Valentinian Protology and the Philosophical Discussion Regarding the First Principle

Roig Lanzillotta, Lautaro

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CHAPTER 11

Valentinian Protology and the Philosophical Debate regarding the First Principles

Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta

Taking Irenaeus's report of Ptolemy's *Great Notice* (*Against Heresies* 1.1–8), this chapter will delve into Valentinian protology, as also witnessed by the *Refutatio*, Heracleon's fragments, Ptolemy's *Letter to Flora, Excerpta ex Theodoto*, and some texts from Nag Hammadi. The comparative analysis of the Valentinian system will firstly show that sectarian views on the Demiurge, matter, and creation are much more positive than the church fathers would be ready to admit. Secondly, it will demonstrate that Valentinian mythologoumena should be placed in the wider context of the religious-philosophical discussion regarding first principles in the first two centuries, in which Neo-Pythagoreans, Platonists, Stoics, and Gnostics alike were engaged. Thirdly, it will confirm that Ptolemy's equation of the Logos with the demiurgic cause anticipates the split between a divine intellect and a demiurgic intellect that we find in Numenius. In this sense, the analysis of Valentinian protology allows us to see Valentinians as actors in their own right, who not only participated, but also dared to innovate in the lively philosophical discussion that involved different philosophical schools, Jews, and Christians alike.

Until quite recently, Gnostic thought was exclusively understood vis-à-vis proto-orthodox Christianity. Mainly due to the bias of our sources, until the discovery of the Nag Hammadi treatises in the 1940s, our views regarding Valentinian protology relied on the partial understanding of the church fathers, who voluntarily or involuntarily transmitted a rather distorted version of it.[1] The publication and translation of and commentaries on the numerous treatises, however, would still require four or five more decades to be completed.

It is not surprising, therefore, that it is only recently—since the last decades of the twentieth century—that we have begun to understand that Gnostic thought was not simply to be understood as a parasite on orthodox Judaism or Christianity.[2] Gnostics were important actors in the cultural context in which

1 See David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 1–6 and 29–36.

2 April DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Roelof van den Broek, *Gnostic Religion in Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013);

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they lived, and the stature of their thought can only be properly understood as part and parcel of the ongoing discussion among philosophical and religious groups in the first centuries CE.[3] Slowly but surely, studies have begun to sketch a new picture in which old clichés are superseded one by one.[4] Not only are we beginning to understand that their views cannot be taken as simple reactions, we now know that essential conceptual developments in both Christian and pagan worldviews were due to their innovative contributions.[5]

In this chapter, I would like to exemplify this by delving into Valentinian protology. The analysis of Ptolemy's *Great Notice* and its comparison with other versions of the Valentinian system will highlight points of contact with contemporary discussions regarding first principles in philosophical circles. In so doing, my goal is not the analysis of the "sources" of Valentinian views.[6] As I will argue, Valentinians do not slavishly follow philosophical precedents, but are instead important participants in these ongoing discussions, to which they made important contributions. In the framework of the present book on intolerance, polemics, and debate, I consequently intend to show that in developing their views, their interlocutors were both fellow Christians and those engaged in debates in the wider cultural context of the first two centuries.

Karen King, *What is Gnosticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, repr. 2001).

3 See the volume edited by John D. Turner and Ruth D. Majercik, *Gnosticism and Later Platonism: Themes, Figures, and Texts* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000); and Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition* (Québec: Presses De L'Université Laval, 2001).

4 See, in general, King, *What is Gnosticism,* 20–54; on anthropological determinism, see Einar Thomassen, "Saved by Nature? The Question of Human Races and Soteriological Determinism in Valentinianism," in *Zugänge zur Gnosis. Akten zur Tagung der Patristischen Arbeitsgemeinschaft 02.–05.01.2011 in Berlin-Spandau*, ed. Christoph Markschies and Johannes van Oort (Leuven/Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2013), 129–50; on human classes, see lsmo Dunderberg, "Valentinian Theories on Classes of Humankind," in *Zugänge zur Gnosis*, 113–28; on ethics, see Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism*," 163–88; King, *What is Gnosticism*, 201–8; on anticosmic-dualism, see Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism*," 96–103.

5 See Zeke Mazur, "The Platonizing Sethian Gnostic Background of Plotinus Mysticism" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2010); Jean-Marc Narbone, *Plotinus in Dialogue with the Gnostics* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Mazur, "'Those Who Ascend to the Sancturaries of the Temples': The Gnostic Context of Plotinus First Treatise," in *Gnosticism, Platonism and the Late Ancient World: Essays in Honour of John D. Turner*, ed. K. Corrigan and T. Rasimus (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 329–68, here 329–30 and n5.

6 On this issue, see Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the "Valentinians"* (Leiden: Brill, 2006); see also more recently Giuliano Chiapparini, *Valentino Gnostico e Platonico: Il Valentinianesimo della 'Grande Notizia' di Ireneo di Lione: fra esegesi gnostica e filosofia Medioplatonica* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2012).

In order to do so, I will focus on Valentinian views on the relationship between God, Achamoth, and the Demiurge, and also sketch their views concerning the appearance of matter and the creation of the cosmos. My chapter is divided into three sections. The first focuses on Valentinian protology, as presented mainly in Irenaeus's exposition of Ptolemy's *Great Notice* (*Against Heresies* 1.1–9), but also in other sources—such as Ptolemy's *Letter to Flora*, the Valentinian exegesis of John 1:3 mentioned by Irenaeus (1.8.5), Pseudo-Hippolytus's *Refutatio*, and some texts from Nag Hammadi, such as the *Gospel of Truth*. The second contextualises these views by placing them primarily in the context of the debate with Middle Platonic and Neo-Pythagorean interlocutors, and less with the Stoics, regarding first principles. Despite recent attempts to highlight the influence of Stoicism on Early Christianity,[7] my intention is to re-evaluate the Platonic background of Valentinian views by placing them at the core of the discussion regarding first principles. The third section provides some preliminary conclusions.

1 Valentinian Protology according to Ptolemy's *Great Notice* (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.1–8)

1.1 *The Father*

According to the monistic system of the *Great Notice*, after the transcendent, invisible, and incomprehensible divinity (ἀχώρητον καὶ ἀόρατον, ἀΐδιόν τε καὶ ἀγέννητον)[8]—called Forefather and portrayed as a duality[9]—we have the Father, which is a *nous*, also called "Monogenes, Father, and Beginning of all things" (τὸν δὲ Νοῦν τοῦτον καὶ Μονογενῆ καλοῦσι, καὶ Πατέρα, καὶ Ἀρχὴν τῶν πάντων). The Intellect's double orientation explains (a) his internal activity, namely his

7 See, for example, the articles collected in the volume edited by Tuomas Rasimus, Troels Engberg-Pedersen, and Ismo Dunderberg, *Stoicism in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010); see also Engberg-Pedersen, "A Stoic Understanding of the Pneuma and Resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15," *Cosmology and Self in the Apostle Paul: The Material Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010-02-25), Oxford Scholarship Online, 2010-05-01.

8 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.1. Greek text according to Adelin Rousseau and Louis Doutreleau, *Irénée de Lyon. Contre les hérésies. Livre 1*, vol. 2 (Paris: Cerf, 1979), 28–29 (74–86). English translations follow Dominic J. Unger and John J. Dillon, *St. Irenaeus of Lyons: Against the Heresies* (New York, N.Y., etc.: Paulist Press, 1992): "They claim that in the invisible and unnamable heights there is a certain perfect Aeon that was before all, the First-Being, whom they also call First-Beginning, First Father, and Profundity. He is invisible and incomprehensible. And, since he is incomprehensible and invisible, eternal and ingenerate, he existed in deep quiet and stillness through countless ages."

9 Since he also has a feminine aspect (*Ennoia*, *Sige*, *Charis*).

introspective contemplation of the first principle (θεωρῶν τὸν Πατέρα καὶ τὸ μέγεθος τὸ ἀμέτρητον αὐτοῦ κατανοῶν),[10] and (b) his activity "ad extra."[11] After a process of emanation, the Father condescends to produce the Aeons[12] that will form the divine realm.[13] The last one to be created is Sophia.[14] It is the latter's inferior part, or Achamoth, that is responsible for the creation of the lower levels of reality.[15]

1.2 *Achamoth*

Due to her (defective) spiritual nature, Achamoth inhabits the intermediate place (*mesotes*), "above the Demiurge indeed, but below and outside of the Pleroma."[16] This is due to the formlessness and weakness of her feminine spirituality.[17] In this mythological exposition, Achamoth—or "exterior Sophia"—is the inferior part of Sophia, resulting from the process of

10 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.2.1; Rousseau and Doutreleau, *Irénée* 1.2, 36–37 (143–44).

