



Feminine Imagery in Gnostic-Christian Literature

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Introduction

Feminine imagery has permeated Christian texts since the first centuries of Christianity. Female characters and feminine metaphors are largely present in ancient Israel's texts, early Jewish works, as well as in nascent and developing early Christian literature. In the last fifty years there has been a growing interest in the study of women and gender which has interested all disciplines, including Early Christian Studies. Consequently, numerous works have been produced on the role of women in the Christian communities and in the gospels,¹ as well as numerous feminist readings of the history of Christianity.² Notwithstanding, much work needs yet to be done about philosophical and theological meaning of feminine imagery. In particular, my work arises from the need to investigate further *why and how a historically patriarchal society employed feminine imagery to describe God*. This question could be asked beyond the border of early Christianity, for also other religions and philosophies employed feminine imagery.³ Nevertheless, I believe it is a crucial question in the case of early Christian theology, since feminine imagery was progressively dismissed by Christian theologians without ever disappearing completely. Therefore, this work intends to expand on previous scholarship and *take on the challenge of explaining the extent to which feminine imagery was employed by early Christian theologians to describe God, focusing particularly on the Gnostic movements*.⁴

The choice of focusing my research on Gnosticism has been dictated by several reasons. First and foremost, Gnostics are the first Christian theologians to dedicate systematic attention to the feminine, constructing their core mythologies on the fall of a female divine being. Since Christian Gnosticism conveys its doctrines by means of mythologies, it is also the Christian

¹ See particularly the works of Tervahauta (2017); Schenk (2017); Haines-Eitzen (2012); Bauckham (2002); Clark (1990); Pagels (1974).

² For this line of investigation, see Soskice (2008); King – Beattie (2004); Corley (2002); Burrus (1995); Schüssler Fiorenza (1994).

³ An excellent survey of these texts can be found in Ruether (2005).

⁴ For a discussion and definition of the term 'Gnosticism' and its relationship with Christianity, *infra* I.1.

movement in which the role of feminine imagery – in the form of female mythological characters – stands out the most. Secondly, far from being a marginal phenomenon, Gnosticism had a great impact on Christian theology. Even at a superficial glance, its relevance for the history of Christianity is proven *in primis* by the large attention reserved to it by Christian heresiologists and *in secundis* by the significant effect that it had on contemporary or subsequent Christian theologians, such as Clement and Origen of Alexandria.⁵

The importance of feminine imagery in Gnosticism has not gone unnoticed in contemporary scholarship. Thus far, researches on this topic have mainly taken two directions.

On the one hand, the investigation of Gnostic female deities has been relegated to the study of the social status of women in Gnostic circles, especially through the study of the character of Mary Magdalene.⁶ This approach to feminine imagery has been extremely fruitful, since it has integrated the scarce information about the social structures of Gnostic communities and the role of women in them.⁷ A perfect example of this scholarly trend is the work of Karen King. In 1985, she organized a colloquium entitled ‘Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism’ and, in the Foreword of Acts, she claimed that ‘Gnostic mythology and gender imagery often affirm patriarchy and patriarchal gender roles.’⁸ In this case, King’s investigation about Gnostic feminine imagery was limited to the investigation of the balance of power between genders, thus overlooking the questions about what Gnostic authors wanted to convey through the use of feminine imagery to describe God. In other words, the focus on social history led to eyes being taken off theology, thus leaving

⁵ On the relation between Origen and Gnosticism, see Strutwolf (1993); Simonetti (2004); Lettieri (2005) and Lettieri (2008). On the relation between Clement and Gnosticism, see Lilla (1971); Kovacs (2001).

⁶ For instance, Malachi (2006); De Boer (2004); King (2003a); Marjanen (1996).

⁷ For instance, this is the case of some of Pagels’ work on Gnosticism, where she begins by acknowledging the importance and peculiarity of Gnostic feminine imagery to the point of claiming that women in Gnostic groups enjoyed a higher social consideration than in orthodox circles, despite the evidences on the social and communitarian rules of Gnostic groups are scarce. To deepen her argument, see Pagels (1976) and (1979). For a discussion regarding her methodology and her conclusion, see Hoffman (1994). See also Buckley (1986) and King (2003a).

⁸ King (2000), xvii.

aside the question concerning the mythological and theological implications of describing God through feminine imagery.

On the other hand, feminist scholars have found in Gnostic feminine imagery the proof of the existence of an alternative version of Christianity in which female spiritual power was laying claim on male power.⁹ The research of Rosemary Radford Ruether on divine feminine concluded that in Gnosticism ‘the emphasis on feminine spiritual power reflects yet another instance in which Gnostic religious creativity expressed itself in dramatic reversals of social order and religious traditions’ for ‘in the redemptive work of the higher world counteracting the lower world, female spiritual power is often envisioned as subverting and overcoming male material/psychic power.’¹⁰ Besides linking feminine imagery to the social condition of women, Ruether took a step forward and understood the importance of Gnostic feminine imagery as the “victory” of divine feminine over male power. Although the feminist approach has the undisputed merit of bringing due attention to this field of study, it still says little about the *historical theological* reasons behind the use of feminine imagery in Gnostic theology.

If these previous researches used feminine imagery as a means to an end – that is, as a means to cast light on the status of women or to affirm the balance of power between genders – my research aims to investigate how feminine imagery has been employed to convey aspects of the Godhead. In other words, I intend to explore why feminine imagery was important and what Gnostic theologians wanted to convey by using it. By a thorough analysis of Gnostic texts, my research will prove that Gnostic theologians employed feminine imagery to describe the ambiguity of God. Feminine imagery represented both the divine force of disruption and chaos, which altered the cosmic order, and those aspects of God that they perceived as ambiguous, paradoxical and, even, irrational. In particular, the Christian mystery of a God that generates, creates life, descends into the human world, suffers and, yet, reveals himself and redeems human beings. Hence, my research combines studies on female

⁹ For instance, Schüssler Fiorenza et al. (1993).

¹⁰ Ruether (2005), 112-113.

gender with a historical, philosophical and philological investigation. As for the gender studies, it is worth clarifying that the feminine is here understood as an intellectual category, that is, as a means of representing ideas about theological discourses.¹¹ While there are very few examples of such an approach in Early Christian Studies, this methodology has been fruitfully applied to historical philosophical studies. In her study on Plato, Bianchi described her task as that of ‘undertaking a re-examination of the notion of the receptacle/*chora* in Plato Timaeus, asking what its value may be [...] to understand the topology of the feminine in Western philosophy. As the source of cosmic motion as well as restless figurality, labile and polyvocal, the receptacle/*chora* offers a fecund zone of destabilization that allows for an immanent critique of ancient metaphysics’.¹² Although Bianchi works within a feminist framework and I am using a historical perspective, I believe her approach can also apply to an historical-theological investigation of the feminine, insofar as this method uses the feminine as a lens through which pursuing a critical investigation of western intellectual history. The method employed in my research shall be very similar. Nevertheless, insofar as historians of early Christianity ought to be considered ‘practitioners of a species of intellectual history’, as Clark said,¹³ my investigation of the feminine will be conducted within the boundaries of a historical-theological investigation, contextualising Gnostic Christian works within their geographical, chronological and cultural boundaries. Thus, I will conduct a thorough identification, study and comparison of the key exegetical passages regarding feminine imagery in these texts, confronting the different understandings of feminine imagery. This will help me to define possible cross-references and to better contextualize Gnostic Christian works within his cultural milieu. To achieve this goal, I will also conduct a strict philological investigation of the Greek, Latin and Coptic texts. By using this combined and interdisciplinary methodologies to investigate Gnostic theology, this work

¹¹ This definition is borrowed from Scott, J.W. (1988) *Gender and the Politics of History*, New York, 162 and adjusted to historical theological purposes, whereas Scott talked about gender in reference to social historical investigations as ‘a means of representing ideas about social order and social organization.’

¹² Bianchi (2006), 124.

¹³ Clark (2001), 394.

intends to deepen the scholarly understanding of a key element of the history of early Christianity.

