

# Apocryphal Revelation and the Interpretation of Scripture in Valentinian Texts

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**Περίληψη:** Η ερμηνεία της αποκάλυψης σε δύο απόκρυφα βαλεντινιανά κείμενα που διασώζονται στους κώδικες του Nag Hammadi – το *Ευαγγέλιο της Αλήθειας* και την *Τριμερή Πραγματεία* (*Tripartite Tractate*) – αποτελεί το κεντρικό αντικείμενο της παρούσας μελέτης. Προσεγγίζοντας τα κείμενα αυτά ως ιστορικές πηγές για την ποικιλομορφία της χριστιανικής σκέψης του 2<sup>ου</sup> αιώνα, η μελέτη αναδεικνύει τους προβληματισμούς και τις αντιφάσεις των κοινοτήτων που τα παρήγαγαν. Αντί να τα αντιμετωπίζει ως περιθωριακές αποκλίσεις από την ορθοδοξία, το άρθρο υποστηρίζει ότι αποτελούν σύνθετες ερμηνευτικές προσεγγίσεις στο νόημα της χριστιανικής αποκάλυψης, προσφέροντας σημαντικές μαρτυρίες για την εξέλιξη των πρώιμων χριστιανικών αντιλήψεων και δογμάτων. Κεντρικό σημείο της ανάλυσης αποτελεί η στενή σύνδεση μεταξύ αποκάλυψης και γνώσης στη βαλεντινιανή σκέψη. Στο *Ευαγγέλιο της Αλήθειας*, η αποκάλυψη παρουσιάζεται ως φανέρωση του Πατέρα, η οποία διαλύει την άγνοια που επισκιάζει την επίγνωση της ανθρωπότητας για τη θεία προέλευσή της. Η *Τριμερής Πραγματεία* αναπτύσσει το θέμα αυτό μέσα σε ένα πιο συστηματικό κοσμολογικό πλαίσιο, παρουσιάζοντας την αποκάλυψη ως μια σταδιακή διαδικασία διαμεσολάβησης, μέσω της οποίας τα πνευματικά όντα αναγνωρίζουν την πηγή τους και αποκαθίστανται στην ενότητα με το θεϊκό πλήρωμα. Παρά τις διαφορές τους ως προς το είδος και τη δομή, και τα δύο κείμενα συγκλίνουν στην ταύτιση της σωτηριώδους γνώσης με την αναγνώριση της προέλευσής του ανθρώπου από τον Πατέρα. Το άρθρο εξετάζει περαιτέρω τα βιβλικά μοτίβα που επανερμηνεύονται στα συγκεκριμένα κείμενα και ανιχνεύει την επίδρασή τους στον φιλοσοφικό στοχασμό των πρώτων χριστιανικών χρόνων, συμπεριλαμβανομένου του ιωάννειου θέματος της αποκάλυψης του Πατέρα μέσω του Υιού, καθώς και της αντίθεσης μεταξύ άγνοιας και φωτός. Τα βαλεντινιανά απόκρυφα κείμενα αποτελούν, επομένως, σημαντικές ιστορικές μαρτυρίες για την εξέλιξη του χριστιανικού δόγματος και διασώζουν μία από τις σαφέστερες απόπειρες του 2<sup>ου</sup> αιώνα να νοηθεί η αποκάλυψη ως σωτηριώδης γνώση και όχι ως δημόσια μετάδοση δογματικών διδασκαλιών.

**Abstract:** The interpretation of revelation in two Valentinian apocryphal texts preserved in the Nag Hammadi codices – the *Gospel of Truth* and the *Tripartite Tractate* – forms the central concern of this study. Approached as historical sources for the diversity of second-century Christian thought, these writings illuminate the concerns and contradictions of the communities that produced them. Rather than treating them as marginal deviations from orthodoxy, the article argues that they function as sophisticated interpretative reflections on the meaning of Christian

revelation, offering important evidence for the development of early Christian concepts and doctrines. A central focus of the analysis is the close connection between revelation and knowledge in Valentinian thought. In the Gospel of Truth, revelation is presented as the disclosure of the Father that dispels the ignorance obscuring humanity's awareness of its divine origin. The Tripartite Tractate develops this theme within a more systematic cosmological framework, presenting revelation as a gradual process of mediation through which spiritual beings come to recognize their source and are restored to unity with the divine fullness. Despite their differences in genre and structure, both texts converge on the identification of salvific knowledge with the recognition of one's origin in the Father. The article further examines the biblical motifs reinterpreted in these writings and traces their influence on early Christian philosophical reflection, including the Johannine theme of the revelation of the Father through the Son and the opposition between ignorance and light. Valentinian apocryphal texts thus constitute important historical evidence for the development of Christian doctrine and preserve one of the clearest second-century attempts to construe revelation as salvific knowledge rather than as public doctrinal transmission.