11 For an excellent treatment of this section, see Antonio Orbe, *La teología del Espíritu Santo* (Rome: Universitatis Gregorianae, 1966), 121–38.

12 Admittedly the Intellect (Nous) is *sensu stricto* only responsible for the emission of the first Ogdoad, since he delegates the rest to Logos (and Zoe) and Anthropos (and Ecclesia). However, Irenaeus (1.1.1) clearly states that he is ultimately "Father of all who were to come after him and the beginning and formation of the entire Fullness."

13 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.1; Rousseau and Doutreleau, *Irénée* 1.2, 29–30 (85–89): "After She (scil. Sige) had received this 'seed' and had become pregnant, she gave birth to Mind, who was both similar and equal to his Father who emitted him; and He alone comprehended his (Father's) greatness. This Mind they also call Only-begotten, Father and Beginning of all things."

14 I am aware that I am simplifying the myth. I do that on purpose, focusing on those aspects that will facilitate a better comparison with contemporary philosophical parallels in the second part of this chapter. In contrast to the case of Nous, Sophia and Achamoth show no double orientation. We see rather an internal cleavage (*horismos*), with the superior Sophia oriented upwards, towards Nous, and the lower one (Achamoth) oriented towards the "places of shadow and emptiness" (1.4.1, ἐν σκιᾶς καὶ κενώματος τόποις).

15 See Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta, "Achamot, el Alma del mundo valentiniana, y su relación con el Demiurgo (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer*. 1.5)." In *Jornadas sobre la Filiación VII: Cultura pagana, religión de Israel, orígenes del cristianismo. Gnosis, Valentín, valentinianos*, edited by Andrés Sáez Gutiérrez, Guillermo Cano Gómez and Clara Sanvito, 313–38 (Madrid: Trotta, 2018). For the distinction between upper and lower Sophia, see Orbe, *La teología del Espíritu Santo*, 399–402.

16 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.5.3; Rousseau and Doutreleau, *Irénée* 1.2, 82–83 (522–26).

17 The fact that Achamoth is not purely spiritual (but rather defectively spiritual) nor completely psychic seems to imply the attempt in Irenaeus's account to find a proper place for above the psychic region of the Demiurge and outside the Pleroma *sensu stricto*. Thomassen (*Spiritual Seed*) concludes from this affirmation and the different use of *mesotes* in the *Letter to Flora*, where it is applied to the Demiurge, that Ptolemy cannot be the author of the *Great Notice*.

division described in the previous chapters of Irenaeus's account.[18] Only the Monogenes can know the Father, as we saw above. All the other Aeons are ignorant of him, since they lack the degree of communion that characterises the relationship between the Forefather and the Father. All knowledge of the Father is no longer immediate and is from now on marked by an intrinsic lack—namely ignorance, which the last Aeon (Sophia) attempts to overcome by her own means.[19] Although there are other versions of her motivation,[20] in Irenaeus's report, Sophia's attempt to know the Father is apparently based on love for him, but was actually due to her audacity (*tolma*)—which in Irenaeus's account is manifestly negative, but in other contexts was considered either a positive or, in any case, a neutral passion.[21]

It is this step that generates the process of *substantialisation*, so to speak—of passions that gives rise to matter, so graphically described in the *Gospel of Truth*:[22] "This ignorance of the Father brought about terror and fear. And terror became dense like a fog, so no one was able to see. Because of this, error became strong. But she worked on her material substance vainly, because she did

18 Known both as Achamoth and Enthymesis, this inferior Sophia is the result of the intervention of Horos, which purifies Sophia by separating her from her Intention (*Enthymesis*) and passion (*pathos*). As a result, Sophia remains in the Pleroma, but Achamot is kept outside (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.2.4). Valentinian sources are hesitant regarding the existence of one or two Sophias. For an overview of the systems including either one or two, see Thomassen, *Spiritual Seed*, 248–62. For a detailed explanation of the relationship between the higher and lower Sophias, see Orbe, *La teología del Espíritu Santo*, 235–69 (Sophia) and 305–29 (Achamoth).

19 See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.2.1–5. On this issue, see Zlatko Pleše, "Evil and its Sources in Gnostic Traditions," in *Die Wurzel allen Übels Vorstellungen über die Herkunft des Bösen und Schlechten in der Philosophie und Religion des 1.–4. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Fabienne Jourdan and Rainer Hirsch-Luipold (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 101–32, here 112–17.

20 Pseudo-Hippolytus (*Refutatio* 6.30.6–8) attributes it to her audacity in trying to imitate the Father. Audacity also plays an important role in the *Tripartite Tractate* (NHC I,5) 75.17–80.11. See Thomassen, "The Derivation of Matter in Monistic Gnosticism," in *Gnosticism and Later Platonism*, 1–17, esp. 1–2; and Thomassen, *Spiritual Seed*, 283–88, which underlines the contacts between Irenaeus and *Tripartite Tractate*. See the excellent analysis by Mariano Troiano, "Plotine et les gnostiques: L'audace du démiurge," *Journal of Coptic Studies* 15 (2013): 209–35.

21 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.2.2: "The passion began in Mind and Truth but spread as by infection to this estranged Aeon [Wisdom] under the pretense of love, but in reality out of temerity, because he had no fellowship with perfect Father, as even Mind did. The passion consisted in seeking after Father; for he wished, so they say, to comprehend his greatness." See also *Tripartite Tractate* (NHC I,5) 75.19–28; see the same background in *Gospel of Truth* (NHC I,3) 17.8–18.11. For an excellent and exhaustive analysis of Sophia's miscarriage in the Apocryphon of John and beyond, see Zlatko Pleše, *Poetics of the Gnostic Universe Narrative and Cosmology in the* Apocryphon of John (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 142–60.

22 *Gospel of Truth* (NHC I,3) 17.10–20.

not know the truth. She assumed a fashioned figure while she was preparing, in power and in beauty, the substitute for truth."[23]

Both the first division mentioned above and the resultant appearance of passions indicate that what we see before us is the fall of the soul, something which seems to be confirmed by both the *Tripartite Tractate* (if here Sophia is called Logos) and the *Exegesis on the Soul*, which describes the soul's incarnation in vivid terms.[24] Both Irenaeus and Hippolytus present exterior Sophia as deficient, but her deficiency or privation is eventually corrected by Christ, who "then formed for her the formation that is according to knowledge and healed her passions"—which, in my view, should be interpreted as the transmission of his rationality.[25] This rectification enables her repentance and conversion,[26] as a result of which Achamoth acquires the rational principle behind the creative impulse that will account for the creation of the cosmos.

After referring to the three kinds of substance distinguished by Valentinians in the constitution of the universe—material, proceeding from passion; psychic, proceeding from conversion; and spiritual[27]—Irenaeus focuses on Achamoth's creative impulse. While she herself is spiritual, the following two substances appear in two steps. In the first one, as we have just seen, matter arises from her passions. At this point, being the result of passion, matter is simply a formless material.[28] In the second step, after her repentance, the

23 English translation following Harold W. Attridge and George W. MacRae, "The Gospel of Truth," in *Nag Hammadi Codices. I* [*,1*]*,* (*the Jung Codex*)*: Introductions, Texts, Translations, Indices*, ed. H. W. Attridge (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 55–122.

24 *Tripartite Tractate* (NHC I,5) 77.19–29; *Exegesis on The Soul* (NHC II,6) 127.18–128.25. On the latter text, see Roig Lanzillotta, "'Come out of your Country and your Kinsfolk': Allegory and Ascent of the Soul in The Expository Treatise on the Soul (NHC II,6)," in *Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites*, ed. Martin Goodman, George van Kooten, and Jacques van Ruiten (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 401–20; idem, "Platonism and The Expository Treatise on the Soul (NHC II,6)," in *Gods, Daimones, Rituals, Myths and History of Religions in Plutarch's Works. Studies Devoted to Professor Frederick E. Brenk by the International Plutarch Society*, ed. Luc Van der Stockt, Frances Titchener, Heinz Gerd Ingenkamp, and Aurelio Pérez Jiménez (Logan & Malaga, 2010), 345–62.

25 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.4.5; Pseudo-Hippolytus, *Refutatio* 6.32.4–6.

26 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.4.5; Pseudo-Hippolytus, *Refutatio* 6.31.7; 32.4–6.

27 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.5.1; Rousseau and Doutreleau, *Irénée* 1.2, 76 (468–71).

