

# The Passion of Christ in the Valentinian Sources from the Nag Hammadi Library, and its Relationship with the Fourth Gospel

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## Abstract

Although the passion of Christ in the Valentinian Sources from the Nag Hammadi Library and the passion of Christ in the Fourth Gospel seem to share many commonalities, the Valentinian understanding of the passion events has much less to do with the historicity of the crucifixion, suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ than with what they symbolised. Likewise, the passion can only be properly understood in light of the Valentinian myth, through which the Valentinians understood their theology. The following article analyses the passion of Christ in the Valentinian Sources from the Nag Hammadi Library in light of its relationship to the Fourth Gospel.

## 1. Introduction

The passion of Christ in the Valentinian Sources (VSS)<sup>2</sup> from the Nag Hammadi Library (NHL), when compared to the Fourth Gospel (FG), appear quite differently and must be understood within the Valentinian

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

<sup>2</sup> List of abbreviations on page 76.

myth. The events of the last days of Christ bear more meaning symbolically than historically. While the crucifixion includes the idea of redemption on the cross, the cross symbolises the barrier between the physical and spiritual. The suffering takes on the meaning of being detained within the physical realm, the death is the separation of the physical from the spiritual, and the resurrection describes the reunification and restoration of the spiritual body with the Pleroma. Thus, while the passion events appear in the VSS, they must be understood within the Valentinian myth. The following sections will further analyse the passion of Christ within the Valentinian myth.

## 2. The Crucifixion of Christ

There are several passages in the VSS that refer to the crucifixion of Christ. The GT states that he was ‘nailed to a tree’ (*auqftf auše*, 18:24; 20:25). Ménard believes that this reference should be taken spiritually. In other words, Christ was enslaved to humanity, which would be consistent with the death of Christ in the VSS (1972:88). Theodotus equated the cross with the boundary between the unfaithful and faithful and the world and the Pleroma. He pictured Christ as the head and Jesus as the shoulders carrying the seed to the Pleroma (*Exc* 42).

IK 5:30–32 and 13:25–37 both refer to the ‘cross’ (*stauros*). The latter may be a Valentinian interpretation of John 19:26–27 (Pagels and Turner 1988a:83). Both picture Jesus looking down from the cross. Just as the author of the IK describes the saviour as being ‘bent over the cross’ (*ntaurek<ts> hijm pestaurus*, IK 13:27), Irenaeus uses the phrase ‘extended himself beyond the cross’ (διὰ τοῦ Σταυροῦ ἐπεκταθέντα, *Haer* I:4.1). Irenaeus uses this to describe the impartation of Sophia’s form. Thomassen argues that these passages do not demonstrate that the saviour truly suffered or was incarnated. Rather, it should be viewed as an ‘emanation process’ (2006:187). This is compatible with the

terminology of extension in IK (2:28ff; 8:34; 11:26–13:20l; 14:28ff). GP 63 explains the emanation process in the context of the crucifixion.

GP 63:21–24 describes Jesus as the Eucharist, and calls him ‘the one who is spread out’ (*petporš ebol*). The Valentinian idea of mutual participation is in view. Through death, Christ divides himself and extends to those he will redeem (*Exc* 36:1–2) (Magnusson 2006:144–147). Thomassen writes, ‘The chief expression of this meaning of the incarnation of the Saviour is the crucifixion: at the cross the Saviour ‘extends’ himself into matter, symbolised by his spreading out the limbs of his body and letting them be fixed to a piece of wood’ (2009:182). The purpose of the extension is for the aeons to move from a spiritual potential to intelligent beings and for deity to manifest himself as a ‘oneness-in-plurality’ (2006:277). When the incarnation ended, the spirit was released from the body and returned to the spirit realm. Thus, the cross, like the boundary for the Sophia, separates the spiritual realm from the material realm. Theodotus’s writings bear this out as well (*Exc* 42). Moreover, one of Pleroma’s boundaries is called *σταυρός* (*Haer* I:2,4; 3:1,5; *Ref* VI:31,5; 34,7; *Exc* 22:4; 42:1). Thus, the Valentinian language of extension and spreading out should be viewed in the context of emanation and mutual participation.