### **Introduction: Apocryphal Texts and the Interpretation of Revelation**

The discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices in 1945 reshaped the study of early Christian literature by providing direct access to texts previously known mainly through heresiological reports. Before the publication of these texts, knowledge of movements often described as “gnostic” depended primarily on polemical accounts preserved in the writings of early Christian authors such as Irenaeus of Lyons, Hippolytus of Rome, or Epiphanius of Salamis<sup>1</sup>. The Coptic codices from Nag Hammadi made it possible for the first time to analyze a wide range of writings produced within these intellectual and religious environments themselves. Consequently, these texts came to be studied as witnesses to the diversity of early Christian theology rather than merely as deviations from orthodoxy.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See esp. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* I 1-8; Hippolytus, *Refutatio omnium haeresium* VI 29-37; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 31. On the problematic nature and complexity of the term “Gnosticism,” see M.A. Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: an Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1996, pp. 3-28, who argues that the category is an artificial construct that obscures the actual diversity of the texts; and K.L. King, *What is Gnosticism?*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2003, pp. 1-5, 218-238., who critiques the term as a reified historical category used to marginalize diverse Christian interpretations. See also D. Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2010, pp. 29-51, for a discussion on the social and academic limitations of the “Gnostic” label in defining early Christian identity.

<sup>2</sup> J.M. Robinson, ed., *The Coptic Gnostic Library (5 vols.) A Complete Edition of the Nag Hammadi Codices*, Brill, Leiden - Boston 2000; J.M. Robinson, ed., *Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Harper San Francisco, New York 1990; B. Layton, ed., *The Gnostic Scriptures. A New Translation With Annotations and Introductions*, Doubleday, New York 1987.

Among the writings preserved in the Nag Hammadi codices are several texts associated with the Valentinian tradition, including the *Gospel of Truth*<sup>3</sup> and the *Tripartite Tractate*<sup>4</sup>. These writings draw on biblical language and motifs, present Christ as the revealer of the Father, and reflect on themes central to Christian proclamation such as salvation, knowledge of God, and the restoration of humanity.<sup>5</sup>

In this context, apocryphal texts can be understood not only as alternative narratives about figures from the early Christian tradition but also as interpretative works that seek to articulate the meaning of revelation. Rather than presenting entirely new revelations detached from the Christian message, many of these writings reinterpret themes already present in Scripture and early Christian preaching. They frequently employ symbolic language, mythological structures, and philosophical concepts to express theological ideas about the nature of God, the origin of the world, and the destiny of humanity. Consequently, they function as part of a broader hermeneutical effort to understand the significance of the revelation associated with Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup>

The Valentinian texts considered in this study provide a particularly clear example of this interpretative approach. In these writings, revelatory discourse is closely connected with knowledge (*gnosis*) that discloses the hidden relationship between humanity and the divine source from which it originates. The *Gospel of Truth* presents Christ as the one who reveals the Father and dispels the ignorance that has obscured humanity's knowledge of its origin. Similarly, the *Tripartite Tractate* interprets revelation as a gradual process through which beings derived from the divine fullness come to recognize their source and return to it through knowledge.<sup>7</sup> In both texts, revelation is not simply the transmission of doctrinal propositions but an event that discloses the deeper meaning of existence and the hidden structure of reality.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> H.W. Attridge, G.W. MacRae, eds., *The Gospel of Truth*, in: *Nag Hammadi Codex I (The Jung Codex): I. Introductions, Texts, Translations, Indices*, Brill, Leiden 1985, pp. 55-122.

<sup>4</sup> H.W. Attridge, E.H. Pagels, eds., *The Tripartite Tractate*, in: *Nag Hammadi Codex I (The Jung Codex): I. Introductions, Texts, Translations, Indices*, Brill, Leiden 1985, pp. 159-337.

<sup>5</sup> E. Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the "Valentinians"*, Brill, Leiden - Boston 2006; I. Dunderberg, *Beyond Gnosticism: Myth, Lifestyle, and Society in the School of Valentinus*, Columbia University Press, New York 2008.

<sup>6</sup> B.D. Ehrman, Z. Pleše, eds., *Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations*, Oxford University Press, New York 2011, pp. 47; 318-319; K.L. King, *What is Gnosticism?*, pp. 3-27; 119-141.

<sup>7</sup> E. Thomassen, *Valentinian Ideas About Salvation as Transformation*, in: *Metamorphoses: Resurrection, Body and Transformative Practices in Early Christianity*, ed. T.K. Seim, J. Økland, Walter de Gruyter 2009, pp. 169-186.

<sup>8</sup> For a specific examination of the "case of apocryphality" regarding Gnostic literature, see M.J. Edwards, *Catholicity and Heresy in the Early Church*, Ashgate Pub, Farnham - Burlington 2009, pp. 11-16; 161-163, where the author evaluates how Gnostic writings function as a specific genre of "secret" or "apocryphal" interpretation within the broader Christian tradition, he emphasizes also that the boundary between "heresy" and "orthodoxy" was fluid, with apocryphal traditions often serving as the catalyst for the development of formal church doctrine through a process of theological assimilation. See also C.M. Tuckett, *Nag Hammadi and the Gospel Tradition: Synoptic Tradition in the Nag Hammadi Library*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1986, esp. pp. 1-12; 149-163, for a critical assessment of the fluid boundaries between canonical and apocryphal traditions, where the author demonstrates how Gnostic writers frequently relied on and reinterpreted earlier Christian traditions to articulate their specific theological insights; and A.H.B. Logan, *The Gnostics: Identifying an Early Christian Cult*, T&T Clark, London -

This article examines how these Valentinian apocryphal texts interpret revelation and its relation to Scripture. By analyzing the theological themes present in the *Gospel of Truth* and the *Tripartite Tractate*, this work aims to show that these works function as interpretative reflections on Christian unveiling rather than as entirely independent mythological systems. In doing so, the study argues that Valentinian apocryphal literature provides important evidence for the diversity of early Christian attempts to understand the meaning of revelation and the role of knowledge in the process of salvation.

