valentinian Christians.

Problems with identifying Valentinians persist “now,” that is, in modern scholarship, where individual teachers and texts are constantly removed from, and added to, the Valentinian body of evidence. Doubts have been raised whether Valentinus himself or some of his alleged followers, like Heracleon, were Valentinians.² Moreover, there is a recent trend in the study of the Nag Hammadi library to disassociate texts in this collection from the Christianity of the second and the third centuries and to place them into a considerably later context, that of fourth-century Egypt. This trend has also resulted in revisionist views about texts that have customarily been classified as Valentinian. By way of example, Hugo Lundhaug has argued that the *Gospel of Philip* can be best understood in the context of Egyptian monastic Christianity of the fourth and fifth centuries.³ At the same time, new candidates continue to be proposed for the Valentinian corpus, such as the *Apocalypse of Paul* from Nag Hammadi Codex V.⁴

Finally, it is no surprise that, after the deconstruction of “Gnosticism” as a scholarly category,⁵ similar efforts are now being made on “Valentinianism.” One recent study suggests that the whole concept of “the school of Valentinus”

2 Valentinus: C. Marksches, *Valentinus Gnosticus?: Untersuchungen zur valentinianischen Gnosis; mit einem Kommentar zu den Fragmenten Valentins* (WUNT 65; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992).

3 H. Lundhaug, *Images of Rebirth: Cognitive Poetics and Transformational Soteriology in the Gospel of Philip and the Exegesis on the Soul* (NHMS 73; Leiden: Brill, 2010). For my brief rejoinder to some of Lundhaug’s arguments, see I. Dunderberg, *Gnostic Morality Revisited* (WUNT 347; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2015), 9 n. 20.

4 Cf. M. Kaler, *Flora Tells a Story: The Apocalypse of Paul and Its Contexts* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008).

5 Cf. M.A. Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); K.L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

is merely a heresiological construct.⁶ My view is that “the school of Valentinus” will probably stand the test of critical inquiry better than “Gnosticism.” While one of the most fundamental problems related to the latter is that this term does not appear in ancient texts, “the school of Valentinus” is mentioned in early sources, and a number of individual Christian teachers were linked with this group from the outset.⁷ While there is no denying the fact that heresiologists were eager to categorize their opponents for polemical purposes, they must have had some particular reasons why they linked some opponents with Valentinus and some other people with Basilides, Marcion, and other “heresiarchs.”

1. Talking about Recognition

In what follows, I will leave aside the issues pertaining to the identification of Valentinians on the basis of ancient sources, and focus on issues related to “recognition” in the stronger sense, that is, in that of acknowledging, acceptance and approval. This viewpoint is linked with the “Reason and Religious Recognition” research project, for which I presently work at the University of Helsinki.⁸

One way to articulate the project’s aim is to say that it seeks to take the next step from tolerance to fuller approval of the “other.” One of the key issues in the project is to explore acts of recognition, and especially religious views about people that would make such acts possible. Risto Saarinen, the director of this project, outlines the core of an act of recognition in his forthcoming study as comprising two stages:⁹

1. B (a person or a group) seeks recognition from A, and
2. A grants recognition to B.

This core act of recognition can be expanded in many ways; for instance, B can be specific about “as what” it wants to be recognized, and A can be specific about “as what” it recognizes B.

One possible outcome of recognition acts like this is mutual recognition in which B also recognizes A. Such acts of mutual recognition, however, usually presuppose that the parties involved are official institutions and on an equal footing. The best examples of acts of recognition of this type are official agree-

6 G. Smith, *Guilt by Association: Heresy Catalogues in Early Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

7 For a summary of the arguments for the school hypothesis, see I. Dunderberg, *Beyond Gnosticism: Myth, Lifestyle, and Society in the School of Valentinus* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 2–5.

8 This project, directed by my colleague Risto Saarinen, is one of the Finnish Centres of Excellence, funded by the Academy of Finland. I am the leader of a research team on antiquity and early Christianity; two other research teams in the project are focused on medieval and modern discussions related to recognition.

9 R. Saarinen, *Recognition and Religion: A Historical and Systematic Study* [forthcoming].

ments between states or those between well-established churches. The relationship between A and B, however, is often asymmetric in the sense that A represents the official power, whereas B, the person or group seeking recognition from A, is subordinated to A's rule.

The asymmetric relationship is no doubt characteristic of the situation in which early Christians sought recognition from the outsiders in the Roman Empire. The most obvious cases to be studied in this connection are the stories about martyrs and other Christians seeking recognition from Roman authorities when summoned and interrogated by them.