VE 33:16–38 refers to Christ, the ‘cross’ (*še*), and the ‘nail wound’ (*šō<ft>*). It also refers to his descent (33:34), which was necessary to rectify the situation with the aeons of the Pleroma, the exiled Sophia, and human corruption (Pagels and Turner 1988b:163). The perfect form ascends to the Pleroma. The body was detained by the limit, which is part of the suffering of Christ. Christ had a spiritual body before his incarnation (33:34). Jesus receives Christ in VE 39:29–30. This is consistent with the Valentinian division of Jesus and Christ. The crucifixion should be viewed as the division between the spiritual and

physical. The cross is not the place where the saviour physically died and was then buried; he was released taking the spirituals with him to reunite with the Pleroma. Thus, the crucifixion should be seen as a marker between the world and the Pleroma (*Exc* 42).

The crucifixion in the VSS takes on the connotation of revelation, and the cross serves as the boundary between the spiritual and physical, but the Valentinians still retained the idea of redemption. The saviour had to be crucified in order to extend to those he came to redeem (*Exc* 36:1–2). The FG also sees the crucifixion as a redemptive act, but the Valentinians have redefined the cross in terms of a boundary to integrate it with their myth of reunification and final harmony within the Pleroma.

### 3. The Suffering of Christ

In the IK, Jesus ‘had [borne] the suffering’ (*[ti] mine aphisē*, 5:36), but the author refers to the body as a ‘temporary dwelling’ (*pandokeio[n]*, 6:31). This may indicate that the temporary dwelling, or Jesus, may have suffered, but the spiritual body did not experience any pain. The son was sent after the spirituals and spread over the cross and proclaimed the edict of the Father. This language is consistent with the eastern idea of mutual participation, and implies a spiritual body and a spiritual understanding of the suffering of Christ.

The GT states that he suffered (19:19–20:15). The context seems to demonstrate that Jesus truly suffered and the passion was revelatory not soteriological (Attridge and MacRae 1985:58). GT 20:31 states that he clothed himself in perishable rags. Ménard does not agree with those who think this passage demonstrates the reality of Christ’s suffering. He explains, *‘Il dépasse aussitôt l’histoire et la figure du christ est à nouveau sublimée entre le réel et le symbolique. Le Christ-Jésus n’est*

*que le mythe de l'Ursprung, de cette origine céleste dont chacun doit reprendre conscience* (p. 21)<sup>3</sup> (1972:96–97). Passages such as GT 20:31 and 31:1–6, where the material ones did not see the son, support Ménard's theory. Theodotus also confirms this by stating that while the body suffered, Christ had already left (*Exc* 62).

TT 113:31–34, 114:35, and 121:11–14 also describe the *Logos* suffering. The latter states that the material ones persecuted Jesus (Attridge and Pagels 1985:455). TT 65:4–17 describes the Valentinian idea of extension and spreading out. Thus, the suffering should be understood in this light since the *logos* is an emanation of the aeons (76:2–30). The 'flesh' (*sarks*) of Christ in TT 114:1–11 comes from the *logos* not the archons of the world. Irenaeus explains that the Valentinians believed that Christ had an 'animal' or 'fleshly' nature (*ψυχικός*) but was not 'material' (*ὕλικόν*, *Haer* I:5,6). Harvey argues that Apollinarian first believed that the body of Christ was heavenly and not truly earthly (Harvey 1857:52–53). He explains, 'The doctrine of Valentinus, therefore, as regards the human nature of Christ was essentially Docetic. His body was *animal* but not *material*, and only visible and tangible...' (1857:52–53). Yet, as has already been demonstrated, this Docetism has to be qualified. The incarnation did occur in some sense. The VSS do not affirm classic Docetism, for in their system Jesus did truly inhabit a bodily form. The tripartite distinction in the VSS may have come from Paul's language concerning the body in 1 Corinthians 15:44, 50. Paul contrasts the 'spiritual body' (*σῶμα πνευματικόν*) and the 'natural body' (*σῶμα ψυχικόν*). The 'flesh' (*σάρξ*) cannot inherit the kingdom and the 'perishable' (*ἡ*