28 Admittedly, the process is more complex than the overview I give in the body of the text. This formless "material" is incorporeal. It is thanks to the Saviour's intervention that it is endowed with aptitude (*epitedeiotes*) to "enter" (constitute) bodies and compounds (bodily compounds). Out of this incorporeal and adaptable matter there will arise two substances: evil (*phaule*) corporeal matter, coming from passions, and animate/psychic matter, coming from conversion and subject to passions. I thank my colleague Professor Zlatko Pleše for pointing out to me the need to clarify this aspect, which, due to the

psychic appears.[29] What we see before us is a monistic view of matter that, in contrast to the Platonic model, assumes that matter derives from the One.[30]

1.3 *Achamoth and the Logos*

The descent of the Saviour allows her to eradicate her affections[31] and gives rise to her *enthymesis* or "intention," which accounts for the creation of the sensible world:[32]

> For when Intention wished to make all things to the honor of the Aeons, she, or rather, the Savior through her, made images of them [the Aeons]; and she preserved the image of the invisible Father from the fact that she was not known to the Demiurge; but he [Demiurge] preserved the image of the Only-begotten Son, and the Archangels and Angels who were made subject to him preserved the image of the rest of the Aeons (Τὴν γὰρ Ἐνθύμησιν ταύτην βουληθεῖσαν εἰς τιμὴν τῶν Αἰώνων τὰ πάντα ποιῆσαι, εἰκόνας λέγουσι πεποιηκέναι αὐτῶν, μᾶλλον δὲ τὸν Σωτῆρα δι' αὐτῆς. καὶ αὐτὴν μὲν τὴν εἰκόνα τοῦ ἀοράτου Πατρὸς τετηρηκέναι μὴ γινωσκομένην ὑπὸ τοῦ Δημιουργοῦ, τοῦτον δὲ τοῦ μονογενοῦς υἱοῦ, τῶν δὲ λοιπῶν Αἰώνων τοὺς ὑπὸ τούτου γεγονότας ἀρχαγγέλους τε καὶ ἀγγέλους).[33]

This is something more than an interesting play with images and reflections. As a matter of fact, the text describes in a mythological fashion the different levels of reality, which in turn reflect those of the intelligible world.[34] For the theology of the *Great Notice*, it is interesting to note, in the first place, that it is the Saviour who is first responsible for the appearance of the visible cosmos. It

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intentional simplification of the line of the mythical story for comparative purposes in the second part of the chapter, may create confusion.

29 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.5.1; Rousseau and Doutreleau, *Irénée* 1.2, 76 (472–76).

30 On this monistic view, see Thomassen, "The Derivation of Matter"; see also below 379–80.

31 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.4.1; 1.4.5.

32 The term *enthymesis* in the present passage is extremely difficult to translate. Scholars present a wide range of renderings, from "thought" and "consideration" to "deliberation," "intention," or even "imagination." Later on, Irenaeus will attempt to explain it (*Against Heresies* 2.13). On this issue, see Orbe, *La teología del Espíritu Santo*, 261–67; Pleše, *Poetics of the Gnostic Universe*, 130–31 with footnote; Thomassen, *Spiritual Seed,* 211–13.

33 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.5.1; Rousseau and Doutreleau, *Irénée* 1.2, 78–79 (486–93). English translation following Unger and Dillon, *St. Irenaeus of Lyons: Against the Heresies*, vol. 1.

34 This tiny but crucial difference disappears, however, in Chiapparini's reconstruction of the text in *Valentino gnostico e platonico*, 153–54 and notes 3–4. Rousseau and Doutreleau (*Irénée* 1.2, 77 *ad loc*), in contrast, accept Holl's conjecture, which is supported by the Latin version (Q) *imaginem*, in order to solve the crux of the passage.

is the Saviour, by means of the instrument of Achamoth, who provides the first impulse for creation—so much so that, according to Irenaeus, Valentinians taught that the Saviour was the real Demiurge (καὶ διὰ τοῦτο δυνάμει τὸν Σωτῆρα δεδημιουργηκέναι φάσκουσι), something that is also affirmed by the *Excerpta ex Theodoto*.[35] The Logos and the Demiurge are also the main actors in Ptolemy's *Letter to Flora*. Admittedly, the passage is disputed, but the *Letter* also seems to agree with this basic Valentinian tenet regarding the Logos as the first impulse behind creation. In any case, Antonio Orbe, Giles Quispel, and Einar Thomassen[36] agree—against Winrich A. Löhr and Christoph Markschies, and more recently Pier Franco Beatrice[37]—that the same scheme underlies the texts of both Irenaeus and Ptolemy's *Letter to Flora*.

However, the fact that the status and function of the Logos was not completely settled in Valentianism can be seen later on in Irenaeus, where a different Valentinian exegesis of John 1:3 is discussed.[38] This version, apparently a more primitive version of the myth,[39] goes even further than the *Great Notice*, since it makes the Logos accountable for the creation of the Aeons as well.[40] Fragment 1 from Heracleon seems to be reacting against this view. In his commentary of John 1:3, Heracleon agrees that the Word was the cause of the activity of the creator God, but explicitly denies that his creation could have included the Aeons that were prior to him:

> The sentence: "All things were made through him" means the world and what is in it. It excludes what is better than the world. The Aeon (i.e., the Pleroma), and the things in it, were not made by the Word; they came into existence before the Word. […] "Without him, nothing was made" of what is in the world and the creation […]." All things were made through Him," means that it was *the Word who caused the Creator* (*Demiurge*) *to make*

35 See Irenaeus's remark in 1.4.5 (Rousseau and Doutreleau, *Irénée* 1.2, 74–75 [460–61]) that Valentinians believed that the Saviour was the real demiurgic cause. See also Clement of Alexandria, *Excerpta ex Theodoto* 45.2–47.1.

36 Antonio Orbe, *En los albores de la exégesis Iohannea* (Rome: Universitatis Gregorianae, 1955), 253–54; Giles Quispel, *Ptolémée: Lettre à Flora*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Cerf, 1966), 77; Thomassen, *Spiritual Seed*, 123.

37 Winrich A. Löhr, "La doctrine de Dieu dans la lettre à Flora de Ptolémée," *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 75 (1995): 177–91, esp. 181–82; Christoph Markschies, "New Research on Ptolemaeus Gnosticus," *ZAC* 4 (2000): 225–54, esp. 239–44; Pier Franco Beatrice, "Greek Philosophy and Gnostic Soteriology In Heracleon's 'Hypomnemata'," *Early Christianity* 3 (2012): 188–214, esp. 197–200.

38 See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.8.5; Rousseau and Doutreleau, *Irénée* 1.2, 129–37 (908–73).

39 Thomassen, *Spiritual Seed*, 213–18.

40 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.1.2.

> *the world*, that is it was not the Word "from whom" or "by whom," but the one "through whom (all things were made)." […] It was not the Word who made all things, as if he were energized by another, for "through whom" means that another made them and the Word provided the energy (τὸ "πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο" ἐξειληφέναι τὸν κόσμον καὶ τὰ ἐν αὐτῷ, ἐκκλείοντα τῶν πάντων, τὸ ὅσον ἐπὶ τῇ ὑποθέσει αὐτοῦ, τὰ τοῦ κόσμου καὶ τῶν ἐν αὐτῷ διαφέροντα … οὐ τὸν αἰῶνα ἢ τὰ ἐν τῷ αἰῶνι γεγονέναι διὰ τοῦ λόγου, ἅτινα οἴεται πρὸ τοῦ λόγου γεγονέναι. […] "Καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἕν," τῶν ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ καὶ τῇ κτίσει […] "Πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο" […] Τὸν τὴν αἰτίαν παρασχόντα τῆς γενέσεως τοῦ κόσμου τῷ δημιουργῷ, τὸν λόγον ὄντα, εἶναι οὐ τὸν ἀφ' οὗ, ἢ ὑφ' οὗ, ἀλλὰ τὸν δι' οὗ, […] "'Οτι οὐχ ὡς ὑπ' ἄλλου ἐνεργοῦντος αὐτὸς ἐποίει ὁ λόγος, ἵν' οὕτω νοηθῇ τὸ δι' αὐτοῦ, ἀλλ' αὐτοῦ ἐνεργοῦντος ἕτερος ἐποίει.").[41]

As Antonio Orbe affirmed many years ago, Heracleon's model reduces the elements involved in the process of creation to the minimum, even if omitting Sophia does not deny her specific role:[42] The Logos (that is, the Saviour), as the intellective principle, is behind Achamoth's impulse, which in turn instigates the demiurgic activity. This is the reason why Heracleon's fragment 22 criticises those who worshipped the creation "and not the true creator, who is Christ, since 'all things came into being through him, and apart from him nothing came into being.'"[43]

Let us now return to Irenaeus's text. Also interesting in the passage of the *Great Notice* quoted above is the mention that after the Saviour's descent, Achamoth preserves the image of the invisible Father, while the Demiurge preserves that of the Only-begotten-Son.[44] The sentence not only properly expresses the transmission of impulses from the first principle, but also brings the demiurgic cause back to the Father. Unable to give form to spiritual existence, since she was consubstantial to it, Achamoth gives form to psychic substance. Consequently, and contrary to general belief, it is not the Demiurge, but rather Achamoth who is the real maker of the cosmos and everything in it.[45]

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41 Heracleon, fragment 1; English translation following Peter Kirby, "Fragments of Heracleon." Early Christian Writings. 2019. 12 June 2019.