## Valentinian Apocryphal Literature and Its Context

The Valentinian movement emerged in the middle of the second century and soon became one of the most influential intellectual currents within early Christianity. Its founder, Valentinus, was active in Rome during the reign of Antoninus Pius (138–161 CE). According to early Christian sources, he was educated in the Christian tradition and participated in the life of the Roman church before the development of the theological system associated with his name.<sup>9</sup> Modern scholarship generally agrees that Valentinianism should not be understood simply as a movement outside Christianity but rather as a school that developed its own interpretation of the Christian message within the broader framework of the early church.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike some other groups that later came to be classified under the label “gnostic,” Valentinian teachers appear to have remained closely connected to Christian communities. Ancient authors frequently describe them as participating in the same liturgical and communal life as other Christians while interpreting Scripture in distinctive ways. Irenaeus of Lyons notes that they employed the language of Scripture and Christian teaching but reorganized its meaning within a complex theological system.<sup>11</sup> This observation has been confirmed by the study of Valentinian texts

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New York 2006, pp. 1-22, which discusses the specific literary and theological criteria used to define the “apocryphal” status of Gnostic revelation.

<sup>9</sup> Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus haereses* I 11,1; Eusebius of Caesarea, *Historia ecclesiastica* IV 11. Ancient sources, e.g. Tertullian, *Adv. Val.* 4, claim that Valentinus campaigned for a bishopric, but modern historiography remains cautious on this matter. See C. Marksches, *Valentinian Gnosticism: Toward the Anatomy of a School*, in: *The Nag Hammadi Library after Fifty Years: Proceedings of the 1995 Society of Biblical Literature Commemoration*, ed. J.D. Turner, C. Marksches, Brill, Leiden 1997, pp. 401-438; E. Thomassen, *The Relative Chronology of the Valentinian Systems*, in: *Valentinianism: New Studies*, ed. C. Marksches, E. Thomassen, Brill, Leiden - Boston 2020, pp. 15-28.

<sup>10</sup> E. Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed*, pp. 3-30.

<sup>11</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* I 1,1-3. Irenaeus notes that Valentinian teachers employ traditional Christian terminology – e.g. “Nous ... Monogenes, and Father, and the Beginning of all Things” (AH I 1,1) – while integrating it into a speculative cosmology of emanations. He further criticizes their exegetical method, observing that “these thirty Aeons are most plainly indicated in the parable of the labourers sent into the vineyard” (AH I 1,3), which they interpret as a symbolic reference to the structure of the *pleroma*. According to Irenaeus, such interpretations result from their tendency to search the Scriptures for elements that can be adapted to their system: “they proceed when they find anything in the Scriptures which they can adopt and accommodate to their baseless speculations” (AH I 1,3). These passages illustrate his claim that Valentinian teachers made extensive use of biblical language while reorganizing its meaning within their theological framework. See also M.J. Edwards, *Gnostics and Valentinians in the Church fathers*, „The Journal of Theological Studies” 40,1 (1989), pp. 26-47.

themselves, which show extensive engagement with biblical themes, terminology, and narrative patterns<sup>12</sup>.

The writings preserved in the Nag Hammadi codices provide important insight into this intellectual environment. Among them, the *Gospel of Truth* (NHC I,3; XII,2) and the *Tripartite Tractate* (NHC I,5) are widely recognized as texts reflecting Valentinian theological reflection.<sup>13</sup> Although these works differ in genre and structure, they share a common concern with the meaning of divine revelation and the restoration of humanity's relationship with its divine source.

The *Gospel of Truth* is generally interpreted as a homiletic or theological meditation rather than a narrative gospel. Recent scholarship has also emphasized that the work may reflect a distinctive second-century interpretation of Pauline theology, especially the idea of a hidden divine wisdom revealed to the spiritually mature.<sup>14</sup> Its language draws extensively on biblical imagery, especially themes associated with the Johannine tradition, such as the revelation of the Father through the Son and the transformation of ignorance into knowledge. The text presents the mission of Christ as the disclosure of the Father to those who have forgotten their origin. Ignorance is described as the fundamental condition of humanity, and revelation appears as the act through which this ignorance is overcome. The work, therefore, interprets the proclamation of the gospel not primarily as the communication of doctrinal propositions but as the unveiling of the truth about God and humanity.<sup>15</sup>

The *Tripartite Tractate*, by contrast, is a much more extensive and systematic theological composition. It presents a complex account of the divine reality, the emergence of the spiritual and material worlds, and the process through which salvation unfolds. At the center of this narrative stands the figure of the Father, whose transcendence exceeds the capacity of created beings to comprehend him directly. The text emphasizes that the Father remains beyond immediate knowledge and therefore reveals himself through mediating realities that proceed from him.<sup>16</sup> Revelation thus unfolds gradually within the structure of reality itself, leading the beings derived from the divine fullness toward the recognition of their origin.

Despite their differences, these texts share a fundamental theological orientation. Both present revelation as closely connected with knowledge (*gnosis*) that enables human beings to recognize their origin in the divine realm. In the *Gospel of Truth*, ignorance of the Father is described as the source of fear and confusion in the world,

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<sup>12</sup> D. Brakke, *The Gnostics*, pp. 36-40.

<sup>13</sup> B. Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures: A New Translation with Annotations and Introductions*, New York 1987, pp. 250-274.

<sup>14</sup> E. Pagels, *How the Gospel of Truth Depicts Paul's Secret Teaching: A Study in Second-Century Reception History*, „Harvard Theological Review” 117,1 (2024), pp. 99-112.