In such stories, the bar is sometimes set unrealistically high. The author of Luke-Acts describes the swift conversion of the Roman proconsul Sergius Paulus into full-blown Christian faith as the result of his brief meeting with Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:6–12). If we dwell on the question of “as what” Christianity seeks to be recognized here, the answer is not (as one might expect) “as one of the tolerated religions in the empire.” Rather, what is claimed here is that Christianity should be recognized as the *only* true religion.

The story of the conversion of Sergius in Luke-Acts also shows how recognition can be sought at the expense of a third party. It is the punishing miracle Paul performs on Sergius' Jewish court magician Elymas that makes Sergius convert to Christianity so quickly. Luke thus uses the story of Sergius' conversion to reaffirm a prevalent Greco-Roman stereotype of the Jews as open to magic, which in turn made them politically suspect and even dangerous in the empire. This is one way in Luke-Acts to bring home the opinion that the recognition of Christianity entails the non-recognition of Judaism.

2. Irenaeus, the Valentinians and Textual Community

Turning from Luke-Acts to the Valentinian evidence, issues related to recognition are very complicated. It is much more difficult to identify the parties “A” (the one from whom recognition is sought) and “B” (the one who is seeking recognition) in the debates involving the Valentinians. Let me start with Irenaeus of Lyons. He vigorously argued for non-recognition of the Valentinians, but it cannot be inferred from his rebuttal of their views that there were Valentinians who sought recognition from him.

We can also ponder “as what,” or in what role, Irenaeus writes against Valentinians. While he did not have any official power in the empire, he doubtless had, and could have claimed, institutional power as the bishop of Lyons. This, however, is not the position he adopts in the debate. He neither calls upon nor mentions his ecclesiastical position in his account of why he set out to write his anti-Valentinian work. He introduces his work against the Valentinians as “a concise and clear report on the doctrine of these people who are at present spreading false teaching,” and his intention is to supply the addressee with “suggestions . . . for refuting this doctrine, by showing how utterly absurd, inconsistent, and incongruous

with the Truth their statements are.” In short, he seeks “not only to make clear to you their doctrines – which you have long sought to learn – but also to supply you with aids for proving it false.” There are glimpses of Irenaeus as an ecclesiastical authority later in his work but this is not how he positions himself as the author of his work against the Valentinians.

Another noteworthy trait in Irenaeus’ introduction is the impression of close contacts between him and some Valentinians. Irenaeus relates that his account of Valentinian teaching is based upon discussions with some of “the disciples of Valentinus,” and on reading their “commentaries.”¹⁰ There is no need to assume that the Valentinians whom Irenaeus met had approached him in seeking recognition from him as an ecclesiastical authority. As PHEME PERKINS points out, the picture emerging here is rather that of a textual community in which books were composed, copied, exchanged, read aloud, discussed and debated.¹¹ Most “academic” texts in antiquity had little chance of success in the public book market, and so were distributed more privately in the smaller circles of the learned. William Johnson’s valuable recent studies on ancient textual communities detail how the circulation of books and especially granting someone else access to one’s own work (either completed or in progress) were regarded as special tokens of friendship in such groups, creating and reaffirming the sense of belonging to the same exclusive club.¹²

Although Irenaeus was fiercely opposed to the teaching of the Valentinians, his access to their texts and his discussions with them show that he was part of the same network of early Christian intellectuals as they were.¹³ Although Irenaeus’ full-scale attack on the Valentinians and their teachings cannot be explained in terms of (overblown) criticism that one might expect in textual communities like this,¹⁴ his aspiration to settle the issue by argumentative means rather than by calling upon his ecclesiastical status fits this context well.

Irenaeus also delved into Valentinian teaching in order to offer a comprehensive description of it. He did not simply reproduce the sources available to him but composed his own summary based on such sources.¹⁵ One notable difference

10 Irenaeus, *Her.* 1, preface.

11 The relevance of this aspect for our understanding of the encounters of Irenaeus and Valentinians has been recently pointed out by Perkins.

12 For a comprehensive account of these aspects related to ancient textual communities, see W.A. Johnson, *Readers and Reading Cultures among Greeks and Romans: A Study of Elite Reading Communities in the High Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); cf. also idem, “Constructing Elite Reading Communities in the High Empire”, in *Ancient Literacies: The Culture of Reading in Greece and Rome*, ed. W.A. Johnson & H.N. Parker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 320–30.