42 Orbe, *En los albores*, 252–53.

43 See also Manlio Simonetti, *Testi gnostici in lingua greca e Latina*, 3rd ed. (Rocca San Casciano: Fondazione Lorenzo Valla- Mondadori, 2001), 459n32.

44 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.2.5. On this issue, see Simonetti (*Testi gnostici*, 484), who thinks that this son is the Intellect (*Nous*).

45 Achamoth is the main responsible power behind the whole process of creation, a point which is repeatedly assessed in Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.5. See Irenaeus, *Against*

1.4 *Achamoth and the Demiurge*

In any case, the first result of this creative impulse is the appearance of the Demiurge, whose main characteristics are not as negative as one might expect:[46]

> First, they say, she gave form out of her ensouled substance to the God, Father and King of all things, also of those who are of the same nature as he, that is, of the ensouled substances—which they also call the right-handed—and of the substances [that came] out of passion and matter—which they also call left-handed. For, they assert, he gave form to all things that exist after him, to which he was secretly urged by his Mother. Hence they also call him Mother-Parent, Fatherless, Demiurge and Father. They call him Father of the right-handed, that is, of the ensouled substances; but Demiurge of the left-handed, that is, material substances; and King of the universe[47] (καὶ πρῶτον μεμορφωκέναι αὐτὴν ἐκ τῆς ψυχικῆς οὐσίας λέγουσι τὸν <Θεὸν καὶ> Πατέρα καὶ βασιλέα πάντων, τῶν τε ὁμοουσίων αὐτῷ, τουτέστιν τῶν ψυχικῶν, ἃ δὴ δεξιὰ καλοῦσι, καὶ τῶν ἐκ τοῦ πάθους καὶ τῆς ὕλης, ἃ δὴ ἀριστερὰ λέγουσι. πάντα γὰρ τὰ μετ' αὐτὸν φάσκουσιν <αὐτὸν> μεμορφωκέναι, λεληθότως κινούμενον ὑπὸ τῆς Μητρός· ὅθεν καὶ Μητροπάτορα καὶ Ἀπάτορα καὶ Δημιουργὸν αὐτὸν καὶ Πατέρα καλοῦσι, τῶν μὲν δεξιῶν Πατέρα λέγοντες αὐτὸν, τουτέστιν τῶν ψυχικῶν, τῶν δὲ ἀριστερῶν, τουτέστιν τῶν ὑλικῶν, δημιουργόν, συμπάντων δὲ βασιλέα).[48]

Far from presenting him in a negative way, this section names the Demiurge "Father and King of all things," which makes of him lord of *his* creation. All of his titles cover diverse aspects of his divine person. While from a biomorphic perspective, *Metropator* describes him as a generative cause of the reality below him, Apator—or "without Father"—focuses in turn on his own origin in Achamoth, due to the parthenogenesis that made him possible. Finally, *Demiurge* and *Father* (*Demiurgum et Patrem*) take on the perspective

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Heresies 1.5.1: "For they affirm that he formed all the things which came into existence after him, being secretly impelled thereto by his mother" (481–82, λεληθότως κινούμενον ὑπὸ τῆς μητρός); and 1.5.3, "while he in reality made them in conjunction with the productive power of Achamoth" (518–19, Αἰτίαν δ'αυτῷ γεγονέναι τὴν μητέρα … φάσκουσι). It is also true, however, that the Saviour is the real instigator and is consequently behind the whole process of creation, acting through Achamoth.

46 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.5; Rousseau and Doutreleau, *Irénée* 1.2, 76 (476–86).

47 English translation following Unger and Dillon, *St. Irenaeus of Lyons: Against the Heresies*, vol. 1.

48 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.5.1; Rousseau and Doutreleau, *Irénée* 1.2, 76–77 (476–86).

of creation in order to explain how he is God of his creatures: as *father* of the consubstantial ones and *creator* of the material ones.[49]

Irenaeus then describes the Demiurge's ignorance, which—according to Ptolemy's *Great Notice*—concerns both the creative impulse and the model of the things created:[50]

> Demiurge imagines, they assert, that he made the totality of these things by himself, whereas he made them inasmuch as Achamoth [his Mother] emitted them. He made the heavens without knowing the heavens; he fashioned man without knowing Man; he brought the earth to light without understanding the Earth. In like manner, they assert, he was ignorant of the images of the things he made, even of his Mother herself. He imagined that he himself was all things. His Mother, they say, was the cause of that false notion of his (Ταῦτα δὲ τὸν Δημιουργὸν φάσκουσιν ἀφ' ἑαυτοῦ μὲν ᾠῆσθαι κατασκευάζειν, πεποιηκέναι δ' αὐτὰ τῆς Ἀχαμὼθ προβαλλούσης. οὐρανὸν <γὰρ> πεποιηκέναι μὴ εἰδότα Οὐρανόν, καὶ ἄνθρωπον πεπλακέναι ἀγνοοῦντα [τὸν] Ἄνθρωπον, γῆν τε δεδειχέναι μὴ ἐπιστάμενον [τὴν] Γῆν· καὶ ἐπὶ πάντων οὕτως λέγουσιν ἠγνοηκέναι αὐτὸν τὰς ἰδέας ὧν ἐποίει καὶ αὐτὴν τὴν Μητέρα, αὐτὸν δὲ μόνον ᾠῆσθαι πάντα εἶναι. Αἰτίαν δ' αὐτῷ γεγονέναι τὴν Μητέρα τῆς ποιήσεως ταύτης φάσκουσι).[51]

The opening lines of the passage associate the Demiurge's ignorance with the models inspiring the things created: the whole creation relies on a *paradeigma* or divine model,[52] which is here conceived of as the thoughts of God. This might be seen as a veiled reference to the Logos—which is, in the final analysis, the primary demiurgic cause behind Achamoth[53]—but also to the Father or Intellect from whom the Logos emanates, and of course to the first principle of everything as well, the God beyond thought and being. While the *topos* of

49 As we will see below, this mention echoes the Middle Platonic interpretation that understood the expression of *Timaeus* 28c as a reference to two different aspects of the creative activity of God. Interestingly, Irenaeus substitutes the term ποιητής for δημιουργός, which seems to associate the Demiurge's activity with manual labour and consequently presents it as hierarchically inferior to the activity of the highest God.

50 On the terms used for the creation in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, see J. P. Mahe, "La creation dans les Hermetica," *Recherches augustiniennes* 21 (1986): 3–53.

51 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.5.3; Rousseau and Doutreleau, *Irénée* 1.2, 81–82 (511–19). English translation following Unger and Dillon, *St. Irenaeus of Lyons: Against the Heresies*, vol. 1.

52 See below 369–70.

53 See note 35 above for the references on the issue by both Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria in *Excerpta ex Theodoto*; see also Thomassen, *Spiritual Seed*, 123.

the Demiurge's ignorance serves different purposes in various texts,[54] in the present section, it simply exonerates him of any responsibility for the creative process, presenting the Demiurge as the last link in a causal chain that brings the first creative impulse back to the transcendent God.