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<sup>3</sup> Translation: He now goes beyond the story and the person of the Christ (which is) once again sublimated between the real and the symbolic. Jesus, the Christ, is not only the myth of the Ursprung, but is from this heavenly origin of which everyone shall regain consciousness.

φθορά) cannot inherit the ‘imperishable’ (τὴν ἀφθαρσίαν). The Valentinian idea that the body is a shell is a familiar Platonic idea (*Gorgias* 493a; *Cratylus* 400c) (Plato 1963:275, 437). As this dissertation has already argued, the suffering of the Logos finds no parallel in Hellenistic or Jewish Literature. This concept must have been influenced by the suffering of Jesus, who was the Logos, in the FG. The fact that the FG did not elaborate on this aspect of the passion as much as the Synoptics provides opportunity for the Valentinians to make extensive use of the FG.

The suffering of Christ in the VSS either takes on the meaning of being detained in the earthly realm or is explained by dividing Jesus, the one in the body, and Christ (*Exc* 62). The fact that the Logos suffered provides a glimpse of the FG’s influence in the VSS. Nowhere other than in the FG is suffering associated, through Jesus, with the Logos.

#### 4. The Death of Christ

The TR does imply the son of man’s death (46:14–17). Yet, the use of the title son of man suggests a distinctively Valentinian understanding of his death, namely that the son of man would lead to the restoration of the Pleroma (Peel 1985:152–153). The son of man restored the spirituals to the Pleroma (TR 44:30–33) and unified the spiritual component of Christ with the Pleroma (Bock 2006:104). Bock argues that Christ’s death was only spiritual in the VSS, but there seems to be a psychic component as well. Death is the separation of the inward members from the outward members so that one can take on new flesh (47:4–8) and a garment of light (45:30–31). This separation is consistent with Theodotus in *Exc* 62—the body of Jesus suffered while Christ was deposited in the Father’s hand. A quotation from Paul is included in TR 45:25–28 (Thomassen 2006:83n1). In fact this mixes two Pauline passages: Romans 8:17 and Ephesians 2:5–6. In the context

of the TR, the spirituals are also ‘wearing’ (*phorei*) him. Some have seen this as a reference to the ‘kosmos’ (*kosmos*) rather than the saviour (Layton 1979:17, 56, 61; Layton 1981:202n53), but Peel believes that it should be translated ‘him’ rather than ‘it’ (1985:163). In TR 45, life comes from death (cf. *Phaedo* 71c-d). Death is necessary so that life can come out of it. This is consistent with the Middle Platonic dualistic ideas of the world of being and the sphere of becoming and corruption, as well as the idea of the intelligible and sensible worlds. Pagels explains this dual nature by stating that ‘the divine spirit within him could not die; in that sense he transcended suffering and death’ (1979:90). Through the act of ‘swallowing up death’ (*ōmnk m-pmou*), the saviour provided a way to ‘immortality’ (*ntnmntatmou*, TR 45:20–23). This passage contains clear references to mutual participation and returning to the Pleroma. Thus, this should be seen as relocation from earth to the Pleroma and a release from the physical body.

GP 52:35–53:14 implies the death of Christ in the phrase ‘laid down his life.’ GP 68:27–29 quotes Mark 15:34. The author’s interpretation of the Markan text includes the phrase ‘he had departed’ (*ebol hm*). Ehrman translates it ‘he was divided’ (2003:224) and explains that the author interpreted these words as if Christ had abandoned Jesus at the cross. Hence he was divided. This is consistent with Irenaeus’s assessment of Valentinian theology (*Haer* III:16,1). It also recalls Theodotus’s statement that while the body suffered, the soul of Christ was deposited in the Father’s hand (*Exc* 62).