<sup>15</sup> *Gospel of Truth* 17,4-18,17. See also G.S. Smith, *Constructing a Christian Universe: Mythological Exegesis of Ben Sira 24 and John's Prologue in the Gospel of Truth*, in: *Jewish and Christian Cosmogony in Late Antiquity*, ed. L. Jenott, S.K. Gribetz, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2013, pp. 64-84.

<sup>16</sup> *Tripartite Tractate* 64,28-65,5. See also E. Thomassen, *The Structure of the Transcendent World in the Tripartite "Tractate" (NHC I, 5)*, „Vigiliae Christianae” 34,4 (1980), pp. 358-375; P. Linjamaa, *The ethics of the Tripartite tractate (NHC I, 5): a study of determinism and early Christian philosophy of ethics*, Brill, Leiden - Boston 2019, esp. pp. 47-69; 119-125.

while knowledge restores harmony and order.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the *Tripartite Tractate* describes salvation as the process through which those who come from the divine fullness recognize their source and are drawn back into unity with it.<sup>18</sup> In this perspective, revelation is not merely an external proclamation but a transformative disclosure that enables human beings to perceive the deeper structure of reality.<sup>19</sup>

The Valentinian texts, therefore, illustrate how apocryphal literature could function as a medium of theological interpretation within early Christianity. Rather than presenting a separate religious tradition, they reinterpret the themes of Christian proclamation through a distinctive conceptual framework shaped by philosophical reflection and symbolic cosmology. Their concern with revelation, knowledge, and the origin of humanity places them within broader debates about the meaning of the Christian message that were unfolding throughout the second century.

### **Revelation as Knowledge in the *Gospel of Truth***

The *Gospel of Truth* offers one of the clearest expressions of the Valentinian understanding of revelation. Preserved in Nag Hammadi Codex I and Codex XII, the text is usually interpreted not as a narrative gospel but as a theological meditation on the meaning of the Christian message. Modern scholarship often describes it as a homiletic reflection intended for instruction within a community, rather than as a narrative account of the life of Jesus.<sup>20</sup> Its language and imagery draw heavily on biblical traditions – especially themes associated with the Johannine proclamation of the revelation of the Father through the Son.

At the center of the text stands the conviction that the fundamental problem of the human condition is ignorance (*agnoia*). According to the author, humanity lives in a state of confusion and fear because it has forgotten its origin in the Father. This ignorance is not merely intellectual but existential: it shapes the entire structure of human existence and explains the disorder present in the world. The text expresses this

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<sup>17</sup> *Gospel of Truth* 16,31-17,4; 17,9-12. The text explicitly connects revelation with knowledge of the Father: “The gospel of truth is joy for those who have received from the Father of truth the grace of knowing him through the power of the Word that came forth from the pleroma” (EvVer 16, 31-34). Ignorance of the Father is described as the source of disorder in the world: “Ignorance of the Father brought about anguish and terror; and the anguish grew solid like a fog so that no one was able to see” (EvVer 17,9-11). Revelation therefore consists in the removal of this ignorance and the restoration of knowledge, through which those who belong to the Father come to recognize their origin.

<sup>18</sup> *Tripartite Tractate* 68,1-15; 69,1-6. It describes the aeons as beings who have come forth from the Father and who ultimately return to him in unity: “All those who came forth from him (...) are the aeons of the aeons, being emanations and offspring of his procreative nature” (TripTrac 68,1-4). Their origin and destiny are grounded in knowledge that comes from the Father: “the Totalities knew that it is from knowledge and wisdom that they have come forth” (TripTrac 68,7-9). For this reason they are drawn back into unity with their source: “in the power of the unity of him from whom they have come, they were drawn into a mingling and a combination and unity with one another” (TripTrac 68,15-19). These passages present salvation as the recognition of one’s origin in the Father and the restoration of unity with the divine fullness.

<sup>19</sup> See J. Magnusson, *The Gospel of Truth as the Gospel of the Saved Saviors: Gnosis from Daily Life to Cosmic Enlightenment*, „Gnosis: Journal of Gnostic Studies” 6,1 (2021), pp. 31-48; E. Thomassen, „Valentinian Ideas About Salvation as Transformation”, pp. 170-173.

<sup>20</sup> B. Layton, *The Gnostic scriptures*, pp. 250-253.

idea in a striking formulation: “ignorance of the Father brought about anguish and terror.”<sup>21</sup> In this perspective, ignorance becomes the primary cause of alienation between humanity and its divine source. The mission of Christ is therefore interpreted as the revelation of the Father that dispels this ignorance. The *Gospel of Truth* describes Christ not primarily as a teacher of new doctrines but as the one who makes the Father known. Revelation thus appears as an unveiling that restores knowledge of God and enables humanity to recover the truth about its own origin. The text emphasizes that the purpose of revelation is “the grace of knowing him.”<sup>22</sup> Knowledge of the Father, therefore, represents the central content of the gospel message.