1.5 *The Demiurge and the Cosmos*

After mentioning Achamoth's creation of the Demiurge, the latter's relationship with *his* creation, and the model inspired by the mother, the *Great Notice* describes the creation of the cosmos by the Demiurge:

> Accordingly, they assert that he became Father and God of all things outside the Fullness, inasmuch as he is the Maker of all the ensouled and material beings. For it was he who distinguished the two substances that were confused and made corporeal out of incorporeal things. He made the heavenly and earthly things, and became the Maker of the material and ensouled beings, of the right-handed and the left-handed, of the light and the heavy, of those that tend upwards and of those that tend downwards (Πατέρα οὖν καὶ θεὸν λέγουσιν αὐτὸν γεγονέναι τῶν ἐκτὸς τοῦ Πληρώματος, ποιητὴν ὄντα πάντων ψυχικῶν τε καὶ ὑλικῶν. Διακρίναντα γὰρ τὰς δύο οὐσίας συγκεχυμένας καὶ ἐξ ἀσωμάτων σωματοποιήσαντα, δεδημιουργηκέναι τά τε οὐράνια καὶ τὰ γήϊνα, καὶ γεγονέναι ὑλικῶν καὶ ψυχικῶν, δεξιῶν καὶ ἀριστερῶν Δημιουργόν, κούφων καὶ βαρέων, ἀνωφερῶν καὶ κατωφερῶν).[55]

With an obvious empirical tone, this text once again presents the Demiurge as the only lord of the created world—of both eternal and transient perceptible substances.[56] The Demiurge of the *Great Notice* mixes, cuts, combines, unites, and separates. At the same time, the mythical language of the previous section is replaced with a more scientific tone: in the current passage, the reference to the mythical origin of the substances—to wit, conversion and passion—leaves room for a description of their character and origin that focuses on their

54 The Demiurge's ignorance is a topos of most Gnostic texts, but not all of them conceive of it in the same way: while in some cases it highlights the Demiurge's foolishness (Pseudo-Hippolytus, *Refutatio* 6.33.1; *Gospel of Philip* [NHC II,3] 55.14–19), in other cases it intends to emphasise his arrogance (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.30.6 [Ofitas]; Pseudo-Hippolytus, *Refutatio* 7.23.3 [Basilides]; *Hypostasis of the Archons* [NHC II,4] 94.21–28; *Origin of the World* [NHC II,5] 103.6–15).

55 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.5.2; Rousseau and Doutreleau, *Irénée* 1.2, 79–80 (494–500). English translation following Unger and Dillon, *St. Irenaeus of Lyons: Against the Heresies*, vol. 1.

56 Plato, *Timaeus* 32d–36d.

primordial state. Both substances are separated in order to create corporeal beings out of incorporeal ones. Heavenly and earthly realms appear as a result of decantation: while the lighter bodies ascend, the heavier ones descend.[57]

We arrive then at the creation of the sublunary world. What the previous section already insinuated is now explicitly stated: the lower world is made out of the four elements. We find again the same scientific tone, while the mythical echoes might be explained as the result of Irenaeus's repetition, which once again refers to the passions as the origin of matter:

> The corporeal elements of the world, as we already remarked, came from consternation and distress, as from a more ignoble source. Thus they teach, the earth came into being according to the condition of perplexity; the water came into being according to the movement of fear; air, according to the consolidation of her grief; while fire, which causes death and corruption, was inherent in all these elements, according to their teaching, just as ignorance lay hidden in these three passions (Ἐκ δὲ τῆς ἐκπλήξεως καὶ ἀμηχανίας ὡς ἐκ στασιμωτέρου τὰ σωματικὰ καθὼς προείπαμεν τοῦ κόσμου στοιχεῖα γεγονέναι· γῆν μὲν κατὰ τὴν ἐκπλήξεως στάσιν, ὕδωρ δὲ κατὰ τὴν φόβου κίνησιν, ἀέρα δὲ κατὰ τὴν λύπης πῆξιν· τὸ δὲ πῦρ ἅπασιν αὐτοῖς ἐμπεφυκέναι θάνατον καὶ φθοράν, ὡς καὶ τὴν ἄγνοιαν τοῖς τρισὶ πάθεσιν ἐγκεκρύφθαι διδάσκουσι).[58]

The hierarchy of being (spiritual—psychic—hylic) and the gradual devaluation of its levels as we approach the sublunary world might seem to imply a negative evaluation of the cosmos. The opposite is true. Interestingly, in the *Great Notice*, the physical world retains a clearly positive character, and nothing points to dualistic depreciation. As far as the hebdomad or planetary region is concerned, Irenaeus not only describes the heavens as intelligible, but also connects them with angels: there is no reference to scary guardians stopping souls in their ascents and descents though the spheres. The sublunary world, in turn, formed by the four elements and far removed from the divine region, is obviously characterised by an inherent deficiency or privation (*steresis*). This does not imply, however, the blanket condemnation of matter: significantly, evil does not proceed from matter, but from the spirit of wickedness, which

57 The background is again Plato, *Timaeus* 53a, which distinguishes between heavier and lighter elements in primordial matter and allots them a different place in the created cosmos.

58 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.5.4; Rousseau and Doutreleau, *Irénée* 1.2, 85–86 (549–56).

originates from grief—evil's existence is attributed to the devil or the ruler of the world (*Cosmocrator*), and not to matter.[59]

1.6 *The Cosmos and the Appearance of Matter*

As already noted above, matter in this system proceeds from Achamoth's passions Achamoth—more specifically, from her "fear and sorrow" (ἐκ δὲ τοῦ φόβου καὶ λύπης).[60] Given that Achamoth proceeds from the Father and, through him, from the transcendent principle beyond any thought, matter in this system also necessarily proceeds from the invisible and incomprehensible divinity. In contrast to other dualistic systems, which set spiritual and material principles in opposition—be it God versus matter, form versus matter, or the active (τὸ ποιοῦν) versus the passive (τὸ πάσχων)[61]—we have before us a monistic system in which everything emanates from the first principle.

2 Valentinian Protology in the Context of the Philosophical Discussion regarding the First Principles

It is now time to try to place these ideas in the context of the contemporaneous philosophical debates regarding first principles. That Gnostics were part of this active philosophical discussion can be seen in numerous texts. Most of the time, we find a tacit integration of philosophical notions. This is the case with numerous theological, cosmological, and anthropological ideas—inherent to the body of Gnostic thought—that are well-established current philosophical notions. Sometimes the author takes a positive stance towards the tradition of which he is a part. A good case in point is the *Exegesis of the Soul*, the beginning of which places its account in the long tradition regarding the soul's character and nature, we read: "wise men of old gave the soul a feminine name."[62] At other times, the writer presents a more polemical attitude, such as the attack on philosophy in the *Treatise on Resurrection*: "Some there are, my son

59 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.5.4; Rousseau and Doutreleau, *Irénée* 1.2, 84–85 (537–45). As Pleše ("Evil and its Sources in Gnostic Traditions", 107–08 and n. 14) affirms, matter is not intrinsically evil (as it is in Plotinus) and is not a sufficient cause of evil. It is, however, a concomitant cause, because the spirits of wickedness and their ruler are inherent in matter and proceed from the same source as matter—namely, Achamoth's passions.

60 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.4.2; Rousseau and Doutreleau, *Irénée* 1.2, 66–67 (387–99). See also 1.2.3, in which the passions are "sorrow, fear and perplexity."

61 See Roig Lanzillotta, "Spirit, Soul and Body in Nag Hammadi Literature: Distinguishing Anthropological Schemes in Valentinian, Sethian, Hermetic and Thomasine Texts," *Gnosis: Journal of Gnostic Studies* 2 (2017): 15–39, here 38–39.

62 *Exegesis on the Soul* (NHC II,6) 127.19–20.

Rheginus, who want to learn many things. They have this goal when they are occupied with questions whose answer is lacking. If they succeed with these, they usually think very highly of themselves."[63]

However, independently of their positive or negative attitudes towards received knowledge, appropriation, integration, adaptation, use, or whatever name we want to give it, the presence of philosophical notions and ideas is a fact and is always perceptible—whether visibly or less visibly—in the text.

In some cases, the author deliberately takes a position regarding a given tenet. Thus, for example, at the beginning of the *Origin of the World*—which not only clearly positions itself in the discussion regarding first principles, but also claims to know them better and to be able to demonstrate the errors of others—we read: "Seeing that everybody, gods of the world and mankind, says that nothing existed prior to chaos, I, in distinction to them, shall demonstrate that they are all mistaken, because they are not acquainted with the origin of chaos, nor with its root. Here is the demonstration."[64]

In my view, this is precisely the context in which we have to place Valentinian protology. Not only the views outlined in Ptolemy's *Great Notice*, but also those of Heracleon, Ptolemy's *Letter to Flora*, and the "other exegesis" of John 1:3 quoted by Irenaeus (1.8.5), mentioned above, should be seen as (different) Valentinian attempts to offer a proper response to issues that were being raised in the philosophical discussion regarding first principles in the second century. When seen against this background, the complex mythological expositions become more understandable.

2.1 *The Father*

The fact that the view of the first unborn God beyond thought and essence which we find in the *Great Notice* replicates that of the intellectual and philosophical environment of the historical period in which it was written should not surprise anyone. After E. R. Dodds's seminal article, published in 1928, and John Whittaker's "*Epekeina nou kai ousias*,"[65] there can be little doubt regarding the influence of Plato's *Republic* 509b and the first hypothesis in the *Parmenides* on the development of the notion of a divinity beyond thought

63 *Treatise On Resurrection* (NHC I,3), with Luther H. Martin, "Anti-Philosophical Polemic and Gnostic Soteriology in the Treatise on the Resurrection (CG I, 3)," *Numen* 20 (1973): 20–37.