13 Ph. Perkins, “Valentinians and the Christian Canon”, in *Proceedings of Valentinian Conference (Rome, October 15–18, 2013)*, ed. E. Thomassen [forthcoming].

14 For some examples, see W.A. Johnson, *Readers and Reading Cultures*, e.g., 42–62 (on Pliny’s literary community).

15 Cf. I. Dunderberg, *Beyond Gnosticism*, 9.

between Irenaeus' account and the parallel but independent account in Clement of Alexandria's *Excerpts from Theodotus* (43–65, "Section C" in that work) is that myth and scriptural proof texts are constantly intertwined in the latter, whereas Irenaeus offers a sample of proof texts Valentinians used to support their views at the end of his summary. It could thus be suggested that Irenaeus, by separating myth from proof texts, gave a new outlook on and thus, in a way, "invented" the Valentinian myth. This interpretation, however, is not completely certain since no scriptural proof texts are adduced for the cosmogonic tales related in the Valentinian *Tripartite Tractate* either. The juxtaposition of myth and proof texts may, thus, be a feature peculiar to Clement's source. Furthermore, the similarity in the basic structure of Irenaeus' account and the first two sections of the *Tripartite Tractate* suggests that the narrative outline of Irenaeus' report indeed goes back to Valentinian sources. In comparison to the lengthy cosmogonical account in the *Tripartite Tractate*, however, Irenaeus' report seems to offer a greatly truncated version of the Valentinian myth. This supports the conclusion that Irenaeus did not reproduce any of his sources in full, as is sometimes assumed, but offered a summary based upon them.

Though Irenaeus can be commended for his efforts to study Valentinian sources, his work betrays very weak tokens of the recognition of the other. These tokens include the fact that he found the school of Valentinus important enough to be disagreed with, and the fact that, all his sarcastic and malevolent remarks aside, he made the effort to paint a relatively careful picture of the Valentinian myth. This is how far recognition gets in Irenaeus. He finds little recommendable in the Valentinians and nothing in their teaching. Irenaeus does not shy away from any of the dirty tricks used in ancient polemics, including gossip, burlesque, libellous poems, claims about one's opponent's suspicious ancestry, and accusations of one's adversary's sexual misconduct and other manifestations of lewd morality.¹⁶ Irenaeus pays lip service to the rhetorical skill and persuasiveness of the Valentinians, but only as opposed to the simple truth he claims to profess in simple style.¹⁷ There is, as far as I can see, only one notable "crack" in Irenaeus' energetic vituperation. He is willing to admit that, while most Valentinians were immoral people, some of them were committed to high moral standards. Yet Irenaeus heaps scorn on such persons as well. In Irenaeus's unrelenting polemics, these "better" Valentinians were self-important because of their virtuous lifestyle and showed off their good morality, walking around "like Gallian roosters."¹⁸

Irenaeus also possibly misrepresents the materials he got access to, or learned about, in the textual community to which both he and the Valentinians belonged. Irenaeus accuses the Valentinians of "producing their own compositions (*con-*

16 Gossiping: Irenaeus, *Her.* 1.13.4–7; burlesque: 1.4.4; 1.11.4–5; libellous poem: 1.15.6; claims about one's opponent's suspicious ancestry: 1.23–31: 1.31.3; lewd morality: 1.6.3–4; 1.13.5–6, etc.

17 Irenaeus, *Her.* 1, preface.

18 Irenaeus, *Her.* 3.15.2.

scriptiones),” and presents the text called the *Gospel of Truth* (*veritatis euangelium*) as the prime example of the audacity (*audacie*), which their production of new books expresses.¹⁹ Irenaeus claims, furthermore, that this particular text “does not at all conform to the gospels of the apostles” (*apostolorum evangelii*). Irenaeus thus insinuates that this text belongs to the same category as, and competes with, the New Testament gospels. If the text Irenaeus referred to was the same as or similar to the *Gospel of Truth* included in the Nag Hammadi Library, nothing could be further off the mark. This text does not purport to be a story of the life of Jesus but offers an eloquent reflection on the nature of the Father of All and of the role of Jesus as the revealer. The word “gospel,” used in the opening line of this text, is used not as a genre designation but simply as meaning “good news”: “The good news (“gospel”) about truth is joy for those who have received grace from the Father of truth ...” (NHC I, 16).²⁰