Given the extent of the Gnostic production and the variety of aspects conveyed through feminine imagery in these works, I had to narrow down the field of investigation by following the subsequent criteria. First, I have decided to focus exclusively on the theological doctrines conveyed through feminine imagery, thus leaving aside social implications. Therefore, my investigation of Gnostic feminine imagery is primarily an investigation on the nature of the divine in Gnosticism, which highlights how some of the soteriological and generative functions of God are performed by female characters in Gnostic mythologies. Secondly, the selection of Gnostic texts from the vast Gnostic corpus has been operated to provide the most comprehensive representation possible of the mythologoumena and theologoumena of the major Gnostic movements.¹⁴ Therefore, my selection of Gnostic texts will privilege those which present feminine imagery linked to Ophite, Sethian, Barbeloite, Valentinian and Simonian mythologoumena and theologoumena.¹⁵ The selection of texts with these specific mythologoumena and theologoumena has been motivated either by the importance that they had in early Christian theology – for instance, this is the case of the *Apocryphon of John* – or for the significative presence of feminine imagery – as in the case of Justin’s *Book of Baruch* and the Nag Hammadi treatise known as *The Exegesis of the Soul*.¹⁶ Moreover, each of these texts represents a specific moment in the development and reception of feminine motifs in early Christianity, proving the widespread Gnostic interest in this topic. Thirdly, I have identified three main aspects of Gnostic feminine imagery: the feminine as part of the Godhead (or also intra-pleromatic feminine), the feminine as a fallen divine entity, and the feminine as represented in humankind. The first aspect concerns the presence and role of female characters within Gnostic Godhead, thus analysing characters such as

¹⁴ I shall employ the terms ‘mythologoumenon’ and ‘theologoumenon’ to describe the core theological doctrines of Gnostic movements. In particular, I have decided to use this terminology for it underlines the mythological way in which Gnostic theologians expressed their theological doctrines.

¹⁵ For a discussion of the different denomination of Gnostic movements, *infra* I.3.

¹⁶ A detailed explanation of the criteria employed for the selection of the texts will be provided in each part of this work, *infra* II.1; III.1; IV.

Barbelo-First Woman, Incorruptibility and Silence. The second aspect, namely the fallen feminine, includes those female divine beings which fall out of divine world into the material world. In this respect, it is worth underlining that the use of the term “fallen” has a specific biblical and theological connotation, for it is meant to recall the “fall” of the first chapters of Genesis. Sophia (the fallen aeon common to so many Gnostic mythologies) is certainly the most important character present in this category. The third aspect is the incarnated feminine and it concerns the feminine imagery employed in the description of biblical or mythological characters dwelling in the material world. These three aspects have been selected because they clarify how female beings permeate all levels of the Gnostic dualistic cosmos, thus better highlighting the roles and functions of each female character. In the following chapters, I will provide an explanation of these three aspects of feminine imagery in each of the texts that I have chosen, thus showing the theological meanings attributed to the feminine in different texts.

This work is divided into four parts. Part I is dedicated to the definition of ‘Gnosticism’ as a religious phenomenon and it is divided into three chapters. The first one provides a brief story of the scholarly debate concerning the definition of Gnosticism, since a universally agreed definition has not been found yet. In this regard, it is worth anticipating that my research is based on the *working definition* of Gnosticism agreed at the Colloquium of Messina in 1966.¹⁷ Briefly summarising, the terms “Gnostic” and “Gnosticism” will be here employed to indicate some Christian movements that started around the second century CE. These movements were in different geographical locations, used different languages and often had different community regulations. Nonetheless, they were associated by their theology, which is characterised by the notions of an ontological affinity between a specific class of humans and

¹⁷ Bianchi (1970). It is worth underlining that Gnosticism has always been considered a heretical group opposed to an alleged “orthodox church”. The faults of this categorisation has been largely investigated by Bauer (1971). Despite this, I will occasionally use this terminology to describe the opposition between Gnostic groups and heresiologists – such as Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Clement or Origen. However, the category of “heresy” and “orthodoxy” should not be interpreted rigidly and, most of all, they should not be intended as “moral” judgments. The use of this terminology will simply serve the purpose of illustrating the perceptions of ancient writers, but it does not express any verdict on the value of these doctrines.

divine beings, by a radical cosmic dualism, and by the idea of a devolution of the divine nature into the material world. I have made few additions to the Messina's *working definition* of Gnosticism, stressing particularly how all Gnostic texts present a mythological and cosmological structure based on *typological resemblance*. In the second chapter, I will illustrate the heterogenous nature of the Gnostic corpus, which is composed by both original Gnostic sources and heresiological accounts, explaining what problems arise from the use of polemical sources. Lastly, the third chapter will discuss the classification of Gnosticism in groups (such as Ophite, Sethian, Valentinian, etc...), highlighting how these denominations are extremely useful for historical research despite the doubts concerning their historical accuracy. For the sake of clarity, I will also briefly list the most important mythologoumena and theologoumena of each movement.

Part II analyses feminine imagery in Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite texts. Attention will be focused particularly on the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, *On the Origin of the World* and Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* I, 29 and I, 30. In the first chapter, I will illustrate the criteria used to select these texts. In brief, these texts have been selected from among those with Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite mythologoumena and theologoumena because they attribute to the feminine a unique role in the history of salvation. In the second chapter, I will expound the intra-pleromatic representation of the feminine in each text. In the third chapter, I will compare the various portrayals of Sophia, the liminal aeon who falls out of the Pleroma originating the inferior word. In the fourth chapter, I will analyse the differences between the spiritual Eve and the carnal Eve, showing how the former is the main soteriological and revealing agent in these Nag Hammadi treatises. Although each text presents a specific plot, all of them seem to attribute soteriological and revealing functions to female characters, while the extent of these functions varies from texts to texts. My analysis will prove that the attribution of such a soteriological role to the feminine is a trait proper – if not exclusive – to Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite movements. Hence, the feminine imagery is highly ambiguous – even paradoxical – for it represents both the defective and

fallen element and one of the major soteriological and revealing agents of these Gnostic theologies.

Part III deals with one of the most structured and well-known Gnostic movements, namely Valentinianism. The *Gospel of Philip*, the *Excerpta ex Theodoto* and Irenaeus' *Great News* on Ptolemy's doctrines (*Adversus Haereses* I, 1-8) are here used as major Valentinian sources. As in Part II, the first chapter will illustrate the sources of Valentinianism, explaining the selection criteria that I have used. This Gnostic movement has probably received the largest attention in the field of contemporary Gnostic studies, especially due to the heresiological insistence on its refutation. In Valentinian myths, the three aspects of Gnostic feminine imagery are perfectly recognisable: the female counterpart of the supreme Abyss, the male Pre-Father, is named Silence; the fallen feminine is always named Sophia, being both she who disrupts the perfection of the Pleroma with her sin and the totality of the spiritual seed; the incarnated feminine is represented by Eve, a fallen image of her fallen mother (Sophia). Each one of these three aspects will be discussed in one chapter. Contrarily to Ophite, Barbeloite and Sethian representations of the feminine, the Valentinians present female characters who do not perform any soteriological action. However, they still convey very important aspects of God. In particular, these chapters will illustrate that Valentinian feminine imagery represents the suffering and revealing God. Although the *paradoxical* aspect of the feminine is not stressed as much as it is in texts with Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite features, Valentinian feminine imagery conserves a certain *ambiguity* since it represents both the defective aeon that violates the rules of the syzygy and the spiritual being worthy of being reunited with the bridegroom in the "bridal chamber".

Part IV is divided into three chapters and its structure differs from that of the two previous sections. It is a collection of three case-studies: Helena of Tyre in Simonian gnosis, the *Book of Baruch* and *The Exegesis of the Soul*. These Gnostic texts have yet to find a classification under a specific Gnostic movement. Therefore, I will use my previous findings about feminine imagery in different Gnostic movements to contextualise and analyse these texts, thus

reaching some new conclusion concerning their mythology and theology. The first chapter will analyse the peculiar presence of feminine imagery in the so-called Simonian gnosis, that is, the role and functions of Simon's partner, Helen of Tyre. The study of this mysterious woman – if she ever existed – has been largely neglected by scholarship, which has rather chased the historical Simon. The available sources describe Helen in a threefold manner: as the *Ennoia* of Simon First-God, as a fallen divine feminine entity in need of redemption and as the actual historical woman who went about with Simon the Magician. If so, Helen groups in herself all three major aspects of Gnostic feminine imagery: the divine female entity, the fallen divine trapped into a material world and a carnal woman. Contrarily to previous researches, my work will emphasise the importance of the character of Helen both *per se* and as a key element to understand Simon's portrait as a Gnostic teacher. As a matter of fact, my research will claim that it is the way in which the character of Helen has been fashioned by the heresiologists that makes Simon a credible Gnostic teacher in the eyes of his opponents. Hence, this case has been selected for it shows the crucial importance of feminine imagery within Gnosticism. The second chapter will investigate the peculiar case of the *Book of Baruch* of the Gnostic teacher Justin. The importance of this document for the study of Gnostic feminine imagery is due to both the mystery surrounding its author and the unique myth narrated in the book. Edem is a female psychic being who is united in syzygy with Elohim, the male and supreme God, and she is abandoned in the lower regions of the cosmos when Elohim discovers his true pneumatic nature. The characterisation of Edem and the centrality attributed by the author to the syzygy portray a feminine imagery that is a unique combination of Ophite and Valentinian traits. Despite its brevity and its uncertain origin, this short myth represents an interesting case-study for the cross-contamination of different Gnostic representations of the feminine. The third chapter will analyse the use of feminine imagery in a short, but rich, Nag Hammadi treatise entitled *The Exegesis of the Soul*. This treatise has been largely overlooked by scholarship, probably because of its origin and date of composition are difficult – if not impossible – to determine. The mythology presented in this text is utterly centred on feminine imagery, identifying the soul with a vivid female character. The journey of the soul is interpreted as a

passing from one lover to another until the true lover is finally found. The explicit feminine imagery makes this text pivotal in the understanding Gnostic feminine imagery. My investigation will show how this text seems largely influenced by Valentinian feminine imagery, thus suggesting that this treatise should be listed among late Valentinian works.