This emphasis on knowledge should not be understood simply as the communication of abstract information. In the theological perspective of the *Gospel of Truth*, knowledge is closely connected with salvation itself. To know the Father means to overcome the state of forgetfulness that characterizes human existence and to rediscover one’s true origin. The text presents salvation as the moment when those who belong to the Father recognize the truth that had been concealed by ignorance. Revelation thus functions as an act of recognition that restores the relationship between humanity and the divine source from which it originates.<sup>23</sup> The text expresses this idea through the imagery of remembrance. Humanity is portrayed as having forgotten the Father, and revelation is described as the restoration of memory. When the Father is revealed, those who belong to him are able to recognize their origin and return to him. In this sense, revelation is inseparable from the process through which individuals rediscover their identity. Knowledge does not merely convey doctrinal truths but transforms the believer’s understanding of existence itself.<sup>24</sup>

The figure of Christ occupies a central place in this process. The *Gospel of Truth* presents him as the manifestation of the Father within the world and as the one who communicates the knowledge that leads to salvation. His mission reveals the hidden reality of the Father and brings clarity to a world shaped by ignorance. The text describes Christ as the one who “revealed what was in the heart of the Father.”<sup>25</sup> Through this revelation, those who receive the message of the gospel are able to recognize the truth about God and themselves.

In this theological framework, revelation acquires a distinctive epistemological dimension. It is not merely an event in the history of salvation but also a process of

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<sup>21</sup> *Gospel of Truth* 16,31-17,4.

<sup>22</sup> *Gospel of Truth* 17,9-12. See more F. Watson, *The Gospel of Truth*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2025, pp. 60-75.

<sup>23</sup> *Gospel of Truth* 24,31-33; 24,36-38. This fragment states that the Father reveals what was hidden in himself through the Son so that “the aeons may know him and cease laboring in search of the Father, resting there in him,” and adds that “when the Father is known, from that moment the deficiency will no longer exist.”

<sup>24</sup> *Gospel of Truth* 17,3-7; 17,9-12; 24,31-38. It describes the totality as searching “for the one from whom they had come forth,” while the revelation brought through the Son allows the aeons to “know him and cease laboring in search of the Father, resting there in him.” It further states that “when the Father is known, from that moment the deficiency will no longer exist.” See also chap. “The Gospel of Truth as an Exoteric Text” in: H.W. Attridge, *Essays on John and Hebrews*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids 2012, pp. 177-192.

<sup>25</sup> *Gospel of Truth* 24,32-33.

disclosure that enables human beings to perceive the deeper structure of reality. The revelation of the Father reveals both the divine source of existence and the true identity of those who belong to that source. As a result, salvation and knowledge become inseparably connected: to be saved is to know the Father and to recognize one's origin in him.

The *Gospel of Truth*, therefore, illustrates how Valentinian apocryphal literature interprets revelation as knowledge that dispels ignorance and restores the relationship between humanity and the divine. In contrast to approaches that emphasize the transmission of doctrinal teaching or institutional authority, this text presents revelation as a transformative disclosure that enables believers to recognize the hidden meaning of their existence. This perspective provides an important key for understanding the broader Valentinian interpretation of Christian revelation and prepares the way for the more systematic theological reflections found in the *Tripartite Tractate*.

### **The *Tripartite Tractate* and the Gradual Revelation of the Father**

While the *Gospel of Truth* presents revelation primarily as the disclosure of the Father that dispels ignorance, the *Tripartite Tractate* offers a more extensive and systematic theological reflection on the same theme. Preserved in Nag Hammadi Codex I, this work is one of the longest and most complex texts in the collection and reflects a mature form of Valentinian theological speculation.<sup>26</sup> Its structure combines cosmological narrative, anthropological reflection, and soteriological interpretation in order to explain how divine revelation unfolds within the history of reality.

At the center of the text stands the figure of the Father, who is described as the ultimate source of all existence. The *Tripartite Tractate* emphasizes the transcendence of the Father and the limits of created beings in their attempt to comprehend him. According to the text, the Father surpasses all forms of knowledge and remains beyond direct apprehension. For this reason, the revelation of the Father cannot occur immediately or directly but must unfold through a process of mediation. The text states that the Father is “ineffable and unnamable and exalted above every mind and every word,” and that his greatness is such that a direct manifestation would overwhelm those who proceed from him.<sup>27</sup>

Because of this transcendence, revelation takes place gradually through realities that derive from the Father. The text describes a hierarchical structure of divine emanations originating from the fullness (*pleroma*). Within this structure, various

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<sup>26</sup> B. Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, pp. 275-321.

<sup>27</sup> *Tripartite Tractate* 63,20-64,10; 64,31-65,5. This text emphasizes the transcendence of the Father and the limits of created beings in comprehending him. The beings that proceed from him are described as “minds and spiritual offspring to the glory of the Father,” who move toward him and exist in relation to him (TripTrac 63,35-64,5). At the same time, the Father himself remains beyond comprehension, being “ineffable and unnamable and exalted above every mind and every word” (TripTrac 65,1-3). For this reason, the text explains that a direct manifestation of the Father would be impossible for the aeons: “if he had revealed himself suddenly, quickly, to all the exalted ones among the aeons who had come forth from him, they would have perished” (TripTrac 64,31-34). These passages illustrate the Valentinian conception of divine transcendence and explain why revelation must occur through mediation rather than through an immediate disclosure of the Father.



spiritual beings participate in the knowledge of the Father and transmit this knowledge in mediated form. Revelation is therefore not a single event but a process unfolding within the ordered structure of reality itself. Through this process, the knowledge of the Father becomes accessible to beings who originate from the divine fullness but have become separated from it.