64 *Origin of the World* (NHC II,5) 97.24–29.

65 E. R. Dodds, "The *Parmenides* of Plato and the Origin of the Neoplatonic One," *Classicsal Quarterly* 22 (1928): 129–42; John Whittaker, "Epekeina nou kai ousias," *Vigiliae Christianae* 23 (1969): 91–104.

and essence in that historical period.[66] This transcendent, stationary divinity was better adapted to the criticism generated by Plato's Demiurge, as presented in the *Timaeus*, and had been released from all contact with the world below him. The bibliography on this issue is vast.[67] As far as the view of the God below it—Ptolemy's Father or Intellect—is concerned, the notion is also well established in the philosophical and religious currents of the first centuries CE, even if it is not always subordinated to a higher, transcendent God. In fact, Middle Platonists show some hesitation regarding the existence of one or two Gods—an indecision which, according to Whittaker, can be traced back to the discussions in the Old Academy regarding the question of whether the ultimate godhead was to be identified with the *nous* or was beyond it.[68] While first-century authors tend to posit one single God,[69] in the second half of the second century, the discussion regarding first principles timidly begins to distinguish two: the transcendent principle and a lower intellect proceeding from him.[70] Interestingly enough, Ptolemy's *Great Notice* shows no hesitation and is clear as to both the number of divinities and the relationship between them: the two Gods appear in a clear hierarchy that subordinates the Father or the Intellect to the first transcendent principle.

2.2 *Achamoth*

Moreover, the relationship between God and Achamoth as well as between Achamoth and the Demiurge in the *Great Notice* can only be understood as a part of the wider discussion regarding God's relationship to the world, which also intended to respond to Aristotelian and Epicurean criticism of a God

66 Numenius, fragment 5 explicitly gives the one all the attributes of the One of the first hypothesis of Plato's *Parmenides*. See also Numenius fragments 16 and 19.

67 See John Whittaker, "Neopythagorean and Negative Theology," *Symbolae Osloenses* 44 (1969): 109–25; Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition* (Quebec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2001); Michael A. Williams, "Negative Theologies and Demiurgical Myths in Late Antiquity," in *Gnosticism and Later Platonism*, 277–302.

68 Whittaker, "Epekeina," 103–4.

69 For Atticus (fragments 12 and 28.7–8), the first God is an intellect. According to Plutarch (*Isis and Osiris* 352A), God is One and Intellect. See also *Platonic Questions* 1003A.

70 Numenius, fragment 15, calls this divine intellect "Demiurge"; in the Chaldean Oracles, fragments 1, 3, and 7 (Des Places), the Father is called the Second Nous; Alcinous (*Didaskalikos* 164.19–28) distinguished between two Intellects, the first transcendent intellect and the intellect of the whole heaven.

engaged in labour,[71] such as the Demiurge of the *Timaeus* or the Stoic immanent deity.[72]

More specifically, Ptolemy's theology should be placed in the context of the reception of Plato's *Timaeus* 28c2–5, which—as is well known—is among the most-cited passages in ancient theological literature.[73] Plato's passage describes God as "Maker and Father," and most Middle Platonic authors comment upon it: Philo of Alexandria, Plutarch, Numenius, Atticus, Harpocration,[74] and Alcinous all mention the passage explicitly.[75] Here we see the hesitation

71 See Aristotle's criticism of Plato's World Soul in *On the Heavens* 284a27–35: "for such a life as the soul would have to lead could not possibly be painless or blessed." See the Epicurean criticism in Cicero, *De natura deorum* 1.49–52, on which see P. Merlan, "Aristoteles und Epikurus müssige Götter," *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 21 (1967): 485–92; Strato of Lampsacus (fragment 32 [Wehrli] [ap. Cicero, *Academica* II 121]) argues that the gods should have holidays at least, as priests also do; see Matthias Baltes, *Die Weltentstehung des platonischen Timaios nach den antiken Interpreten, Teil I* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 24; Jan Opsomer, "Demiurges in Early Imperial Platonism," in *Gott und die Götter bei Plutarch*, ed. R. Hirsch-Luipold (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005), 51–100, esp. 56–63.

72 Cf. Cicero, *De natura deorum* 1.52; Diogenes Laertius 7.88; 7.134–36; Cleanthes, *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* 1.537; Philodemus, *On Piety,* col. 11 (= *SVF* 2.1076). See also Hans Joachim Krämer, *Der Ursprung der Geistmetaphysik. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Platonismus zwischen Platon und Plotin* (Amsterdam: Grüner, 1964) 296n407; Gretchen Reydams-Schils, *Demiurge and Providence. Stoic and Platonist Readings of Plato's Timaeus, Monotheismes et philosophie* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), 42–51 and 55–56.

73 For the reception of Plato's sentence, see A. J. Festugière, *La révélation d'Hermès Trismegiste*, vol. 4, *Le Dieu inconnu et la gnose* (Paris : Librairie Lecoffre, 1954); Alcinoos, *Enseignement des doctrines de Platon*, ed. John Whittaker, trans. Pierre Louis (Paris: Budé, 1990), 104; Heinrich Dörrie, Matthias Baltes, and Christian Pietsch, *Die philosophische Lehre des Platonismus*, vol. 7.1: *Theologia Platonica* (Bad-Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2008), 572–80; see also Franco Ferrari, "Gott als Vater und Schöpfer. Zur Rezeption von *Timaios* 28c3–5 bei einigen Platonikern," in*The Divine Father: Religious and Philosophical Concepts of Divine Parenthood in Antiquity*, ed. F. Albrecht and R. Feldmeier (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 57–71, here 60.

74 As is well known, Philo quotes Plato's sentence indifferently, preserving the same order as Plato (in 21 passages) or inverting the terms of the sentence (also in 21 cases). See D. T. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the* Timaeus *of Plato* (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 103–13. For Plutarch, see *Platonic Questions* 1001A–B, with Roig Lanzillotta, "Dios como padre y artífice en *Moralia* de Plutarco," in *Filiación V. Cultura pagana, religión de Israel, orígenes del cristianismo*, ed. Patricio de Navascués, Manuel Crespo, and Andrés Sáez (Madrid, 2013), 139–56, here 150–54. For Numenius, see fragment 26, with Baltes, "Numenios von Apameia und der Platonische Timaios," *Vigiliae Christianae* 29 (1975): 241–70, here 264. See Proclus, *In Timaeum* 1.305.6–16. On Harpocration's split of the divine unity in the wake of Numenius and against his teacher, Atticus, see Proclus, *In Timaeum* 1.304.22–305.6.

75 See Pierluigi Donini, "La connaissance de dieu et la hiérarchie divine chez Albinos," in *Commentary and Tradition. Aristotelianism, Platonism, and Post-Hellenistic Philosophy*, ed. P. L. Donini and M. Bonazzi (Berlin : De Gruyter, 2011), 423–36.

I mentioned above: while for Philo and others, the sentence refers to one single divinity,[76] according to Numenius, Harpocration, Alcinous, (perhaps Galen),[77] Porphyry, and Plotinus, this passage clearly distinguishes two divinities. In this case, the term "father" (πατήρ) referred to the highest God, the transcendent divinity, while the term "maker" (ποιητής) referred to a second divinity, the Demiurge or "creator" God. Situated between these groups, Plutarch of Chaeronea tends to maintain God's unity, like the first group, but attributes the two terms to different aspects of the divinity, in line with the second group.

A brief overview of the reception of *Timaeus* 28c in the first and second centuries will help us clarify the issues at stake in the *Great Notice* as well as the innovative character of Ptolemy's theological developments. Plato's passage appears repeatedly in Philo,[78] who interprets the expression ποιητὴς καὶ πατήρ as a reference to one single divinity,[79] even though he was certainly aware of the biomorphic and technomorphic aspects of the sentence.[80] For Philo, the two aspects are different sides of the same divine coin.[81] As to the first, in line with Genesis 1–3, where God's activity is described using the verb ποιεῖν ("to make"), God is first of all the maker of the universe. As to the second aspect, for

76 Maximus of Tyre, *Orations* 11.12, with Festugière, *La révélation*, 4:112–13; see also Opsomer, "Demiurges," 77n139; Apuleius, *De Platone et dogmate eius* 1.5.190, with Festugière, *La révélation*, 4 :102–9; Opsomer, "Demiurges," 77–78n140. See also Apuleius, *Apologia* 64; *De Deo Socratis* 123, 124; on Longinus, see Michael Frede, "La teoría de la ideas de Longino," *Methexis* 3 (1990): 85–98, here 91–92; and Irmgard Männlein-Robert, *Longin. Philologe und Philosoph. Eine Interpretation der erhaltenen Zeugnisse* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001), 538–39; on Longinus's views on God and the Demiurge, see also Opsomer, "Demiurges," 78, with n. 143; and Atticus, fragment 9.35–43; see also 28.7–8.