Scholarship has dedicated great attention to Gnosticism. It would be impossible to examine here the scholarly debate concerning this movement; therefore, a detailed discussion of the scholarship will be conducted in each part of this work. Nonetheless, I believe it is important to highlight that no one has ever produced a monograph on Gnostic feminine imagery and that my research aims to fill this gap.

I. Methodological Problems in the Study of Gnosticism

The ancient religious phenomenon known as Gnosticism has been defined in various way by contemporary scholars.¹ The term Gnosticism was invented by modern scholars to indicate a second century heresy, which they knew mostly through the descriptions of its adversaries.² Before the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library in 1945,³ the information about Gnosticism was mostly limited to the heresiological accounts of its opponents,⁴ whose reports need to be examined critically by contemporary scholars because of their polemical intent. Although the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library brought new Gnostic texts to our attention, it did not solve the issue of defining and dating Gnostic movements. Contrariwise, the issue of defining Gnosticism became more urgent. The Nag Hammadi treatises are Coptic translations of originally Greek works, often poorly conserved and almost impossible to date. Consequently, the heterogeneity of Gnostic works and the polemical nature of heresiological sources induced scholars to question the category of Gnosticism *per se*. Up to nowadays, scholarship has not yet reached a universal agreement on the definition of Gnosticism. For these reasons, I deem it necessary to clarify some preliminary issues regarding the definition and internal articulations of Gnosticism, thus establishing some solid ground on which I intend to build my research.⁵

¹ See *infra* I.3.

² Lewis (2017), 23-25.

³ For more details about this discovery, see *infra* I.2.

⁴ With the exception of the *GosMary*, the *ApJohn* and the *SophJesChr*, which were already known thanks to the Berlin Codex.

⁵ The following overview of the methodological problems of Gnostic studies will not engage in the debate concerning the origins of Gnosticism, for it falls beyond the scope of this work to identify the origin of Gnostic movements. As I have explained in the Introduction, the texts analyzed in this work are mostly classified as Christian texts, despite the fact that they present substantial borrowings from other religious and philosophical traditions. Furthermore, when the affiliation to Christianity of some texts is not acknowledged by the scholarship, I will provide evidences in support of such affiliation. For further readings on this topic see Bianchi (1970) and Simonetti (1991).

I.1 Reaching an Agreement: the Rugged Way Towards a Definition of Gnosticism

The definition of Gnosticism has troubled scholars for many decades now, but no universally acknowledged definition has yet been agreed.⁶

The first scholar to take a decisive stand in this regard was Adolf von Harnack,⁷ who was also one of the first to dedicate due attention to Gnosticism. He defined Gnosticism as ‘the acute secularising or Hellenising of Christianity, with the rejection of the Old Testament’, which developed in opposition to the ‘catholic Church’.⁸ Harnack’s definition shaped the study of Gnosticism for almost fifty years until another German scholar, Hans Jonas, researched this topic extensively, concluding that Gnosticism was the ‘organising force’ or the ‘underlying unity’ of the syncretistic wave which hit the East at the beginning of the Christian era.⁹ It is worth mentioning that Jonas was the first to connect the problem of the essence of Gnosticism with its origins and syncretistic nature. However, Jonas formulated a rather loose definition of Gnosticism, classifying it as ‘a collective heading for a manifoldness of sectarian doctrines appearing within and around Christianity during its critical first centuries’.¹⁰ In spite of the many chronological and historical differences between these movements, Jonas believed that they presented some similarities in their theology, cosmology, anthropology, eschatology and morality.¹¹ Besides Harnack’s and Jonas’ efforts to define Gnosticism, an additional attempt was made by Robert Grant, who proposed to classify Gnostic movements according to their geographical locations, discussing also the possibility that the social dynamics which followed the Jewish revolts of the first century played a

⁶ The following overview of the scholarly debate that led to the modern questioning of the category of Gnosticism is hardly comprehensive enough to explain the complexity of the problem. While specific scholarly positions will be explained and discussed later on in this work, this paragraph aims at providing a general overview in order to allow the reader to better engage with the complex matter at hand. For a complete story of the bibliography on Nag Hammadi see the two volumes of Robinson (1997) and (2014).

⁷ For the story of the scholarship before Harnack, see Rudolph (1987), 30-32.

⁸ Harnack (1894), 227.

⁹ Jonas (1963), 26-27.

¹⁰ Jonas (1963), 32.

¹¹ Jonas (1963), 42-47.

primary role in the construction of Gnosticism.¹² Although his research had the undisputed merit of highlighting the connection between Jewish texts and Gnosticism,¹³ his findings failed to reach a wide consensus in the academic community.

With the edition and publication of the Nag Hammadi library between the 1950s and 1970s,¹⁴ the problem of defining Gnosticism became more pressing and the international community of scholars organised a Colloquium in the city of Messina in 1966. Major Gnostic scholars gathered together with the intent of establishing a universal definition of Gnosticism and investigating its origins.¹⁵ Notwithstanding all the difficulties and disagreements during the Colloquium, scholars agreed the following definition:

The Gnosticism of the second century sects involves a coherent series of characteristics that can be summarised in the idea of a divine spark in man, deriving from the divine realm, fallen into this world of fate, birth and death, and needing to be awakened by the divine counterpart of the self in order to be finally re-integrated. Compared with other conceptions of a "devolution" of the divine, this idea is based ontologically on the conception of a downward movement of the divine whose periphery (often called Sophia [Wisdom] or Ennoia [Thought])¹⁶ had to submit to

¹² Grant (1961), 16.

¹³ Grant (1959).

¹⁴ It is worth remembering that, despite the library was discovered in 1945, the process of editing the codices was difficult and most documents were released only in 1970s'.

¹⁵ Many prominent scholars attended the Colloquium, including Ugo Bianchi, Jean Daniélou, Robert M. Grant, Yvonne Janssens, Hans Jonas, George W. Mac Rae, Giulia Sfameni-Gasparro, Robert McL Wilson, Gilles Quispel, Kurt Rudolph.

¹⁶ Notwithstanding the existence of several versions of Sophia's story, it is useful to provide here a general outline of this myth, since this will help the reader to understand subsequent references to it. In Gnostic mythologies, Sophia is the name attributed to the last production of the Pleroma, the superior world. She is a female aeon, who is considered part of the divine pantheon although she is not united in syzygy with a male partner. The story begins when, being aware of her loneliness, Sophia becomes restless and begins searching a suitable companion. During her quest, she oversteps the limits of her pleromatic conditions and leaps out of the Pleroma into the lower world. In falling outside of the Pleroma because of her uncontrolled desire, she gives birth to an abortion – often called Yaldabaoth or Demiurge – who does not resemble his mother and is ignorant of the world above. Being however extremely powerful, Yaldabaoth becomes lord (chief archon) over the inferior world, generating also several archons to help him in governing his realm. In doing so, he typologically and unwillingly reproduces the structure of the world above. Seeing the evils she has brought into the world, Sophia regrets her decisions and appeals to the good grace of the Virginal Spirit, the Father. At this point, the Pleroma takes pity on her and sends down its

the fate of entering into a crisis and producing — even if only indirectly — this world, upon which it cannot turn its back, since it is necessary for it to recover the pneuma — a dualistic conception on a monistic background, expressed in a double movement of devolution and reintegration. The type of gnosis involved in Gnosticism is conditioned by the ontological, theological, and anthropological foundations indicated above. Not every gnosis is Gnosticism, but only that which involves in this perspective the idea of the divine consubstantiality of the spark that is in need of being awakened and reintegrated. This gnosis of Gnosticism involves the divine identity of the knower (the Gnostic), the known (the divine substance of one's transcendent self), and the means by which one knows (gnosis as an implicit divine faculty is to be awakened and actualised. This gnosis is a revelation tradition of a different type from the Biblical and Islamic revelation tradition).¹⁷

Hence, the Messina Colloquium represented a keystone in Gnostic scholarship for it proposed a definition of Gnosticism. Notwithstanding that such a description is a scholarly reconstruction, it provided historians with a way of coping with the variety of documents grouped under this umbrella definition. Considering that scholarship needs *a working definition* of Gnosticism to make sense of the numerous ancient information that have been bequeathed to us about these groups, the Messina's formula is the most valid and comprehensive one produced up to present time, in spite of its faults.¹⁸ In my opinion, the

perfect fruit, Christ, to rescue her. Christ is not only her saviour but also her rightful companion, with whom she will ascend again to the Pleroma.