The early reactions to Irenaeus’ account of Valentinians were split, which may indicate that he went too far in his polemics for some tastes. In his *Against Valentinians*, Tertullian almost slavishly followed Irenaeus, only adding new jokes and quips from time to time. Tertullian knew, or knew about, some first-hand Valentinian sources but paid little attention to them.²¹ There are also some glimpses of him being informed about some particularities of Valentinian theology that are not mentioned in Irenaeus.²² Epiphanius of Salamis, who wrote in the late fourth century, largely based his anti-Valentinian report on long direct quotations from Irenaeus, though he also knew – and (unlike Tertullian) also quoted – some first-hand Valentinian texts, such as Ptolemy’s *Letter to Flora* and the *Valentinian Instructional Letter*.²³

A somewhat different reaction to Irenaeus is attested in the *Refutation of All Heresies*, customarily but not unanimously attributed to Hippolytus of Rome. The author of this work drew heavily on Irenaeus’ account, but he also recorded protests that some followers of the Valentinian Marcus had raised against that account. After mentioning Irenaeus’ report on Marcosian baptismal rituals, the author of the *Refutation* continues: “When they read (ἐντυχόντες)²⁴ this, they, as is their wont, denied that this was their tradition.” One may be entitled to see

19 Irenaeus, *Her.* 3.11.9.

20 The manuscript of this text in NHC I does not have a separate title (either at the beginning or at the end). The present title modern scholars use for this text in scholarship is derived from its opening words. Nevertheless, this was not an unusual way of identifying texts in antiquity either. Hence the possibility that the text Irenaeus refers to is the same as, or similar to, the *Gospel of Truth* now available to us in the Nag Hammadi Library.

21 Tertullian (*The Flesh of Christ*, 17.1) mentions one Alexander, who in support of his teaching called upon “the psalms of Valentinus.” Clement of Alexandria could have been subjected to the same accusation (see below)!

22 Tertullian, *Val.* 4.2, suggests that the great number of eternal beings (aeons) should be understood as “names and positions”, rather than more literally as a household of divine beings.

23 Ptolemy’s *Letter to Flora*: Epiphanius, *Pan.* 33.3.1–7.10; *Valentinian Instructional Letter*: 31.5–6.

24 For this sense of the verb, see *LSJ* s.v. III.

here a minor act of recognition since the author finds the reason “to study more carefully and find out in detail what their tradition on the first baptism ... and on the second, which they call ‘redemption,’ is in this protest.”²⁵

3. Stronger Recognition: Clement of Alexandria

Stronger signals of recognition can be found in the works of two Alexandrian teachers, Clement and Origen. Although their anti-Valentinian sentiments are unmistakable through and through, both authors also occasionally express approval of some views put forward by their Valentinian adversaries. In what follows, I take a brief look at two texts, first, the fragments of Valentinus in Clement’s *Miscellanies* (*Stromateis*) and, second, fragments of the Valentinian Heraclion in Origen’s *Commentary on John*.

Two general comments deserve to be first made as regards Clement’s views about the Valentinians. First, he did not resort to the same “dirty tricks” as Irenaeus in describing the Valentinians. (Clement did not completely refrain from those tricks in other cases: he mentions someone who called himself a “Gnostic” and promoted licentious behavior by claiming “to conquer pleasure by practicing pleasure.”)²⁶ Second, Clement’s response to the Valentinians varies from work to work. Judith Kovacs points out that, in his more elementary work *Christ the Educator*, Clement rejects the Valentinian ideas “in strongly polemical statements”, whereas in the *Miscellanies* he shows “how the insights of Valentinian exegetes can be incorporated into the true, ecclesiastical γνῶσις.”²⁷

The latter work, the more theologically inclusive *Miscellanies*, is also our main source for the fragments of Valentinus’ own works. Altogether six – and thus a majority – of such passages come from this text. The more critical side of the dialogue comes to the fore in the way Clement quotes and discusses Valentinus’ view about the creation of Adam. Fragment 1 of Valentinus offers a glimpse of the story in which the creator angels recognized a superior divine essence in Adam, became afraid of him and sought to hide or destroy him.²⁸ Clement quotes this passage and another one from the followers of Basilides in his discussion about right and wrong forms of fear.²⁹ While Clement rejects fear as a passion, he finds positive value in the fear of God and in the fear promulgated by the divine law. Building on the dictum “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” Clement

25 Ref. 6.42.1; cf. N. Förster, *Marcus Magus: Kult, Lehre und Gemeindeleben einer valentinianischen Gnostikerguppe: Sammlung der Quellen und Kommentar* (WUNT 114; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 28–29.