TT 115:3–8 also speaks of the death of Christ: ‘Not only did he take upon [himself] the death of those whom he thought to save, but he also accepted their smallness.’ It does not make a docetic qualification, but the term ‘smallness’ (*šēm*) in 115:6 was used of psychic beings in 89:9–10. The psychic Christ redeems the psychic beings, namely Christians

(Thomassen 2006:65). The psychic Christ was born from the Demiurge according to Irenaeus (*Haer* I:7,2), who also states that the psychic Christ suffered as a ‘mystery’ or a ‘symbolic representation’ (μυστηριωδῶς) (Thomassen 2006:73). This implies that he did not truly suffer or die. IK 5:30–38 also speaks of the death of Christ. When combined with the statement that the body is a ‘temporary dwelling’ (*pandokeio[n]*) in 6:31, a Valentinian view of this event seems clear. Pagels sums up the data well: ‘None of these sources [VSS] denies that Jesus actually suffered and died; all assume it. Yet all are concerned to show how, in his incarnation, Christ transcended human nature so that he could prevail over death by divine power’ (1979:115). Yet the death of Christ is often couched in the language of mutual participation. Thus, one should not equate the death of Christ in the VSS with that of the FG. Death in the Valentinian paradigm includes division, swallowing, and departure. Pagels attributes this to the fact that the Valentinians were the first theologians and were working out the theological issues (1979:114–116). The Valentinians certainly existed in the first centuries of Christianity, but their views were not exclusively based on biblical accounts. There is no evidence that there was an early GT tradition that influenced the FG as Barrett suggests (1982:62–63). On the contrary, the GT demonstrates that the author, most likely Valentinus himself, did not have a well-formed Valentinian theology at this stage (i.e. lack of Sophia and no split between Jesus and Christ). Rather, their theology competed with orthodox understandings of the death of Christ. On the other hand their constant use of the FG and other canonical books makes it clear that they attempted to explain their beliefs about Christ’s death within a Christian framework.

The death of Christ in the FG is viewed as an event in time, which occurs for the sins of the world (1:29). The death of Christ in the VSS, while necessary, separates the inward and outward members so that a new form of flesh (TR 47:4–8) can be assumed. The difference lies in



the Valentinians' desire to explain their chief myth, the ultimate harmonization and restoration of the Pleroma.

## 5. The Resurrection of Christ

The resurrection should be seen as restoration in Valentinian theology (*Exc* 7:5; 61:5–8; 80:1–2; *Heracleon* frg. 15; TR 44). As has already been discussed, the other elements of the passion are consistent with this view. The Valentinian theology of the resurrection is described in the TR. It treats the resurrection of Jesus and the spirituals as if it has already happened (45:25–46:2; 49:16–30). Now if we are manifest in this world wearing him, we are that one's beams and we are embraced by him until our setting, that is to say, our death in this life. We are drawn to heaven by him, like beams by the sun, not being restrained by anything. This is the spiritual resurrection which swallows up the psychic in the same way as the fleshly (45:25–46:2). The author of the TR writes: 'We suffered with him, and we arose with him, and we went to heaven with him.'

The use of the title son of man in 46:14–17 suggests a Valentinian understanding of the death and resurrection. The son of man restores the spirituals to the Pleroma (44:30–32) (Peel 1985:152–153). Just as the son of man ascends in the FG, the same can be said of the son of man in the VSS. However, the FG describes Jesus ascending to heaven while the VSS describe him reuniting with the Pleroma. The resurrection is the separation of the inward members from the outward members (47:36–48:3). The mind and thought are separated from the body at death (Plato, *Timaeus* 28a). In Plato's *Republic* (IV), the allegory of the cave demonstrates this connection. The cave represents the world of becoming and those outside the cave represent the world of being. In the TR, the resurrection is revelation of what is (48:34–35) and the

filling of deficiency on the part of the Pleroma (49:4–5). The resurrection is spiritual (45:40–46:2) and came into being through Jesus (46:16–19). It swallows up the psychic and fleshly (45:40–46:2) and restores those that will be saved to the Pleroma (44:30–32). Peel believes that Pauline mystical language has influenced the author of the TR. The author's 'realized eschatology' has been influenced by passages like Romans 6:5–8, Ephesians 2:5ff, and Colossians 2:12ff. Paul speaks of this audience's crucifixion and death as a figurative, past event. The Valentinians may have understood the death of sin and the new life in a corporate sense and thus applied it to their restoration with the Pleroma.