¹⁷ Bianchi (1970), XXVI-XXVII.

¹⁸ However, the Messina definition should not be intended in a strict sense. In fact, it recognises the complex syncretistic process that led to the genesis of Gnosticism, and it identifies some significant antecedents to Gnostic movements. In Bianchi (1970), XXVII, it is specified that: 'The question arises on whether this "classical" Gnosticism was preceded by proto-Gnosticism or only by pre-Gnosticism. If it is a matter of pre-Gnosticism one can investigate the pre-existence of different themes and motifs constituting such a "pre-" but not yet involving Gnosticism. But if it is a matter of proto-Gnosticism, one can think to find the essence of Gnosticism already in the centuries preceding the Second Century CE, as well as outside the Christian Gnosticism of the Second Century.' These two additions proposed at Messina go into different directions. On the one hand, the category of pre-Gnosticism adheres more strictly to the idea that Gnosticism was a second century heresy, albeit admitting that there were liminal movements that possess *in nuce* some elements of Gnosticism. On the other hand, the definition of proto-Gnosticism intends Gnosticism more loosely, therefore it may include some Iranian or Indian religious movements that presented similar form of *gnosis* in geographical and chronological moments that can also be very distant from the ones of "classic" Gnosticism.

Messina's definition has three main merits. First, it provides a way of distinguishing the philosophical and theological notion of *gnosis* – that is, the idea that knowledge is the key to reach the divine, or even to be deified – from *Gnosticism* – that is, a particular set of doctrines proper to specific historical religious movements from the second century onward.¹⁹ Secondly, this definition allows us to account for the doctrinal unity which emerges from these unusual texts by acknowledging the existence of shared mythologoumena and theologoumena. Thirdly, by setting the boundaries of Gnosticism, it gives the possibility of identifying better the internal differences and similarities between Gnostic movements.²⁰ I will use the Messina's definition as a *working definition*, that is, a historical paradigm deduced from the texts rather than imposed on it. Such a definition will be shaped according to what emerges from the texts, thus accounting for the different texts and not the other way around.²¹

Notwithstanding its usefulness, this definition is not exempt from problems. One of these was first spotted by Jonas, who claimed that its intrinsic fault lied in assuming the idea of Gnosticism as a unitary religious group in its origin and then using such concept to identify the category of Gnosticism.²² Building on Jonas' critique, Kurt Rudolph violently criticised the distinction between gnosis and Gnosticism, defining the category of Gnosticism as 'a modern, deprecatory expression, a theologizing neologism'.²³ In particular, he criticised the limitations that the Messina's definition had brought upon the idea of

¹⁹ The significance of the Messina's definition and its significance for my research will be discussed shortly.

²⁰ For more information, see Simonetti (1999).

²¹ For a similar definition of Gnosticism, see Sfameni Gasparro (2013).

²² Jonas (1970), 90 explains it in the following manner: 'Delimiting a phenomenon that exists as a manifold of diverse individuals involves the well-known circle of using the presumed unity of the many for the designation of a common name, and then using the meaning of that name to define the unity of the manifold – and hence to decide over the inclusion or exclusion of individuals. It is the paradox, first, the evidence of prescribing to us – persuasively; and, then, our concept prescribing to the evidence – normatively. In our case this means that we must have some historical delimitation first as to arrive at a typological one, and again the typological one to re-assess the historical one.' Unfortunately, as Jonas pointed out, we need to 'assume a measure of consensus on the existence of such an entity as the Gnostic phenomenon' in order to discuss about it.

²³ In his work, he seemed to use 'gnosis' and 'Gnosticism' interchangeably. Such use of the two terms is indeed typical of German scholarship; see Rudolph (1987), 54-59 and Marksches (2003), 16-17.

gnosis and Gnosticism. In other words, both Jonas' and Rudolph's refusals of the Messina's definition was caused by their understanding of Gnosticism as a widespread 'worldview', which interested different geographical locations and historical periods which the Messina's definition had instead excluded from the umbrella term of Gnosticism. More recently, a different critique to the Messina definition was raised by Michael Williams.²⁴ Contrariwise to Rudolph's concerns, Williams' worries regarding the use of the category of Gnosticism had a very practical reason: within the academic community and beyond, the term Gnosticism has been borrowed by so many academic fields and for so many different purposes that it has lost its original scientific connotation of a second-century historical movement. In addition, he strongly criticised the use of general categories (e.g. anti-cosmism and revolutionary spirit) to define the essence of Gnosticism, since they add very little to our historical knowledge of this religious phenomenon. In other words, Williams suggested that since the category of Gnosticism has failed to achieve its original purpose, it ought to be replaced by a new category. He proposed to adopt the category 'biblical demiurgical', a term which would indicate a system where the superior deity is distinguished by the inferior creator of the world.²⁵ In this case, the emphasis would be on the "biblical" nature of Gnosticism, which would distinguish it from the Platonic demiurgic tradition.²⁶ However, his proposal has not been embraced by the academic community for such a vague definition generates even more confusion than previous ones. A different approach to the problem has been experimented by Marksches who has criticised the Messina definition of the term gnosis, rather than the one of Gnosticism.²⁷ His argument

²⁴ Williams (1996).

²⁵ Williams (1996), 265-266: 'The category "biblical demiurgical" could be fairly clearly defined. It would include all sources that made a distinction between the creator(s) and controllers of the material world and the most transcendent divine being, and that in so doing made use of Jewish or Christian scriptural traditions. This category would not simply be a new name for "Gnosticism," however, since it would not precisely correspond to the grouping included in most anthologies of "Gnostic" sources or discussions of this subject. There would indeed be considerable overlap, since the largest number of sources normally called "Gnostic" also happen to contain or assume some biblical demiurgical myth. And in fact, there are scholars who would consider what I have called biblical demiurgy to be, in the final analysis, the only genuinely defining feature of "Gnosticism." Nevertheless, there are some sources that many would want to call "Gnostic" on the basis of other features in them, such as an orientation toward esoteric knowledge.'

²⁶ Williams (1996), 52.

²⁷ Marksches (2003), 13-16.

is composed of two parts: on the one hand, he has remarked that Gnostic teachers called themselves ‘Gnostics’ and not ‘Gnosticists’; on the other hand, he has underlined that gnosis is defined quite loosely by the Messina statement, reducing it to a ‘general attitude of mind’.²⁸ Nonetheless, I believe it is worth noting that, although he has criticised the Messina definition of gnosis, Marksches has always employed a definition of Gnosticism which has mostly been grounded on the Messina definition.²⁹

This contemporary scepticism towards the definition of Gnosticism as recognizable historical movements leads to a general caution when presenting new researches on Gnostic material or discoveries.³⁰ Nonetheless, many scholars – such as Pagels, Pétrement, Simonetti, Lettieri, and Thomassen³¹ – abide by the definition agreed at Messina, albeit to different degrees. To a certain extent, contemporary scholarship has overcome some of the problems outlined above. On the one hand, recent studies have stressed the differences between the numerous Gnostic movements, such as Sethianism, Ophitism and Valentianianism. Scholars such as Hans-Martin Schenke, John Turner, Einar Thomassen and Karen King have largely investigated specificity of each Gnostic movement, thus opening up new research horizons.³² Yet, these researches have also revealed an underlying unity, a theological core common to all these movements. Notwithstanding its many variants, this theological and mythological core corresponds roughly to that described by the Messina’s definition, especially when considering the Gnostic accounts here analysed.

²⁸ Marksches (2003), 14.

²⁹ Marksches (2003), 16-17. He has identified seven main points which characterize the movement known as gnosis: 1) the presence and experience of an otherworldly God; 2) the multiplication of this otherworldly divine entity in numerous entities which separate the supreme beings from some lower divinities closer to humans; 3) the notion of matter as evil; 4) the introduction of a deity who is the creator of the world; 5) the presence of a mythological drama which presents the fall of a divine being; 6) the concept that knowledge – that is, gnosis – can be gained through a redeemer; 7) the presence of a divine spark in humans; 8) a tendency towards dualism. As it is possible to observe, most of these elements – if not all – are already outlined in the Messina definition of Gnosticism.