26 Clement, *Misc.* 2.117.5–6.

27 J.L. Kovacs, “Concealment and Gnostic Exegesis: Clement of Alexandria’s Interpretation of the Tabernacle”, *Studia Patristica* 31 (1997), 414–37: 431.

28 Valentinus, Fragment 1 (Clement, *Misc.* 2.36.2–4).

29 Clement, *Misc.* 2.32–40.

finds educational value in God's law since it teaches us the things we should avoid, including adultery, pederasty, injustice, and so on.

In this connection, Clement is outspoken in his criticism of Basilides and Valentinus: "These men are fabricating meaningless nonsense." The main obstacle in their view is that they presuppose the existence of lesser deities involved in creation. This can be seen in Clement's response, which begins with the affirmation that "there is only one first principle." Clement's insistence that fear can be rational (as "the beginning of wisdom") is especially targeted against Valentinus, in whose story of Adam's creation fear appears completely irrational and is linked with the inferior creator angels.³⁰

Clement is keen to interpret Valentinus' teachings in the light of typical prejudices linked with those of the "wrong side." In Fragment 4, Clement quotes Valentinus' teaching about the primordial immortality of humankind, and takes this teaching as illustrating a "typical" disdain of martyrdom among the heretics.³¹ The alleged link of Valentinus' teaching with avoidance of martyrdom is far from obvious here, and Clement immediately moves on to a critique of the doctrine of two Gods, for which he sees evidence in another quotation from Valentinus, which contains reflection on how the perfect God's invisible nature becomes manifest in the imperfect world.³² The passage distinguishes between God and the world, but since the distinction between the true God and the creator-god is not present in it, Clement must "produce" it by bringing in what he obviously considered to be standard Valentinian theology. Clement amplifies the intended effect by placing Valentinus here in the dubious company of Basilides and the Montanists.

Fragment 2 of Valentinus comprises a reflection on how the good Father and God alone can purify a heart afflicted by evil spirits.³³ Clement also here links Valentinus with Basilides and, in this case, the latter's son Isidor,³⁴ but the link seems forced. There is no obvious link between Valentinus' teaching on the impure heart and the Basilidean theory about the soul's "attachments," that is, the natures of animals clinging to the soul that drive humans into behaving like animals. It is more interesting to note how Clement steers the teaching of Valentinus in the direction of what he designates as "our truth." This nod to Valentinus can be understood as a small token of recognition. Clement both puts Valentinus into

30 Clement's view about the educational benefits of fear comes very close to the view he attributes to Basilides' followers in this section. The latter also designated "fear" as "the beginning of a wisdom which classifies, distinguishes, perfects and restores human beings to their pristine state." For the view of Basilides' followers (Clement, *Misc.* 2.36.1), see W.A. Löhr, *Basilides und seine Schule: Eine Studie zur Theologie- und Kirchengeschichte des zweiten Jahrhunderts* (WUNT 83; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 61–78.

31 Clement, *Misc.* 4.89.1–3.

32 Valentinus, Fragment 5 = Clement, *Misc.* 4.89.6–90.1.

33 Clement, *Misc.* 2.114.3–6.

34 Basilides and Isidor: Clement, *Misc.* 2.112.1–2.114.2; for a comprehensive interpretation of this passage, see W.A. Löhr, *Basilides und seine Schule*, 78–101).

bad company and extricates him from it. What happens in the relevant passage is that Clement finds a disagreement between Valentinus' teaching about the soul, undergoing a change from worse to better, and the Valentinian theory of fixed natures, which does not admit of such a change: "For if he grants the soul the power of repentance and choosing the better course, he will be saying unwillingly what our truth says as dogma, that salvation comes not from nature but from a change in obedience."³⁵

The teaching that the soul is the place where the choice between evil and good is made is attested for Valentinians; Irenaeus mentions this view alongside their theory of three fixed natures.³⁶ Clement, however, is inclined to see essence in difference; that is, he thinks that the theory of three fixed natures forms the core of Valentinian theology, while the more familiar theory that the soul can choose between good and evil is not part of that core. Hence Clement's contention that Valentinus is saying something "unwillingly," when the latter's teaching comes close to Clement's own views.