Within this cosmological framework, ignorance becomes a central element in explaining the disorder of the lower realm and the condition of those who have lost awareness of their origin. According to the *Tripartite Tractate*, the disruption of the original harmony of the divine realm results in a situation in which certain beings lose awareness of their origin. This loss of knowledge leads to disorder and fragmentation within the created world. Revelation, therefore, has the function of restoring knowledge and reestablishing the proper relationship between creatures and their source.<sup>28</sup>

The figure of the Savior plays a decisive role in this process. In the *Tripartite Tractate*, the Savior acts as the mediator through whom the knowledge of the Father becomes accessible to those who have forgotten their origin. His mission reveals the structure of reality and enables spiritual beings to recognize the source from which they come. The text describes how those who originate from the divine fullness come to recognize their origin through this revelation and are drawn toward unity with it.<sup>29</sup> Knowledge thus functions as the means through which restoration becomes possible.

The transformative character of knowledge, already central to the *Gospel of Truth*, is here grounded in an explicit ontological framework: return to the Father is possible because spiritual beings carry within themselves a constitutive relation to their source. Through revelation, those who belong to the divine realm become aware of their true identity and their relationship to the Father. The *Tripartite Tractate*, therefore, describes salvation as a process of return in which beings who have come from the divine fullness are drawn back into unity with it. The knowledge revealed by the Savior enables them to recognize their origin and to participate again in the harmony of the divine realm.

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<sup>28</sup> *Tripartite Tractate* 76,36-79,13; 82,33-85,13; 86,15-87,10. This part explains the emergence of disorder through the loss of knowledge and the appearance of ignorance. It describes the moment when “there was a division (...) forgetfulness and ignorance of himself”, which leads to the production of deficient realities described as “copies, shadows, and phantasms, lacking reason and the light”. In this condition, beings come to believe that they exist independently of their source, “thinking that they were beings originating from themselves alone and were without a source”. The result is a world marked by conflict and confusion, characterized by “wrath and violence and desire and prevailing ignorance”. Salvation is presented as the restoration of knowledge through the revelation brought by the Savior, who is identified as “the knowledge of the Father”. These passages illustrate the Valentinian explanation of cosmic disorder as the consequence of ignorance and present revelation as the means by which the proper relationship between creatures and their divine source is restored.

<sup>29</sup> *Tripartite Tractate* 67,34-68,25. The Savior is presented as the mediator through whom knowledge of the Father becomes accessible to the beings that originate from the divine fullness. The text states that he is “the one who is knowledge for himself and for all the powers,” and that through him the beings that proceed from the Father come to recognize their origin. Revelation thus allows them to understand that “they exist according to their individual properties in a unified way,” and that they ultimately belong to the one source from which they have come. In this way the Savior’s activity makes possible the restoration of unity among the beings that derive from the divine realm and leads them back toward the Father.

The theological vision of the *Tripartite Tractate* thus expands the ideas already present in the *Gospel of Truth*. While the latter emphasizes the experiential dimension of revelation as the overcoming of ignorance, the *Tripartite Tractate* situates this process within a broader cosmological framework. Revelation appears here as a dynamic movement through which the divine knowledge originating in the Father is communicated throughout the structure of reality and ultimately leads those who receive it back to their source.

Taken together, these two texts illustrate a characteristic feature of Valentinian apocryphal literature: the interpretation of Christian revelation as a form of knowledge that discloses both the nature of God and the origin of humanity. In this perspective, revelation is inseparable from the process through which human beings come to understand their place within the divine order. The knowledge revealed through Christ, therefore, functions not only as a theological doctrine but also as the means through which the fractured relationship between humanity and its divine source is restored.

### **Biblical Motifs in Valentinian Apocryphal Texts**

Although Valentinian writings often employ mythological and philosophical language, they remain deeply rooted in the symbolic world of early Christian Scripture. Modern scholarship has repeatedly emphasized that these texts should not be understood as a rejection of biblical tradition but rather as a distinctive interpretation of it. Valentinian authors frequently adopt biblical imagery and theological motifs, reworking them within a cosmological and soteriological framework that seeks to explain the relationship between the divine realm and the human condition. In this sense, the apocryphal texts associated with the Valentinian tradition function not only as speculative theological reflections but also as interpretative engagements with the scriptural heritage of early Christianity.<sup>30</sup>

One of the most prominent biblical themes reinterpreted in Valentinian literature is the idea of the revelation of the Father through the Son. In the New Testament, especially in the Johannine tradition, Christ is presented as the one who makes the Father known to the world. Valentinian texts adopt this theological framework but reinterpret its meaning in epistemological terms. The most direct biblical antecedent for this christological function is the Johannine formulation of John 1:18, according to which the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, has made him known. Valentinian exegetes adopted this verse as a key scriptural warrant for the mediatory role of the Son, reinterpreting the act of “making known” as the disclosure of the Father’s hidden interior reality rather than as the communication of propositional teaching. A similar reinterpretation is visible in their engagement with John 17:3, where

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<sup>30</sup> On the interpretative engagement of the *Gospel of Truth* with biblical traditions see J.A. Williams, *Biblical Interpretation in the Gnostic Gospel of Truth from Nag Hammadi*, Scholars Press, Atlanta 1988; F. Watson, *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids 2013, pp. 258-266.

eternal life is defined as knowledge of the Father – a formulation that Valentinian theology developed into a full identification of salvation with gnosis.<sup>31</sup>

Another important scriptural theme developed in Valentinian texts is the connection between knowledge of God and salvation. Early Christian writings frequently associate eternal life with the knowledge of God, a theme that appears explicitly in the Gospel of John<sup>32</sup>. Valentinian authors develop this idea further by presenting knowledge as the central element of salvation itself. In the *Gospel of Truth*, salvation occurs when those who belong to the Father recognize their origin and return to him through knowledge. This recognition is not simply intellectual but existential, involving a transformation in the way individuals understand their place within the divine order.