³⁰ See King (2009) and (2003).

³¹ To name a few see Pagels (1979); Pétrement (1984); Simonetti (1999); Lettieri (1996); Thomassen (2006).

³² For instance, Schenke (1962); Turner (2001); King (2003); Thomassen (2006).

For the sake of clarity, I believe it is worth summarising once again the main points of the Messina's definition with which I agree:

- 1) Gnosticism is a religious phenomenon which starts around the second century CE, within which several movements are identifiable;
- 2) Gnosticism is a dualist system in which the inferior deity is the result of an internal crisis within the superior divine world. Such a crisis is caused by a female divine entity, often called Sophia;
- 3) The cosmos is dominated by a double movement of devolution and reintegration. Humankind is inserted in this movement, but some human beings retain a special position among created beings since they possess a divine nature, which makes them consubstantial with the divine;
- 4) The Gnostic gnosis aims at reuniting the divine nature, which is in the human, with the divine fullness (often called Pleroma). Such reunion is achieved thanks to the identity between knower (the Gnostic) and known (the divine substance of one's transcendent self), which is the distinctive marker of Gnostic gnosis.

Once having established all these features, I think that it is necessary to add two further elements:

- 5) Gnosticism, as it has been described above, is a primarily Christian movement, although it is a highly syncretistic form of Christianity, thus borrowing from other religions and philosophies (especially Jewish apocalyptic texts, Platonic and Middle-Platonic philosophies).
- 6) The Gnostic cosmos – including all its inhabitants, whether these are deities or creatures – is organised in hierarchical levels, where the inferior level bears a *typological resemblance* towards the upper level – that is to say, the inferior level is τύπος (lit. impression, mold; fig. symbol) of the superior level.³³ This typological resemblance also plays

³³ The addition of this characteristics to the Gnostic system is largely based on the works of Sagnard (1947), Simonetti (1999), Orbe (1996), Marksches (2003), Lettieri (2008) and (2005).

a significant part in the process of re-discovery of the divine self, for it provides hints of truth to the ones searching for it.

In regard to the fifth point, it ought to be said that the scholarly debate about the definition of Gnosticism is inextricably intertwined with the question concerning its origin. It is impossible to discuss such a thorny issue in detail here; nonetheless, it is necessary to devote a few words in order to illustrate where my research stands on this matter, thus locating it within contemporary scholarship. However, it is important to keep in mind that it is *not* the main purpose of my research to determine whether Gnosticism was originally a Christian movement, but rather it aims at illustrating the historical theological importance of Gnostic feminine imagery, thus dealing with the issue of the origin of Gnosticism only tangentially.

The scholarly hypotheses can be briefly summarised according to three main positions. The first group of scholars, whose main representative can be found in Jonas,³⁴ tends to believe that Gnosticism developed out of oriental religions, especially Iranian ones, and that it was a pre-Christian religious phenomenon.³⁵ The second group is composed of scholars who promoted the idea of the Jewish origins of Gnosticism, thus interpreting the Gnostic phenomenon as a revolt against the dominant Judaic group.³⁶ The third group includes those scholars who acknowledge a primarily Christian origin of Gnosticism.³⁷ My research shares the same conclusions as the latter group. Against those who claim a parallel development of Gnosticism and Christianity or a progressive christianisation of Gnosticism,³⁸ I believe that Gnosticism developed within Christianity, although it was strongly influenced by Platonism, Middle and Neo Platonism, Judaism (in particular, Jewish apocalypticism) and oriental religions.³⁹ In this regard, I believe it is essential to stress the importance of recent works on the ‘inadequacy of any monolithic model that seeks to theorize

³⁴ See Jonas (1963).

³⁵ Yamauchi (1997), (1973) and (1970).

³⁶ Among them Rudolph (1987), Stroumsa (1984), Schenke (1962), Grant (1959).

³⁷ Among them Simonetti (1991), Orbe (1995), Pétrement (1984).

³⁸ Wilson (1970) and Schenke (1962).

³⁹ To deepen the discussion such influences, see respectively Turner (2006) and (2001); Berno (2018) Reed (2005); Jonas (1963).

the relationships between Judaism and Christianity'.⁴⁰ As many researches have proved,⁴¹ there were extensive interactions between Christian and Jews in second and third centuries, and it is reasonable to assume that Gnostic texts were the natural product of such a mingled environment. Nevertheless, I have observed that the Christian influence is predominant over the Jewish one. In particular, my research intends to build on Orbe's work, which explains in detail how Gnostic mythologies derive from the interpretation of Christ's stories,⁴² and Simonetti's research, which envisions a progressive de-christianisation of Gnosticism following the "orthodox" rejection of this religious movement.⁴³ The evidence which Simonetti brings to support his thesis is rather compelling. First of all, he underlines that it would be inaccurate to ignore the fact that ancient writers, both pagan and Christian, understood Gnosticism as part of Christianity, corroborating his claims with evidence from Celsus and Porphyry.⁴⁴ Secondly, he highlights how it is possible to find Christian elements in Nag Hammadi treatises that are usually categorised as non-Christian, for instance the *Eugnostos*. Thirdly, he explains how such an unusual dualistic form of Christianity developed already during the first centuries CE, since the opposition between a superior God and an inferior one was certainly not exclusive to Gnosticism since it can be found also in Marcionism.⁴⁵ Obviously, the dissemination of these ideas happened in different ways and times, as well as to different degrees. For instance, due to the absence of a radical opposition between superior/inferior deities and the use of Greek names to indicate the female divine entity, Simonetti hypothesizes that Simon Magus' teachings were more influenced by pagan ideas than by Jewish texts. Contrariwise, other Christian Gnostics of Syrian origins would have taken a more anti-Jewish perspective, stressing the opposition between the superior and inferior God. Hence, although sharing some of Simonetti's

⁴⁰ Although I do not share the theory about the "ways that never parted" to the fullest extent, I do believe it is important to avoid extreme opposition between Judaism and Christianity Becker – Reed (2007), x.

⁴¹ See also Kessler – Wenborn (2005); Iricinschi – Zellentin (2008).

⁴² Orbe (1976).

⁴³ Simonetti (1999), xix-xxvii and Simonetti (1991).

⁴⁴ Besides Christian heresiologists, he points also towards Celsus (Origen, *Contra Celsum* VI, 25, 27-34) and Plotinus (Porphyry, *Enneas* II, 9).

⁴⁵ It is worth underlining that, according to the Messina's definition, Marcionism cannot be listed as a form of Gnosticism for it does not present any reference to an intra-divine fracture. For more information on Marcionism, see Lieu (2017); Vinzent (2014).

conclusions, my research hopes also to add further elements to his analysis by using the feminine as test case, thus showing how Gnostic feminine imagery shapes Christian Trinitarian theology and Christian soteriology.

In addition to Christianity, Gnosticism is highly influenced by Judaism, Platonism, Middle Platonism and few oriental religions. Numerous studies have been conducted on this topic and it is here impossible to summarise their findings.⁴⁶ At this stage, I aim at providing only a general overview of the influence that these philosophies and religions had on Gnostic feminine imagery, whilst I will offer more detail in the textual analyses of Gnostic texts.

The influence of Judaism is visible in the entire Gnostic production. Among biblical texts, Genesis⁴⁷ and Song of Songs⁴⁸ are particularly relevant for Gnostic feminine imagery. On the one hand, Gen. is important because female characters in Gnosticism are often a reinterpretation of Eve and of the events which lead to the fall. On the other, *Sos* is important for Gnosticism since it describes the relation between God and his creatures in terms of nuptial and feminine imagery. In the following chapters, I will stress this dependence on several occasions, thus highlighting how these texts are used by Gnostic theologians. In addition, Gnosticism is largely influenced by Jewish apocalyptic literature. Here, feminine imagery takes the form of an opposition between the characters of the bride and the prostitute.⁴⁹ As I will illustrate at length in my work, the opposition between lawful bride and illicit lover plays an essential role in Gnostic feminine imagery. Lastly, it is also worth stressing the importance of Jewish Wisdom theology, where God's Wisdom is personified in a female character or it presents female traits. In particular, this

⁴⁶ For the relation between Platonism and Gnosticism, see especially Turner – Majercik (2000) and Turner (2001). For the influence of Middle Platonism, see Turner (2006). For Gnosticism and Jewish apocalypticism, see Quispel (2008), 539-566 and Lettieri (2017).

⁴⁷ See Luttikhuisen (2006).

⁴⁸ See Meloni (1975); Young (2001); Lettieri (2016). Despite its controversial history, this text had a huge impact on Christian speculation; indeed, many commentaries and homilies were written by religious writers – both Christian and Jewish – to explain its erotic and feminine language.