Clement, however, takes even firmer steps towards a fuller recognition, as can be seen in his discussion on Fragment 3. This fragment provides us with a surprising illustration of Jesus' great self-control. Valentinus taught about Jesus: "He was firm, enduring all things. Jesus practiced divinity. He ate and drank in his own manner, without excreting food. The power of his continence was so great that not even food was destroyed in him since he did not have that which is perishable."³⁷

Valentinus's argument should not surprise us since similar stories were told of legendary sages, such as Pythagoras, in the Greco-Roman world.³⁸ What is surprising is the way Clement uses this teaching of Valentinus. One might expect scorn, or at least refutation based on the lack of proof in the gospels for this view about Jesus. Quite the contrary, Clement uses Valentinus to support his own teaching about self-control. Before the quotation from Valentinus, Clement specifies what self-control is: "Self-control means indifference to money, comfort, and property, a mind above spectacles, control of the tongue, mastery of evil thoughts . . ." After quoting Valentinus, Clement formulates a conclusion: "*So we embrace self-control* out of love we bear the Lord and out of its honorable status, consecrating the temple of the Spirit." In other words, Clement recognizes Valentinus here as a source of genuine Christian teaching and uses his teaching as one would use scriptural proof texts.

In Fragment 6, Valentinus contends that "Many of the things written in common books can also be found written in the church of God."³⁹ Clement comments that Valentinus here "makes the truth a matter of common knowledge (κοινοποιεῖ τὴν ἀλήθειαν)." As Christoph Marksches points out, this should not be taken

35 Clement, *Misc.* 2.115.2.

36 Irenaeus, *Her.* 1.7.5.

37 Clement, *Misc.* 3.59.3.

38 Cf. I. Dunderberg, *Beyond Gnosticism*, 22.

39 Clement, *Misc.* 6.52.3–53.1.

as a reproach.⁴⁰ Clement runs this quotation at the end of a section in which he argues that it was the same God who gave the law to the Jews and philosophy to the Greeks, and that those who practiced this philosophy (as a way of life) were easily won over in Hades to the Christian message that Christ preached during his visit there. Clement had already bolstered his teaching in this passage with a spurious quotation, which he attributed to Paul: “Take also the Greek books, read the Sibyl, how it is shown that God is one, and how the future is indicated. And take and read Hystaspes and you will find much more luminously and distinctly the Son of God described ...”⁴¹ It is impossible to trace the origin of the quotation, but it serves the same purpose as one from Valentinus talking about the positive value of the “the common books.”⁴²

4. Between Rejection and Approval: Origen and Heracleon

The examples discussed above illustrate that Clement “now and then” recognizes Valentinus’ teaching, although he is more often than not very critical of it. The same attitude towards proponents of Valentinian theology is apparent in Origen’s work. His interaction with Valentinians is best attested in his *Commentary on John* where he often quotes, discusses and interprets the Valentinian Heracleon’s views. Although Origen’s wealthy patron Ambrose was a former Valentinian, rebuttal of Heracleon’s views does not loom large in Origen’s commentary. Heracleon is not mentioned in the introduction to the entire work, and the intensity with which Origen is engaged in the discussion with his views varies from one book to another.

Much ink has been spilt in debating Heracleon’s theology in recent years, above all on the issue of whether he was a proponent of the Valentinian doctrine of three fixed natures (spirit, soul, matter) or whether his views can be understood in more flexible terms, admitting change from one category to another. I leave this debate aside here, however, and focus on the way Origen conducts dialogue with Heracleon.⁴³

While Irenaeus was an ecclesial authority but did not invoke that role, Origen poses as “the man of the church,” who is up to the challenge presented by misguided allegorists like Heracleon. Origen portrays himself as being capable of stepping in to defend “the teaching of the Church” and putting the blame

40 C. Marksches, *Valentinus Gnosticus?*, 189–90.

41 Clement, *Misc.* 6.5.1. “Hystaspes” refers to the Persian apocalypse *Oracle of Hystaspes*. For this text, see J.J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, ²1998), 32. The Sibyl and Hystaspes are also mentioned together in Justin, *1. Apol.* 20.1; 44.12.

42 It should be added that Clement also supports this particular view with a quotation from Isidor, although he is even further off the mark than Valentinus from Clement’s perspective.