Closely related to this idea is the motif of ignorance as the fundamental condition of the world. In biblical literature, ignorance of God is often associated with spiritual blindness or separation from the divine will. Valentinian texts radicalize this biblical motif by extending it from the moral to the cosmological register: ignorance is no longer merely a failure of the will but the generative condition of the disordered world itself. The scriptural precedent for this move can be located in the Johannine opposition between light and darkness, which the *Gospel of Truth* absorbs and reconfigures as an opposition between knowledge and the oblivion that precedes revelation.<sup>33</sup>

A further biblical motif reinterpreted in Valentinian writings is the theme of remembrance. The text can be read as portraying salvation in terms of recovering what ignorance had obscured. This language echoes biblical traditions in which remembering God or returning to him marks a turning point in the relationship between humanity and the divine. In the Valentinian interpretation, however, this motif is given a distinctively epistemological meaning: remembrance becomes the rediscovery of the knowledge that had been obscured by ignorance.

Through these reinterpretations, Valentinian apocryphal texts demonstrate how biblical language and imagery could be integrated into a broader theological narrative. Rather than abandoning scriptural traditions, Valentinian authors reinterpret them within a symbolic framework that seeks to explain the structure of the cosmos and the destiny of humanity. Their writings thus illustrate the dynamic process through which early Christian communities engaged with Scripture, developing new theological interpretations in order to articulate the meaning of revelation and salvation.

### Christ as Revealer in Valentinian Theology

A central element of Valentinian apocryphal literature is the presentation of Christ as the revealer who discloses the hidden reality of the Father and the origin of humanity.

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<sup>31</sup> *Gospel of Truth* 16,31-33; 17,3-11; 24,31-36

<sup>32</sup> See J 17,3; J 10,14-15; 1J 5,20. See also E.H. Pagels, *The Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis: Heracleon's Commentary on John*, Scholars Press, Atlanta 1989, pp. 96-110; T. Rasimus, *Ptolemaeus And The Valentinian Exegesis Of John's Prologue*, in: *The Legacy of John: Second-Century Reception of the Fourth Gospel*, ed. T. Rasimus, Brill, Leiden - Boston 2010, pp. 157-158.

<sup>33</sup> *Gospel of Truth* 18,11-17.

In these texts, the role of Christ is closely connected with the theme of revelation understood as knowledge. These texts place less emphasis on the historical events of Christ's life than on his revelatory function: the manner in which the knowledge of the Father becomes accessible to those who are capable of receiving it. Through this revelation, human beings are able to recognize their true origin and rediscover their relationship with the divine source.<sup>34</sup>

In the *Gospel of Truth*, the christological function of the revealer is expressed primarily through metaphor rather than through cosmological mediation. Christ does not stand between the Father and humanity as a distinct ontological intermediary; rather, his figure embodies the act of knowledge itself – the moment in which the hidden Father becomes present within the believer's recognition. This metaphorical logic distinguishes the *Gospel of Truth* from approaches that present Christ as a structural mediator within a hierarchical order of reality. The text emphasizes that the Son reveals the Father to those who belong to him, making known what had remained hidden within the Father. This perspective has significant implications for the concept of revelation itself: if Christ communicates no new doctrine but discloses a reality already present in the Father, then revelation is not an event that introduces something previously absent but one that makes visible what was always already the case. Revelation, therefore, appears as an unveiling that restores the relationship between humanity and its divine origin.<sup>35</sup> The *Tripartite Tractate*, by contrast, grounds the christological function of the revealer in an explicit ontological structure. The problem that Christ-as-mediator addresses is not simply ignorance as a psychological condition but the metaphysical impossibility of direct access to a Father who exceeds all categories of being and knowing. Mediation is therefore not a contingent feature of the economy of salvation but a structural necessity arising from the nature of the divine transcendence itself.<sup>36</sup> The revelation brought by the Savior thus enables the restoration of order within the cosmos and the reintegration of spiritual beings into the harmony of the divine realm.

In both texts, the figure of Christ serves as the key to understanding the relationship between revelation and salvation. Knowledge of the Father is not attained through philosophical speculation or intellectual inquiry alone but through the revelatory activity of the Son. By revealing the Father, Christ makes possible the recognition of humanity's origin and the restoration of the relationship that had been disrupted by ignorance. Salvation, therefore, appears as the result of revelation: the knowledge communicated through Christ opens the possibility of returning to the

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<sup>34</sup> See *Gospel of Truth* 16,31-33; 17,9-11; 24,31-33; *Tripartite Tractate* 67,34-68,25; 87; *Gospel of Philip* (NHC II,3) 73,8-10; 76,5-9, where Christ is presented as the revealer through whom knowledge of the Father becomes accessible; cf. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus haereses* I 7,1-2.

<sup>35</sup> *Gospel of Truth* 24,32-33. See also J.A. Williams, *Biblical Interpretation in the Gnostic Gospel of Truth from Nag Hammadi*, pp. 175-187; A.M. Leopold, *Syncretism and Transformation in the Gospel of Truth*, in: *The Nag Hammadi Texts in the History of Religions: Proceedings of the International Conference at the Royal Academy of Sciences and Letters in Copenhagen, September 19-24, 1995 on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Nag Hammadi discovery*, ed. S. Giversen, T. Petersen, J. Podemann Sørensen, Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab, Copenhagen 2002, pp. 46-53.