77 Opsomer, "Demiurges," 78n143.

78 See Runia, "Philo and the Early Christian Fathers," in *The Cambridge Companion to Philo*, ed. Adam Kamesar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 210–30, here 212.

79 See, for example, *De Abrahamo* 57ff., on which Arthur D. Nock, "The Exegesis of Tim. 28C," *Vigiliae Christianae* 16 (1962): 79–86, here 82; also *De Opificio* 36; 68; 138–39; *Legum allegoria* 1.77; 2.3; 3.76; *De mutatione nominum* 47.

80 Philo, *de opificio* 10: "For it stands to reason that what has been brought into existence should be cared for by its Father and Maker. For, as we know, it is a father's aim in regard to his offspring and an artificer's in regard to his handiwork to preserve them, and by every means to fend off from them aught that may entail loss or harm"; See Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the* Timaeus, 109–10. See also Roig Lanzillotta, "Plutarch of Chaeronea, Clement of Alexandria and the Bio- and Technomorphic Aspects of Creation," in *Plutarch and the New Testament Revisited*, ed. Rainer Hirsch-Luipold (Leiden: Brill, 2020), forthcoming.

81 See also Philo, *De specialibus legibus* 1.41; *De aeternitate* 15.

Philo—also in line with the Septuagint (LXX), even if the Pentateuch does not provide much support for it—God is the Father.[82]

Plutarch also thought that Plato was indicating one single divinity. As I have shown elsewhere,[83] however, he also believed there was a reason Plato used two terms: "father" and "maker" were in fact meant to refer to different aspects of the same divine person.[84] The second *Platonic Question* states that the first element of Plato's sentence, "maker," equates God's creative act with his "ordering" activity, when he imparted order to chaotic matter.[85] As for the second element, "father," this is explained by his biological relationship to the World Soul. In fact, after bringing order to the chaotic, pre-cosmic Soul, he shared with her his intellect (νοῦς) and rationality (λογισμός), as a result of which the World Soul can be considered a part of him—namely, his daughter.[86]

Plutarch was more aware of the debate concerning a divinity engaged in labour—even though he ascribed the terms "father" and "maker" to the same divine person—in the first half of the second century, and he goes a step further than Philo, distinguishing divine functions and prefiguring the theological dualism we will find later in Middle Platonism, with the development of a Demiurge figure. According to Plutarch, it is by means of his "daughter"—namely, the World Soul—that the Father creates, by transmitting his order to matter.[87] This shows that Plutarch is attempting to free God from all direct contact with the tangible world—that he is attempting to elevate him to the transcendent realm beyond the generation and corruption of the lower physical world.[88] This was necessary given Epicurean criticism in the wake of Aristotelian theology, as formulated in the *Metaphysics* against

82 See Philo, *De Ebrietate* 30, 42 on *Deuteronomium* 21.18–21; 32.6. On the notion of God as father in Philo, see David T. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the Timaeus of Plato* (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 110–11.

83 See Roig Lanzillotta, "Dios como padre y artifice."

84 On Plutarch, see also Ferrari, "Dio padre ed artifice. La teologia di Plutarco in Pla. Qu. 2," in *Plutarco e la religione*, ed. I. Gallo (Naples: M. D'Auria, 1996), 395–409, here 402; idem, "Der Gott Plutarchs und der Gott Platons," in *Gott und die Götter bei Plutarch. Götterbilder—Gottesbilder—Weltbilder*, ed. R. Hirsch-Luipold (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005), 13–26; Opsomer, "Demiurges," 87–96.

85 Plutarch, *Platonic Questions* 1001A–B.

86 Cf. Roig Lanzillotta, "Dios como padre y artífice," 150–54.

87 Plutarch, *On the Generation of the Soul* 1013E; *Platonic Questions* 1003A.

88 According to John Dillon ("The Role of the Demiurge in Platonic Theology," in *Proclus et la theologie platonicienne. Actes du Colloque International de Louvain (13–16 mai 1998) en l'honneur de H. D. Saffrey et L. G. Westerink*, ed. A. P. Segonds and C. Steel [Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2000], 339–49, here 341–42), Plutarch seems to endow the World Soul—the pre-cosmic Soul "ordered" by the "Maker and Father"—with a demiurgic function.

Platonic and Stoic views of God, which seemed to present him as "grievously overworked."[89]

2.3 *Achamoth and the Logos*

However, it is in Ptolemy that we see a definitive step in this direction. Ptolemy's introduction of the Logos—the Son and Saviour—to fulfil the Father's ordering activity succeeds in freeing God from labour even more than Plutarch did, since the Logos puts the Father's plan into practice. Consequently, in Ptolemy we seem to see (though not quite, since the Logos "is the Father and was with the Father") a split in the Father that prefigures the similar distinction made by Numenius in the Demiurge of becoming (below), who is divided into two: a genuinely divine intellect and a demiurgic intellect that brings his plan into practice. The Valentinian emphasis on Christ being the *real* demiurgic principle[90] was not only intended to voice Valentinian concerns regarding a God engaged in ordering activity, but especially to underline the Valentinian innovation.

Apart from this aspect, however, both Plutarch's and Ptolemy's myths coincide point for point. In fact, the way in which God is the Father in Plutarch—namely, transmitting his intelligibility to the pre-cosmic Soul, making her intelligible and consequently transforming her into the World Soul proper—helps us to understand the relationship between the Saviour and Achamoth. The process by means of which the Saviour, after his descent, eradicates Achamoth's passions is equivalent to the ordering activity of the Father with regard to the pre-cosmic Soul. Similarly, both the Logos (in Irenaeus) and the intelligibility of the Father (in Plutarch) give rise to Achamoth's and the World Soul's creative impulse, respectively. This equivalence is perhaps even more visible in Heracleon's version of the myth, since for him, the Logos is the equivalent of Sophia-Achamoth.[91]

89 Cicero, *De natura deorum* 1.52. See the references in notes 65 and 66 above. See also, Dillon, "Plutarch and God: Theodicy and Cosmogony in the Thought of Plutarch," in *Traditions of Theology: Studies in Hellenistic Theology, Its Background and Aftermath*, ed. D. Frede & A. Laks (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 228; Michael Frede, "Numenius," in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, part 2, vol. 36.2, *Philosophie, Wissenschaften, Technik*, ed. Wolfgang Hasse (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1987), 1034–75, here 1060; Krämer, *Der Ursprung der Geistmetaphysik*, 69.

90 See Heracleon's fragment 22, above 366.

91 See Heracleon, fragment 22, and note 43 above.

2.4 *Achamoth and Demiurge*

Consequently, Plutarch helps us understand numerous aspects of the theology of the *Great Notice*, such as the relationship between God and Achamoth, the role of God's Son, the Saviour or the Logos, and the rapport between the Demiurge and his creation. Particularly interesting for the latter is Irenaeus's assertion that the "Demiurge is Father of the psychic ones and creator of the material ones": while he shares something of his own nature with the former, his relationship with the latter equates to that of a sculptor to his sculpture.[92]

However, Plutarch is not enough: while in Plutarch we have God and the World Soul, in the Valentinian system—notably in Heracleon—we have not two, but three divine figures: God, the Logos/Achamoth, and the Demiurge, which means that the Demiurge's role in creation is not secondary, but tertiary. Numenius provides a better framework to help us understand the Valentinian concept. According to Proclus's report on Numenius's theology, the latter distinguished three Gods: the transcendent God, the Demiurge, and the World.[93] Given the reception of Plato's *Timaeus* 28c under Neo-Pythagorean influence, even since Eudorus, John Dillon and Michael Frede have already pointed out that what we have here is in fact a split in the second God.[94] To quote Jan Opsomer, Numenius's three Gods referred to "(1) the first intellect as the demiurge of being; (2) the second intellect, the demiurge of becoming. The latter then divides into (2a) a truly divine intellect and a (2b) a demiurgic intellect."[95] While the first is inactive with respect to all works and is a king, the second is in spiritual motion and directs his activity towards both the intelligible and the sensible realms.[96] In my view, it is precisely Numenius's distinction—between a pure intellect and a demiurgic intellect putting his plan into practice—that allows us to understand the relationship between God, Logos/Achamoth, and the Demiurge. If my interpretation is correct, we not only see Valentinians participating in the hot but wider discussion regarding the first principles, which involved numerous schools in that period, we also see them engaging in the much more specific debate around God's relationship to the world and taking the initiative in explaining how God interacted with the world. Admittedly, the date of Numenius is difficult to determine. But if Chiapparini is correct in assuming an early composition date between 150 and 160 for Irenaeus's *Against*

92 See Plutarch, *Platonic Questions* 1001A–B.
93 Proclus, *In Timaeum* 3.103.28–32.
94 Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 366–72; Frede, "Numenius," 1060.
95 Opsomer, "Demiurges," 64–65 and 69–73.
96 Numenius, fragments 12, 15, and 16; with Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 368–69.

all Heresies, Ptolemy's views may have already been developed by 150, a date considerably earlier than both Numenius and Alcinous.