43 For a fuller account of Heracleon’s views and the variant modes of Origen’s responses to him, I refer to my essay, “Origen’s Dialogue with Heracleon and the School of Valentinus”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Origen*, ed. R.E. Heine & K.J. Torjesen (Oxford: Oxford University Press) [forthcoming].

on “those who pursue the knowledge falsely so called.”⁴⁴ Therefore, it is striking that Origen addresses his most biting remarks not to Heracleon and other allegorists but to the literalists, the “slaves of the letter.”⁴⁵ In comparison to Origen’s outright rebuttal of the latter, his reactions to Heracleon are moderate and much more nuanced, ranging from full rejection to moderate or conditional approval. Here Origen’s approach to dialogue differs completely from that in Irenaeus, in whom one is hard-pressed to find any tokens of approval. To illustrate the range of Origen’s responses to Heracleon, I employ the model based upon modern questionnaires, which often operate with five variables: completely disagree – disagree – neither agree nor disagree – agree – completely agree.⁴⁶ Instead offering a full survey here, I take up only a few examples to make my point.

Completely disagree: The most prominent issue to which Origen returns time and again is the heterodox teaching about two gods. It is thus clear that whenever the inferior creator-god is referred to in Heracleon (e. g., the royal man in John 4),⁴⁷ Origen disputes this interpretation, but in another context grants that in one way the heterodox distinction is not far off the mark:

“Perhaps it is possible for someone to know God but not know the Father beyond knowing him as God . . . it is indeed possible to agree with the heterodox view that Moses and the prophets did not know the Father.”⁴⁸

Origen also repeatedly rejects “those who introduce natures.” This refers to the theory that humans are divided into predetermined groups and that their salvation depends on the group they belong to. The way Origen interprets Heracleon’s teachings show that he was keen to place Heracleon among the proponents of this theory.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, Origen did not want to push this point too far. He occasionally reports uncertainty over Heracleon’s intentions on this issue. For instance, Origen conditionally approves of Heracleon’s explanation that the Samaritan woman “demonstrated a faith that was unhesitating and appropriate to her nature,” the condition being that Heracleon did not refer to her being of divine nature.⁵⁰

44 Origen, *Comm. John* 5.8 (trans. Heine).

45 Origen, *Comm. John* 10.276; cf. 13.110, 146.

46 For a similar approach to the modes of Origen’s dialogue with Heracleon, see H.W. Attridge, *Essays on John and Hebrews* (WUNT 264; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 198–99; A. Wucherpfennig, *Heracleon Philologus: Gnostische Johannesexegese im zweiten Jahrhundert* (WUNT, 142; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2002), 25–26.

47 Origen, *Comm. John* 13.416.

48 Origen, *Comm. John* 19.26; cf. R.E. Heine, *Origen: Commentary on the Gospel According to John* (2 vols; FC 80 & 89; Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1989–93), 2.25.

49 E.g., Origen, *Comm. John* 20.54.

50 Origen, *Comm. John* 13.64; for other similar cases, in which Origen hesitates concerning Heracleon’s take on this issue, see 2.137; 10.211.

Disagree: One example of respectful disagreement is related to Heracleon's interpretation that Christ's shoe (the thongs of which the Baptist was unable to loosen) denotes the world. Origen applauds Heracleon for "taking the shoe as the world in a very powerful and ingenious manner" – but finally concludes: "I do not think we must agree."⁵¹

Neither agree nor disagree: Origen sometimes mentions Heracleon's teachings without commenting on them. Two examples: 1) "But consider also Heracleon's assertion. He says that the Church received the Christ and was persuaded concerning him that he alone understands all things."⁵² 2) He says, "For men believe in the Savior first by being led by men, but whenever they read his words, they no longer believe because of human testimony alone, but because of the truth itself."⁵³

Agree: There are a few cases in which Origen voices *conditional* approval of Heracleon's views. One example (Origen and Heracleon's views about the Samaritan woman's nature) was already mentioned above. Another intriguing example is Heracleon's explanation of the words "For the Father also seeks such to worship him" (John 4.23). Heracleon explains: "What belongs to the Father has been lost in deep erroneous matter and is being sought so that the Father may be worshipped by his own." Origen responds: "If he were referring to the story about the lost sheep and the son who fell away from his father's ways, we too would accept his explanation."⁵⁴ Heracleon thus offers a good explanation but for the wrong text!