<sup>36</sup> *Tripartite Tractate* 67,34-68,25. On the role of the Savior as the mediator of revelation and the restoration of unity with the Pleroma, see also E. Thomassen, „Valentinian Ideas About Salvation as Transformation”, pp. 170-185.

divine source, a possibility that is realized according to the capacity of each nature to receive what is revealed.

This understanding of Christ as revealer reflects a broader theological pattern within Valentinian thought. Revelation is not simply a historical event but a process through which divine knowledge becomes accessible within the structure of reality. Christ stands at the center of this process, though the manner in which he communicates salvific knowledge differs between the two texts: where the *Gospel of Truth* presents his figure as an image of knowledge overcoming ignorance, the *Tripartite Tractate* places him within a structured cosmological economy of mediation and restoration. Through him, the hidden reality of the Father is made known, and those who receive this revelation come to understand their place within the divine order. The emphasis on Christ as revealer, therefore, complements the interpretation of revelation found in Valentinian apocryphal literature. The figure of the revealer thus anchors the soteriological claim common to both texts: that knowledge of the Father is not available apart from the mediation of the Son.

### Apocryphal Revelation as Interpretation of Christian Tradition

The analysis of the *Gospel of Truth* and the *Tripartite Tractate* demonstrates that Valentinian apocryphal texts should not be understood merely as speculative cosmological narratives. Rather, they show that the interpretative engagement with Christian revelation in the second century operated simultaneously on two levels: the existential, addressing the condition of the individual who has forgotten the Father, and the cosmological, explaining the structural necessity of mediation within a transcendent divine order. Both levels are present, in different proportions, in each of the two texts. By employing biblical imagery, symbolic cosmology, and philosophical concepts, these writings attempt to articulate the relationship between God, the world, and humanity in a way that gives central importance to the knowledge revealed through Christ.

In both texts examined above, revelation is closely connected with the disclosure of humanity's origin in the Father. The *Gospel of Truth* and the *Tripartite Tractate* thus approach the same theological problem – the disruption of the relationship between humanity and its divine source – through complementary but distinct registers: the one existential and experiential, the other cosmological and structural. A particularly clear illustration of this process is the Ptolemaean use of John 1:18 as a proof-text for Valentinian theology: rather than abandoning the Johannine proclamation, Ptolemaeus reread the act of “making known” performed by the Son as evidence for the mediatory structure of divine revelation that his system presupposed.<sup>37</sup>

The existence of such interpretations reflects the broader diversity of theological reflection within early Christianity. During the second century, the meaning of Christian revelation was still being explored and articulated in different ways by various communities and teachers. Valentinian writings represent one of the most intellectually sophisticated attempts to interpret the Christian message within this pluralistic

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<sup>37</sup> See T. Rasimus, *Ptolemaeus And The Valentinian Exegesis Of John's Prologue*, pp. 157.

environment. Their emphasis on revelation as knowledge demonstrates how early Christian thinkers sought to explain the significance of Christ's revelation in philosophical and cosmological terms.

For this reason, Valentinian apocryphal texts constitute important historical evidence for the debates that shaped the development of Christian theology. They show how different interpretations of revelation could emerge from the same scriptural and theological traditions. By examining these texts as interpretative reflections rather than simply as marginal or deviant teachings, it becomes possible to gain a clearer understanding of the intellectual and religious world in which early Christian theology was formed.

## Conclusion

The examination of the *Gospel of Truth* and the *Tripartite Tractate* demonstrates that Valentinian apocryphal texts represent a sophisticated attempt to interpret Christian revelation within the intellectual context of the second century. Far from representing isolated mythological speculations, these writings engage deeply with themes central to early Christian proclamation, including the revelation of the Father, the role of Christ, and the relationship between knowledge and salvation. By drawing upon biblical motifs and integrating them into a symbolic and cosmological framework, Valentinian authors sought to articulate the meaning of the Christian message in a way that addressed both the spiritual condition of humanity and the structure of the divine reality.

A central feature of this interpretation is the close connection between revelation and knowledge. In both texts analyzed in this study, the revelation brought by Christ is presented as the disclosure of the Father that enables human beings to recognize their origin and their place within the divine order. Ignorance appears as the fundamental condition of the world, while revelation restores knowledge and makes possible the return of spiritual beings to their source. The *Gospel of Truth* and the *Tripartite Tractate* approach this common conviction through different registers—existential and cosmological, respectively—yet converge on the identification of salvific knowledge with the recognition of one's origin in the Father.

At the same time, the analysis of biblical motifs and the role of Christ as revealer shows that Valentinian apocryphal literature remains closely connected to the scriptural and theological traditions of early Christianity. Rather than rejecting these traditions, Valentinian authors reinterpret them in order to explain the relationship between God, the world, and humanity. Their writings thus illustrate how early Christian communities engaged creatively with Scripture and theological reflection in order to understand the significance of revelation.

From this perspective, Valentinian apocryphal texts should be regarded as important witnesses to the diversity of early Christian thought. They reveal how different communities sought to interpret the meaning of Christ's revelation and to articulate the relationship between knowledge, salvation, and the divine source of existence. The study of these writings, therefore, contributes to the recognition that

Valentinian apocryphal texts preserve one of the clearest second-century attempts to construe revelation as salvific knowledge rather than as public doctrinal transmission.

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