2.5 *The Demiurge and the Cosmos*

We come then to the creation of the cosmos. The activity of the Valentinian creator God shaping the world, as we saw above, was modelled on the basis of Plato's Demiurge in the *Timaeus*, which is perhaps the reason why Ptolemy's Demiurge lacks the negative traits with which he was described in other Valentinian versions of the myth. In fact, in the wake of Plato's Demiurge and his creation of the heavens, when he mixed "the revolution of the Same and of the Other,"[97] Ptolemy's Demiurge measures, cuts, combines, unites, and separates—activities which reflect the employment of a subaltern divinity engaged in labour. As noted above, the figure of the creator God in Plato's *Timaeus* had already been the target of philosophical criticism, perhaps among Aristotelians, but certainly among Epicureans,[98] and later among Neo-Pythagoreans.[99] By equating the figure of the lower creator God with Plato's Demiurge, Ptolemy tacitly and implicitly sided with those philosophers who criticised the idea of a working God: the Demiurge described in the *Timaeus* could not be the highest God, but had to be a lower divinity who, with the help of younger Gods, was in charge of the creation of the lower realms—namely, the astral and earthly regions.

2.6 *The Cosmos and the Appearance of Matter*

Something similar may be seen in Ptolemy's conception of matter as arising from the passions of Achamoth. While Pythagoreans opposed the Monad to the Indefinite Dyad, Plato worked with a two-principle model that opposed the Demiurge to pre-existent chaotic matter, as did the Aristotelians with their form and matter; later Platonists, such as Plutarch and Alcinous, in turn moved towards a three-principle system, with God, the ideas, and matter. However, as André-Jean Festugière demonstrated many years ago, on the basis of the

97 *Contra* Thomassen, "The Platonic and Gnostic Demiurge," in *Apocryphon Severinin Presented to Soren Giversen*, ed. Per Bilde and Helge Kjaer Nielsen (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1993), 226–44, here 241.

98 Cicero, *De natura deorum* 1.21; Lucretius 5.168–173; Pseudo-Plutarch, *Placita philosophorum* 881B–D.

99 See. Paul Moraux, *Der Aristotelismus bei den Griechen: von Andronikos bis Alexander von Aphrodisias, Bd. 2: Der Aristotelismus Im I. und II. Jh. n. Chr.* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1984), 636–37; David T. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the Timaeus of Plato* (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 444.

testimony of Alexander Polyhistor, Eurorus, and Moderatus of Gades,[100] there was also a trend in Neo-Pythagoreanism that proposed a monistic system in which the Monad and the Indefinite Dyad were seen as arising from a superior One. This issue—which has received the attention of Hans Joachim Krämer, John Rist, John Dillon, and Jens Halfwassen—is extremely important in placing Ptolemy's thought in the context of the philosophical discussion regarding first principles.[101]

In contrast to Philo, who tacitly accepts a two-principle model, for which he probably found some support in Genesis,[102] Ptolemy seems to stick to a strictly monistic system that derives matter from the first, single principle. It seems reasonable to accept, with Einar Thomassen, that Ptolemy's views arise from the Neo-Pythagorean monistic current that proposed a monistic system in which derivation accounted for the appearance of all the levels of being. According to Simplicius, in Moderatus's account "Matter is nothing other than the deviation of sensible forms from intelligible ones, as they turn away from that region and are borne down towards Non-Being."[103] Not only Ptolemy's but also other Valentinian views on matter allow us to assume this influence; in particular, the Neo-Pythagorean character of the vocabulary used in Valentinianism to describe this derivation process shows clear Neo-Pythagorean provenance.[104]

3 Conclusions

Valentinian protology can only be understood vis-à-vis the philosophical discussion regarding first principles in the first two centuries. The relationship between God and Achamoth, and between the latter and the demiurge, on the one hand, helped to solve the implicit problems of an improbable technomorphic God, as accepted in Jewish and proto-orthodox Christian beliefs. On

100 Festugière, *La révélation* 4 and 36–40.

101 Krämer, *Geistmetaphysik*, 229–337; John M. Rist, "Monism: Plotinus and Some Predecessors," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 69 (1965): 329–44; Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 126–29; Jens Halfwassen, "Einheit und Vielfalt bei Plotin: Das Eine als Absoluter Grund der Vielheit," in *Einheit und Vielheit als Metaphysisches Problem*, ed. Johannes Brachtendorf and Stephan Herzberg (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 61–81; idem, *Der Aufstieg zum Einen: Untersuchungen zu Platon und Plotin*, 2nd rev. ed. (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 2012).

102 Philo, *Heres* 160; *De opificio* 7–9.

103 Simplicius, *In Physica* 230.34–231.27 Diels. On which, see Thomassen, *Spiritual Seed*, 271–75; Pleše, "Evil and its Sources in Gnostic Traditions", 115–16.

104 Thomassen, "The Derivation of Matter."

the other hand, it seemed to provide an appropriate response to the problems raised by Aristotelians and Epicureans regarding a divinity engaged in labour.

In my view, Ptolemy's *Great Notice* reflects both the creative reception of Plato's *Timaeus* and the transformation of Plato's theology, which was also taking place in Middle Platonic and Neo-Pythagorean circles. On the one hand, Plato's definition of God as "Father" (28c) articulates the relationship between God the Father and Achamoth (the World Soul), with whom he shares his intelligibility. On the other hand, God is the "maker" of the world through the instrument of the rationalised World Soul, or Achamoth.

However, Ptolemy and other Valentinians went further than Middle Platonists such as Plutarch, who interpreted the *Timaeus* as a reference to one single God but distinguished different divine aspects within him. As a matter of fact, by placing the Logos between God and Achamoth, they show the beginning of the process that we see fulfilled in Numenius's second God: an internal division between a divine intellect and a demiurgic intellect that brought the former's plan into practice.

As far as the notion of the Demiurge is concerned, it was formed on the basis of the description of the Demiurge and the younger Gods shaping higher and lower parts of the human soul in the *Timaeus* (90). Ptolemy's description of a God engaged in manual labour was intended to highlight the lower status of this divinity and should be seen as an implicit criticism of the idea of a working God—a criticism that was also levelled by Aristotelians, Epicureans, and Neo-Pythagoreas against Plato's creator God.

Ptolemy's conception of derivational matter is also an answer to contemporary philosophical debates regarding the existence of one, two, or three principles. Moderatus of Gades, Alexander Polyhistor, Eudorus of Alexandria, and Sextus Empiricus are just a few of the witnesses to the existence of similar monistic trends in Neo-Pythagoreanism. This may also explain the positive view of both creation and matter which we find in the *Great Notice*.

Both the early date and the character of Valentinian protology, as it echoes many of the central aspects of the discussion regarding first principles in that historical period, show that Valentinian protology was shaped vis-à-vis contemporary philosophical discussions and in close interaction with various interlocutors in the wider cultural context of which Valentinians were a part, rather than exclusively reacting to proto-orthodox views.

The use of myth to convey philosophical content, as Plato and Plutarch did; the scientific and empirical tone of the descriptions; the inclusion of hot topics in philosophical interschool polemics; the derivational conception of matter; and the rather neutral character of the latter, defined as στέρησις or "privation"—all of these factors present Valentinians as actors in their own

right in the lively philosophical discussion that involved different philosophical schools, Jews, and Christians alike.[105]

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105 This chapter profited from discussions with and feedback from numerous colleagues, friends, and students during the last two years. Debates and conversations following my presentation at various conferences, in which I exposed diverse aspects of this chapter, helped me to develop numerous views regarding Valentinian protology. Some colleagues, however, took on the more onerous work of reading and discussing in person or by mail numerous particular aspects of my discussion. In this sense, my most warm thanks are due to my friends and colleagues April DeConick, Juan Carlos Alby, and Zlatko Pleše, whose comments have enriched this chapter considerably. Also very useful were the comments of several of my PhD students, such as Petru Moldovan, Luisa Lesage Gárriga, and Fryderyk Kwiatkowski. Needless to say, any remaining errors are only due to my hand.

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