Origen is sympathetic towards Heracleon's view about the relationship between John and Elias, saying that he has made a serious effort to understand Heracleon at this point. Heracleon explains that the identification of John and Elias does not mean full identity but that John had Elias' attributes, like clothes on him. Origen responds:

"I do not quite perceive how, in his view, being the Elias who is to come is John's clothes. Perhaps it accords with our view ... perhaps it can be said that this spirit of Elias is the clothing of John's soul." (6.114)

Completely agree: Origen commends Heracleon for his characterization of the Levites and Pharisees sent to John the Baptist:

"When he wishes... to explain why those sent from the Jews to question him are priests and Levites, his answer is not bad: 'Because it was fitting for these who are devoted to God to be curious about these matters and to inquire. ... His statement is convincing that the Pharisees inquire out of malice and not out of a desire to learn.'⁵⁵

51 Origen, *Comm. John* 6.199.

52 Origen, *Comm. John* 13.164.

53 Origen, *Comm. John* 13.363.

54 Origen, *Comm. John* 13.120–1.

55 Origen, *Comm. John* 6.115, 126; Cf. H.W. Attridge, *Essays on John and Hebrews*, 198.

Origen not only concurs but adopts Heracleon's reading. As regards the priests and Levites, Origen points out that

“things are said with gentleness and curiosity ... There is nothing self-willed or rash in the inquiry of these men; everything is appropriate to scrupulous servants of God. But those sent by the Pharisees ... address the Baptist in arrogant and rather senseless words ...”⁵⁶

5. Conclusion

As those engaged in issues related to the philosophy of history point out, writing history is about making choices. Otherwise, it would be impossible to make any sense of the endless amount of the “raw data” available to us in historical records of all kinds. Taking this simple fact into account brings in the moral aspect inherent in all historiography, and leads to the self-reflective question of why, as scholars of the past, we make the choices we do in our research.⁵⁷ One pertinent question that calls for a critical self-reflection is what kinds of issues dominate the narratives of the past we produce.

I have outlined a broad range of early responses to the Valentinian Christians and their theology above. These responses bear witness to a conflict mode, but other modes of interaction with the “other” are attested as well. There is a long way from Irenaeus and Tertullian, who seek to defeat the Valentinians in every possible manner, to Clement, who sometimes built his own teaching on his opponent's views, and to Origen, who occasionally paused to reflect on what his opponent truly meant. Different depictions of intra-Christian relations in the second and third centuries can be offered on the basis of different sets of evidence.

This range in the available evidence leads to the critical question of what part of the evidence seems preferable to the narratives we concoct of the past, and why. Are conflicts more decisive in our conceptualization of the past than examples of less aggressive relationships among people, and if they are, why? I assume many of us have been trained to focus on conflicts because they are thought to bring in change in the course of history. Another reason for a conflict-driven emphasis may be an implicit wish to produce a larger narrative of how the Christian church as it now stands evolved in the midst of early crises where its distinct identity markers differentiated it from Judaism and “heresies” developed.⁵⁸ It may seem

56 Origen, *Comm. John* 6.51–2; cf. 6.57: “John saw from the question the reverence of the priests and Levites.”

57 For one well-articulated analysis of such issues in modern historiography, see G.M. Spiegel, “Above, about and beyond the writing of history: A retrospective view of Hayden White's *Metahistory* on the 40th anniversary of its publication”, *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 17 (2013), 492–508. I wish to thank my wife, church historian and medievalist, Dr. Päivi Salmesvuori, for this reference.

58 For one example of this mode of explaining Christian origins, see G. Theißen, *A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion*, trans. J. Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1999).

an easier way to explain the evolution of the church as having taken place through bitter struggles, and we may find instances of constructive dialogue to be of less importance in this “big picture.”

If this is so, one obvious question that needs to be raised is whether the way we construct the conflict-driven past also reflects, or contributes to, how we conceive of the present and the future. The conflict theories of different sorts presuppose binary thinking since they require us to construct images of opposed parties that can be more or less securely identified in the historical evidence. One problem with such images is that they perpetuate the tendencies that are only promoted in the most biased of our sources, but this is not the only problem. Another question that can be raised is whether the results of our binary imagination of the past reinforce the binary thinking that is so characteristic of the way people reason, and yet easily leads not only to one-sided but also to destructive thinking about the past, present, and the future.⁵⁹ If it is true that “the historian must choose a past that serves his or her desire for a more perfect future,”⁶⁰ perhaps it is our moral responsibility to take a more serious look than previously at the instances of more constructive interactions between past people in our evidence and use that evidence as something to “think with” in our conceptions of what “a more perfect future” could be.

59 One example I have in mind of such destructive results in our world is the way the muslims are often portrayed in Western media in terms of a binary opposition, that is, as the dangerous “other”, regardless of how diversified their communities in reality are.

60 G. Spiegel, “Above, about and beyond the writing of history”, 497 (in reference to Hayden White’s view about historiography). As Spiegel points out, this approach to the historian’s task does not mean that we should or could give up the more historical aspiration to “to get it right.”

