

VALENTINUS

The founder of a Gnostic sect that bears his name. He was born at Phrebonis in the Nile Delta (c. A.D. 100) and educated in Alexandria. He was well trained in rhetoric and philosophy, [perhaps](#) including familiarity with some of the allegorical writings of Philo Judaeus (c. 20 B.C.-c. A.D. 50). After teaching for some years in Alexandria, he migrated to Rome about 140 and, because of his intellectual prowess, had some hope of being elected bishop there (Tertullian *Adversus Valentinianos* 4).

Disappointed in his attempt to gain the episcopate, Valentinus is said to have broken with the true faith, although Epiphanius states that his apostasy occurred years later, when he had moved to Cyprus (Epiphanius *Panarion* 31). Either assertion presents difficulties for [describing](#) how the so-called Gnostic heresy associated with Valentinus came to be centered in Egypt if he never returned to Africa after founding his heretical sect. One must admit, therefore, that uncertainty prevails concerning both his ecclesiastical career and the time and place of the founding of Valentinian gnosticism. The date of Valentinus' death is unknown but is placed between 165 and 185.

As uncertain as are the historical dates and events in Valentinus' life, so also are the writings and doctrines that are associated with him. The popularity of the Valentinian sect was not disputed in antiquity (Tertullian, *Adversus Valentinianos* 1, describes them as *frequentissimum collegium inter haereticos*, "a very large group among the heretics"), and most of what is known about the Valentinians has been transmitted through disciples rather than the founder himself, somewhat as with Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans.

The acknowledged secrecy of the doctrines of the sect, the disavowal of the name Valentinian by its adherents, and the charge by Tertullian that succeeding generations became more spiritually and doctrinally promiscuous combine to make difficult, if not impossible, the task of

ascribing particular doctrines or writings to Valentinus. Recent discoveries of manuscripts, especially *The Gospel of Truth* in the NAG HAMMADI LIBRARY, and the efforts of many scholars have clarified the matter somewhat, but much remains unknown.

The essential characteristics of Valentinian gnosticism include an involved cosmological speculation consisting of a heavenly realm, the Pleroma, comprised of thirty or more worlds or aeons. Irenaeus claims that Pythagoras was the originator of the number systems that describe the emanations within the aeons (*Adversus omnes haereses* 2.14), and the emanations are described as tripartite, being divided into an Ogdoad, a Decad, and a Duadecad (*Adversus omnes haereses* 1.1-2). One emanation within the Pleroma, Sophia, brought about the Fall and, eventually, the creation of the world.

Redemption became possible through one aeon, Christ, who became united with the mortal Jesus to bring knowledge (*gnosis*) to mankind. Only the “pneumatic” Valentinians can receive the *gnosis* and be fully saved, while the “psychic” other [Christians](#) receive partial salvation, and the “hylic” remainder of the human family will be eternally damned. One of the requirements for full [salvation](#) as a “pneumatic” was marriage (Tertullian *Adversus Valentinianos* 30; Irenaeus *Adversus omnes haereses* 1.46.4), which Clement (*Stromateis* 3.29) notes is after the pattern of sacred marriages among the gods.

Although many followers of Valentinus can be named in the second and third centuries, two main branches of Valentinianism appear to have emerged: the Eastern segment, identified at first with [Theodotus](#) and Mark, and the Western segment, founded by Ptolemy and Heracleon. These sects cannot be traced with certainty, but Valentinians can be found in all parts of the Roman empire, including Gaul, Asia (Turkey), Syria, Mesopotamia, Carthage, and, of course, Egypt. Commentaries on scripture and speculative works were produced by adherents of this Gnostic movement, a characteristic feature of such writings being the use

of allegorical interpretation.

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- See esp. *Gospel of Truth and Gospel of Philip*.

C. WILFRED GRIGGS

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