⁴⁹ This theme has also been inherited by *Rev* 17-18.

tradition influenced the representation of the character of Sophia, which often shares the features of the Jewish Wisdom.⁵⁰

The influence of Platonism and Middle-Platonism is visible particularly in two aspects of Gnostic feminine imagery: a) the process of emanation and reintegration of female characters;⁵¹ b) the Valentinian representation of female characters as material.⁵² Generally speaking, in Platonic and Middle-Platonic philosophies, the feminine is associated both with unformed and raw matter and with the entity entrusted with generation. In this regard, the Platonic depiction of the *χώρα* in Plato's *Timaeus* gives a good insight into the Platonic notion of the feminine.⁵³ Among Platonists, a prominent place is occupied by Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish Platonist philosopher. In particular, his philosophical use of gender categories resembles that of some Gnostic teachers, especially Valentinian ones.⁵⁴ Beside the Platonic influence, some scholars detect also an Aristotelian influence on Gnosticism.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, I have identified only rare occurrences in which Gnostic feminine imagery presents Aristotelian traits.⁵⁶ In addition to these major influences, Gnostic texts present traces of oriental religious mythologies – such as the Egyptian or Manichean cults⁵⁷ – and Greek literature.⁵⁸ Overall, I believe that the presence of so many external influences on Gnostic feminine imagery confirms once again the syncretistic nature of these Gnostic movements.

Concerning the sixth point, the idea of *typological resemblance* as a constitutive element of Gnosticism takes the moves from Sagnard's, Orbe's and Lettieri's works.⁵⁹ Whereas Sagnard employed the term 'exemplarisme

⁵⁰ For a detailed analysis of this dependence, see Stead (1969).

⁵¹ This issue will be explored in the chapters on *ApJohn*, especially *infra* II.2.1.

⁵² This will be further explored in the chapters on the Valentinian Sophia, especially *infra* III.3.

⁵³ See Plato, *Timaeus* 48e-52a. On the features of the feminine in Platonic philosophies, see Bianchi (2006).

⁵⁴ For his use of feminine imagery in Philo, see Baer (1970).

⁵⁵ For instance, Luttikhuisen (2006).

⁵⁶ For instance, this is the case of Aristotle's theory of conception in Valentinian texts, *infra* III.2. For an investigation of the feminine in Aristotelian philosophy, see Bianchi (2014).

⁵⁷ For instance, Egyptian influences have been detected in the *Book of Baruch*, *infra* IV.2.

⁵⁸ For instance, this is the case of the identification of Helena, the companion of Simon Magus, with Helena of Troy, *infra* IV.1.

⁵⁹ See respectively Sagnard (1947), 570-572; Orbe (1976); Lettieri (1995).

inversé', thus making an explicit reference to Plato's repeatability between ideas and their worldly instances,⁶⁰ Orbe and Lettieri took a more textual approach, showing how the Gnostic myth is organized as a projection of biblical and evangelical stories.⁶¹ It is indeed for the exegetical value of the term typology that I have preferred this term to Sagnard's exemplarisme.⁶² Although I am borrowing the term from ancient Christian exegetes, who used it to indicate a specific exegetical device,⁶³ I am here employing it in its cosmological and historical sense to indicate the similarities between levels of reality in which the inferior cosmological level replicates the superior one. Therefore, while I acknowledge that exegetical typology was theorised and employed by Gnostic and non-Gnostic writers alike,⁶⁴ I claim that cosmological and historical typology is a proper feature of Christian Gnostic systems.⁶⁵ Within Gnosticism, typology assumes more than a simple exegetical value, becoming the fundamental principle according to which the entire cosmos is ordained and the different levels of reality are organised. As a matter of fact, the Gnostic cosmos is divided into ontological levels, which maintain a certain similarity between themselves. A clear example of this can be found in the ordination of the inferior cosmos, which is created by Yaldabaoth/Demiurge as an imperfect copy of the pleromatic world.⁶⁶ It is worth noting that, since the cosmos is dominated by a movement of devolution and reintegration (see Point 3), the Gnostic cosmological typology often

⁶⁰ Sagnard (1947), 239-255.

⁶¹ Orbe (1976), 622-632.

⁶² Unlike the Platonic principle of the *exemplarisme inverse*, I believe that the term *typological resemblance* conveys better the idea of an historical development which is proper to Gnostic cosmologies. Although the Platonic model of idea/copy is an important part of the Gnostic worldview, it does not encompass it, since it does not account for the unfolding of the pleromatic and historical events as intertwined and linked to one another.

⁶³ Typology is a widely recognised hermeneutical and exegetical device, usually employed by Christian exegetes to interpret the relation between Old and New Testament. According to this mechanism, characters or events from the Old Testament could be interpreted as τύπος of the New Testament characters or events. On this topic see, Simonetti (2004a) and (1985); Young (1997).

⁶⁴ For examples of the use of exegetical typology among "orthodox" theologians, see Origen, *De Principiis* IV, 1. For a detailed study of Origen's exegesis, see Dawson (2002) and Dively-Lauro (2005).

⁶⁵ Its importance for Gnostic feminine imagery has also been implicitly outlined by Orbe (1995), 149-152. This topic will be however extensively discussed in the course of my research.

⁶⁶ The mythologoumenon of Yaldabaoth/Demiurge creating the inferior world as a faded copy of the superior world is visible in many Gnostic traditions, see for instance *ApJohn* II, 14, 14 – 15, 13; *HypArch* II, 87, 8-11; *OrigWorld* II, 102, 1-7; *GosPhil* 75, 3-9; *AdHaer* I, 5, 3.

implies a loss of perfection. Furthermore, it ought to be highlighted that Gnostics understand the typological unfolding of the cosmos – that is, the subsequent progression of aeons that culminates in the creation of the inferior world – as a historical event, so much so that, according to them, typology becomes also the driving principle of historical developments. Given the importance of this principle, I believe it is fair to conclude that the typological resemblance becomes the lens through which Gnostics understand not only the world, but also the historical events that concern them and even their very historical existence.⁶⁷ Therefore, Gnostic cosmological and historical use of typology has some extremely significant consequences, which are proper only to Gnostic systems. On the one hand, by acknowledging the correspondence between upper and lower levels of reality, it becomes clearer how historical developments happen in accordance with the celestial and eternal events concerning the divine. On the other hand, the typological resemblance becomes also a way of understanding reality, helping to fill the gap between knower and known.⁶⁸ Hence, the *typological resemblance* is also visible among Gnostic characters, especially female characters, who are often presented according to a hierarchical order. With regard to the analysis of the feminine within Gnosticism, the typological resemblance is essential to explain the link between female characters at different levels of reality.⁶⁹ As I will prove throughout my work, the higher manifestations of the feminine are inextricably intertwined with the lowest female manifestations primarily due to this typological resemblance that governs the Gnostic cosmos. Only by acknowledging the existence of a link between different ontological levels – and, consequently, between characters within these levels – the significance of feminine imagery in Gnostic mythologies becomes clear.

⁶⁷ For a more comprehensive discussion of the role of typology in Gnosticism, see my article Cerioni, L. (2019) 'Tempo tipologico. La nozione di tempo nel Valentinismo', in *XLVI Incontro di Studiosi dell'Antichità Cristiana*, SEA 155, p. 495-502.

⁶⁸ This feature of Gnosticism had already been acknowledged by Irenaeus, who explained how the Gnostic cosmos was organised typologically since 'they believe all things below are images of the those above.' (Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 7, 2: πάντα γὰρ ταῦτα τύπος ἐκείνων εἶναι λέγουσι.) Although Irenaeus was here referring to Valentinianism, where this typological structure is more evident, I believe this typological resemblance is traceable in all Gnostic movements that I will take here into consideration. More examples will be provided later in the following chapters.

⁶⁹ One of the major complexities of Gnostic typological resemblance lies indeed in the identification of the different levels involved, for they vary from movement to movement.

In conclusion, this brief section – far from being an exhaustive discussion of all scholarly positions – has aimed at establishing a *working definition* and at situating my definition of Gnosticism within the ongoing scholarly debate. My addition to the Messina definition and my position concerning the origin of Gnosticism are indeed the result of my investigation of the feminine within Gnosticism and one which I shall prove in more detail in the following chapters.

I.2 The Heterogeneous Nature of Gnostic Texts

The second significant issue scholars face when approaching Gnosticism is the heterogeneousness of the sources. In order to bring some clarity to the numerous Gnostic sources, I offer here a brief overview of the main sources which I will discuss in this work.