In the VSS, Sophia plants her spiritual seeds into human bodies; they are educated, baptized, and return to reunite with the Pleroma. (Thomassen 2006:186) VE 33:16–38 implies the resurrection of the saviour in that the perfect form ascends to the Pleroma. The ascension also includes the idea of clothing himself again. GT 20:32 describes the saviour as 'putting on imperishability' (*afti hiōōf ntmntat teko*), referring to the spiritual substance (Ménard 1972:101). With this pneumatic state comes 'knowledge and perfection' (*nnousa unemn oujōk*, 20:38–39) and the perfection ascends to the Father (21:8–11). Thus, the resurrection in Valentinian theology should be seen as release and reunification with the Pleroma.

The author of the GP also explains that in some sense Jesus was resurrected before he died (56:15–20). Thus, the resurrection in the GP and TR is present. Just as Jesus has already risen, so the spirituals must also rise. Layton explains that it 'involves the ... laying aside of flesh, first by anticipation, then literally' (1979:96). This resurrection is achieved through gnosis (1979:58–59). The author of the TR ignores sin, the crucifixion, and the future bodily resurrection. Layton finds that the concept of resurrection in the TR is 'pre-eminently a category of the

here and now...’ Because of this, a future judgment is absent and the concept of a resurrected body does not exist, apart from becoming the body or the church. He concludes by admitting, ‘The author has therefore dressed a quite non-Pauline theology in a thin and tattered Pauline garb’ (1979:211). The garb may seem less thin and tattered if it is recognized as being woven from both Pauline and Johannine ideas. The FG views eternal life as a present reality predicated on belief in Jesus. The Valentinian resurrection comes through knowledge of one’s origin and destiny. The Valentinians may have clothed their theology with both Pauline and Johannine concepts.

## 6. Conclusion

Both the FG and the VSS from the NHL describe the passion of Christ as an historical event, which included a physical cross, suffering, a literal death, and a physical, bodily resurrection of Christ. Nonetheless, the historical events are far less important for the Valentinians. The true meaning of these events can be found in what each of the four pieces of the puzzle represents. For the Valentinians, the barrier between the physical and spiritual (cross) and the suffering of being within the early realm were overcome through the death of Christ, which the resurrection followed. These last two events caused the separation of the inward (spiritual) and outward members (physical) and allowed the restoration of the spirituals to the Pleroma. Thus, the Valentinian description of the passion event describes the Valentinian myth, restoring the fall of Sophia through the Valentinian idea of mutual participation where the spirituals become a spiritual body with the saviour, reunifying together into the Pleroma.

## Abbreviations

Exc	<i>Excerpta ex Theodotus</i> (Clement of Alexandria)
FG	The Fourth Gospel
GP	The Gospel of Philip
GT	The Gospel of Truth
Haer	<i>Against Heresies</i> (Irenaeus)
IK	<i>The Interpretation of Knowledge</i>
NHL	Nag Hammadi Library
Ref	<i>Refutations of all Heresies</i> (Hippolytus)
Strom	<i>Stromata</i> (Clement of Alexandria)
Tim	<i>Timaeus</i> (Plato)
TR	The Treatise on the Resurrection
TT	The Tripartite Tractate
Val	<i>Against the Valentinians</i> (Tertullian)
VE	<i>A Valentinian Exposition with Valentinian Liturgical Readings</i>
VSS	The Valentinian Sources

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