Before 1945, the most significant source for Gnostic movements was represented by heresiological accounts.⁷⁰ Among early Christian authors, the polemic against the Gnostic heresy was present in many heresiological works, especially that of Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Epiphanius.⁷¹ Irenaeus of Lyon was one of the first witnesses to the spread of the Gnostic movements in the West. His major work is entitled *Adversus haereses* and it was written in five books around the second half of the second century. The first and second book are dedicated to the refutation of the Gnostic heresy, in its many forms and groups. Greater attention is dedicated to the confutation of the Valentinian heresy, especially the school of Rome, which was very well known to him. Nonetheless, he seemed also to possess extensive information on other Gnostic groups, such as the Ophites. The reliability of his *AdHaer* is still debated among scholars; therefore, it will be evaluated in each instance in which I will resort to his works.⁷² Hippolytus of Rome's account represents a mystery in many regards. Firstly, the identity of the author is still uncertain and the *Hippolytusfrage* remains a captivating question for modern scholars.⁷³ Secondly, the reliability of his portrayal of Gnostic heresy is under strict scrutiny because of its clear philosophical intent: he wished to derive each heresy from a different philosophical movement. Following Irenaeus' example, he wrote a work entitled *Elenchos* – mostly known with the Latin name of *Refutatio omnium haeresium* – in which he discussed most heretical

⁷⁰ As a consequence, the researches produced before the editions of the Nag Hammadi codices need to be considered very carefully, since they present a partial and, often, outdated description of Gnosticism.

⁷¹ I am here mentioning only those heresiologists who wrote comprehensive refutations of Gnosticism. For a more detailed overview of their heresiological activity, see Van den Broek (2013), 126-136. Nonetheless, in the following chapter, I will resort to other authors, who focused on specific Gnostic groups, such as Justin, Origen and Tertullian.

⁷² For a general overview, see Wisse (1971) and Vallée (1981).

⁷³ For more information, *infra* IV.2.

movements of the first two centuries of Christianity, connecting each heresy with an ancient or Hellenistic philosophy. Nevertheless, his account also bequeathed valuable texts, as in the case of the *Book of Baruch* written by the Gnostic teacher Justin, which would be otherwise unknown. Epiphanius' *Panarion*, written about two centuries after Irenaeus' *AdHaer* – thus, over two centuries after the flourishing of Gnostic movements – is probably the least reliable source among the three heresiologists. His accounts are often exaggerated and biased; nonetheless, it can be a useful source of validation for information found in other sources.⁷⁴

Since the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library, the study of Gnosticism has known a thrilling injection of new sources that have partially challenged and enriched previous conclusions. The Nag Hammadi library is a miscellany of different texts and authors, not all of them ascribable to the category of Gnosticism. This collection is composed of thirteen codices,⁷⁵ containing forty-one different works, some of which survived in several versions.⁷⁶ Each codex contains a different number of books: some are extant in their entirety, whilst others present extensive *lacunae*. All books are transmitted in Coptic translations of Greek texts, which largely complicates any philological investigation.⁷⁷ In addition, very little is known about the community that assembled this collection, even less about their reasons to group these texts together.⁷⁸ It has been suggested, most recently by Lundhaug, Jennot and King, that the codices were property of the nearby Pachomian monastery of

⁷⁴ Williams (2009), xxiii.

⁷⁵ Some scholars, such as Waldstein – Wisse (1995), list only twelve codices. However, it is more correct to refer to thirteen codices. For the story of the codices and the discussion concerning Codex XIII, see Robinson (2014), 20-41. For a complete list of the works included in the codices, see Robinson et al. (1996).

⁷⁶ For instance, *ApJohn* is known in four versions, three of which had been found in the Nag Hammadi archaeological site, whilst the other one is attested in the BG (*Papyrus Berolinensis* 8502).

⁷⁷ Among the many Nag Hammadi treatises, I will investigate only the *ApJohn*, *HypArch*, *OrigWorld*, *ExVal*, *GosPhil*, *ExSoul*. More detailed information about the individual treatises and the criteria employed to select them will be provided in each one of the following chapters.

⁷⁸ For more details see Robinson et al. (1996), 1-26. For more information about the Nag Hammadi collection see Robinson (2014); Van den Broek (2013), 19-22; Rudolph (1987), 34-52.

Chenoboskian.⁷⁹ The supporters of this hypothesis based their observation mainly on the study of the cartonnage of some codices, claiming that it bore evidence which suggested that it was produced in the Pachomian monastery. However, Robinson, Denzey and Blount have proved that these hypotheses are inconclusive, for all of the evidence is circumstantial and several alternative explanations are possible.⁸⁰

The unearthing of the Nag Hammadi library certainly represented a rare opportunity for scholarly research to cast new light on Gnosticism, since it not only made available new Gnostic sources, but it allowed a comparison between original Gnostic texts and polemical heresiological accounts.⁸¹ Despite years of study in this field, there is still much to explore concerning the relationship between the heresiologists and their sources. Unfortunately, the enthusiasm for the Nag Hammadi texts resulted also in the abandonment and discrediting of the study of heresiological sources, which were often judged as utterly unreliable and therefore quickly dismissed.⁸² This tendency was partially due to the discrepancies between Nag Hammadi texts and the heresiological accounts, but also to a harsh evaluation of the heresiologists' work. In this regard, I believe that, while it is undeniable that modern scholars should look suspiciously at the rhetorical and polemical works of the heresiologists, these works still represent a valuable source of information that could help the interpreter to unravel the obscurities of the Nag Hammadi treatises.

The trickiest issue of contemporary scholarship on Gnosticism remains, therefore, the complex relation between heresiological sources and Gnostic accounts. To what extent are the heresiological sources reliable? What is the value of the Nag Hammadi treatises for Gnosticism as a complex religious

⁷⁹ Lundhaug – Jennot (2015) and King (2009), 20-21. In particular, these scholars claim that the Nag Hammadi copies of *ApJohn* were owned by the monastery of Chenoboskian.

⁸⁰ Against the idea of a Pachomian origin of the codices, see Robinson (2014), 1125. For a list of alternative hypotheses, see Denzey – Blount (2014).

⁸¹ For a comprehensive study of the impact of the Nag Hammadi discovery on several fields, see also Robinson (1997), Turner – McGuire (1997).

⁸² For instance, this is the general attitude of King (2003) and DeConick – Adamson (2013), who discredited the heresiological sources in the attempt of proposing a new narrative of the development of Gnosticism, which she conceived in need of being released from the Christian paradigm of the opposition between heresy and orthodoxy.

phenomenon? Is it possible to integrate the two sources? These are indeed only some of the many questions which are still waiting for an answer, if any can be given. At the present state of research, the problem could still be summarised by Desjardin's words: 'so, in effect, the "primary sources" are only primary insofar as one accepts the claims made in the "secondary sources".'⁸³ In other words, the heresiological accounts still represent the baseline for the interpretation of Gnosticism, even if these accounts are polemical and biased against the Gnostic movements they contested. It is indeed undeniable that Gnostic scholars still classifies Nag Hammadi treatises according to categories – such as the ones of Sethianism, Ophitisim, Valentinianism, etc.⁸⁴ – which are elaborated on the basis of heresiological accounts. In my opinion, as long as one is aware of the origin of these categories and uses them as *working categories*, they can be useful tools for the study of Gnosticism. Studying Gnosticism without combining the information available in both the heresiological accounts and the original Gnostic sources is neither possible nor academically solid. Hence, I will use some heresiological categories, being aware that these are *working categories*, which are valid for the sake of historical research. In conclusion, where possible, I will integrate the information deducible from the original Gnostic texts with the information of the heresiologists and vice versa. Working with both sources should give quite a complete view of the feminine in Gnostic movements, both compensating for the physical *lacunae* of the Nag Hammadi texts and allowing the interpreter to distinguish between genuine and polemical heresiological material.

⁸³ Desjardins (1986), 343.

⁸⁴ These definitions will be discussed later in this chapter, *infra* I.3.

I.3 Denominations of Individual Gnostic Movements

The denomination of Gnostic groups has been a problem since this religious phenomenon first appeared. In his *Strom*, Clement of Alexandria explains that:

Of the heresies, some receive their appellation from a [person's] name, as that which is called after Valentinus, and that after Marcion, and that after Basilides, although they boast of adducing the opinion of Matthew [without truth]; for as the teaching, so also the tradition of the apostles was one. Some take their designation from a place, as the Peratici; some from a nation, as the [heresy] of the Phrygians; some from an action, as that of the Encratites; and some from peculiar dogmas, as that of the Docetæ; and that of the Hærmatites; and some from suppositions, and from individuals they have honoured, as those called Cainists, and the Ophians; and some from nefarious practices and enormities, as those of the Simonians called Entychites.⁸⁵

Since these denominations were not agreed, different heresiologists used different names to describe the same movement.⁸⁶ While the circulation of these denominations among heresiologists is attested,⁸⁷ it is unclear whether Gnostics used them to refer to themselves. It must be noted that most contemporary scholars would agree that Gnostics never used such names.⁸⁸ Indeed, thanks to the Nag Hammadi codices, it has been noted that some of them, like Valentinian Gnostics, preferred to call themselves simply ‘Christians’.⁸⁹ For the purpose of my historical investigation, although I am aware of their artificiality, I have chosen to maintain these denominations since

⁸⁵ Clemens of Alexandria, *Strom* 7, 17(108), 1-2: Ταυτὶ μὲν οὖν καὶ εἰς ὕστερον. τῶν δ’ αἱρέσεων αἱ μὲν ἀπὸ ὀνόματος προσαγορεύονται, ὡς ἡ ἀπὸ Οὐαλεντίνου καὶ Μαρκίωνος καὶ Βασιλείδου, κἄν τὴν Μαθίου ἀρχῶσι προσάγεσθαι δόξαν· μία γὰρ ἡ πάντων γέγονε τῶν ἀποστόλων ὥσπερ διδασκαλία, οὕτως δὲ καὶ ἡ παράδοσις· αἱ δὲ ἀπὸ τόπου, ὡς οἱ Περαιτικοί, αἱ δὲ ἀπὸ ἔθνους, ὡς ἡ τῶν Φρυγῶν, αἱ δὲ ἀπὸ ἐνεργείας, ὡς ἡ τῶν Ἐγκρατητῶν, αἱ δὲ ἀπὸ δογμάτων ἰδιαζόντων, ὡς ἡ τῶν Δοκητῶν καὶ ἡ τῶν Αἱματιτῶν, αἱ δὲ ἀπὸ ὑποθέσεων καὶ ὧν τετιμήκασιν, ὡς Καϊανισταὶ τε καὶ οἱ Ὀφιοῖνοι προσαγορευόμενοι, αἱ δὲ ἀφ’ ὧν παρανόμως ἐπετήδευσάν τε καὶ ἐτόλμησαν, ὡς τῶν Σιμωνιανῶν οἱ Ἐντυχῖται καλούμενοι.

⁸⁶ For instance, the Ophites are called ‘Naasens’ in Hippolytus, *El* V, 7-9.

⁸⁷ Hippolytus, *Ref* V, 11 even claims that Gnostics used these denominations to refer to themselves.

⁸⁸ Wisse (1971), 209-212; Thomassen (2006), 4.

⁸⁹ For instance, this is the case of the *GosPhil* II, 52, 21-25.

their use has proven to be extremely effective in illustrating the structure and development of the complex phenomenon known as Gnosticism. Nevertheless, these denominations will be used with the sole purpose of indicating a collection of mythologoumena and theologoumena that belonged to specific Gnostic movements.

In using these denominations in such manner, I acknowledge the current impossibility (due to a lack of historical evidence) in identifying with reasonable certainty the geographical, historical and social developments of these Gnostic groups, while admitting that the theological and philosophical material available allows contemporary scholars to postulate the existence of several Gnostic movements having different theologies. Hence, the different Gnostic movements will be distinguished by means of their core mythologoumena and theologoumena, leaving aside the questions of their geographical location and their social structure.⁹⁰ In my research, I intend to focus mainly on those theological and mythological doctrines that are relevant for and related to the Gnostic feminine imagery, expanding on previous scholarship to isolate the feminine imagery of individual Gnostic movements. Furthermore, it is worth underlining that by identifying Gnostic feminine mythologoumena and theologoumena, I do not intend to draw any conclusions regarding the actual structures and organisations of these historical Gnostic groups, since my research focuses only on the theological significance of Gnostic feminine imagery in the representation of the Godhead.

For the sake of clarity, it is therefore worth providing a brief overview of the theologoumena and mythologoumena specific of each Gnostic movement discussed in the following parts of this work – namely: a) Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite movements, b) Valentinian movement, c) Simonian movement – thus expanding on the very brief sketch given in the Introduction.

⁹⁰ In this regard, it is worth underlining that identifying the core mythologoumena and theologoumena of each Gnostic movement falls beyond the scope of my work. Consequently, the definition I will offer shortly expands on the definitions offered by other Gnostic scholars.

The identification of the mythologoumena and theologoumena of Sethianism, Barbeloism and Ophitism have proven to be especially problematic for contemporary scholarship.⁹¹ While the term Ophites is attested in heresiological literature,⁹² those of Barbelo-Gnostics⁹³ and Sethians are not found in heresiological literature. Before the Nag Hammadi discovery, scholars tended to underline the importance of Ophite texts, so much so that Ophitism was regarded as one of the oldest forms of Gnosticism.⁹⁴ Contrariwise, following the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library, the category of Ophitism was mostly viewed as a heresiological construction, whilst that of Sethianism began to gain ground.⁹⁵ Sethian Gnosticism was systematised in 1981 by the German scholar Martin Schenke, who listed ten main criteria to determine the affinity of a text to Sethianism. Among them, the most important criterion was certainly the presence of references to Seth, Adam's and Eve's son as the redeemer or father of the spiritual seed.⁹⁶ Despite his insightful research, Schenke was forced to allow an excessive degree of fluidity to his classification, for he encountered numerous exceptions; so much so, that he also admitted that not all Sethian texts match the most fundamental criteria, such as the identification of Seth with a salvific figure.⁹⁷ In addition, having minimised the influence of Christianity on Sethianism to the point of saying that 'in the domain of Sethianism there is no Christian gnosis worthy of the name', he failed to explain the presence of numerous Christian features that he

⁹¹ The following digression on the terminology is merely an overview. For a detailed analysis of the scholarly debate, see Rasimus (2009), 9-62.

⁹² For instance, see Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 30 and Pseudo Tertullian, *Libellus adversus omnes haereses* II.

⁹³ The Latin translation of Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 29 is quite problematic for it does not employ this terminology. Epiphanius, however, employs the term *Barbelites* in *Pan* 26 to describe a Gnostic system very similar to the Ophite one.

⁹⁴ Some contemporary scholars still value such a hypothesis; see Rasimus (2009), 28.

⁹⁵ So much so that Turner (2001), 54 regards this as the earliest form of Gnosticism.

⁹⁶ Other important criteria are: 1. The presence of Seth, both as the redeemer or father of a superior seed; 2. The presence of a special prayer; 3. A specific development of negative theology; 4. The presence of the triad Kalyptos, Protophanes and Autogenes; 5. A specific philosophical terminology; 6. Obvious secondary Christianisation; 7. The presupposition of a second tetrad alongside the four lightgivers; 8. The designation in Coptic of Adam as 'Pigeradamas'; 9. The concept of Eleleth as cause of the terrestrial world; 10. The name and the figure of Mirothea/Mirotheos. For a more detailed analysis, see Schenke (1981), 593-594.

⁹⁷ Schenke (1981), 593: 'The group of Sethian documents is held together not simply by the role that Seth plays in them, but rather by the role of Seth plus the fundamental identity of the system. Accordingly, it is possible to identify a given writing as Sethian, even if Seth (for whatever reason) does not appear in it at all'.

detected in some of these texts, such as the *ApJohn* or *HypArch*.⁹⁸ A certain scepticism regarding Schenke's theory was already shown by Wisse at the same colloquium in which Schenke presented his research. Wisse underlined that the themes identified by his colleague were not part of a Gnostic system but rather "free-floating" groups of myths and doctrines.⁹⁹ Although Schenke's research was an admirable attempt of systematisation of Sethianism, I deem his analysis to have two major faults: on the one hand, it failed to account for the presence of extra-Sethian themes and motifs in texts that he classified as such; on the other hand, he was overconfident in the stability, fixity and historicity of this Gnostic movement. Indeed, he addressed Sethianism as a historical, well defined and recognisable group, of which he even listed specific cultic practices and rituals. However, given the complex and multifaceted nature of the listed Sethian works, a more cautious approach would have been preferable, for there was very little uncontested evidence regarding this Gnostic movement. A comprehensive criticism to Schenke's definition and classification of Sethian texts has been recently developed by Rasimus. He has identified three major mythological trends, which he has called Barbeloite, Sethian and Ophite traditions.¹⁰⁰ According to him, the core of the Barbeloite mythology consists in conceiving a divine primordial triad (Father, Mother-Barbelo, Son-Autogenes) and depending heavily on Neopythagorean, Middle and Neo-Platonic speculations. Contrarily, the Sethian mythology is focused on the seed of Seth, that is, those believers who will be saved because of their lineage from the third son of Adam and Eve. Therefore, Sethian mythology is more based on biblical mythology than Barbeloite mythology. Lastly, the Ophite mythology originates from a reverse exegesis of Genesis' stories in which the True God is an androgynous projection of Adam and Eve.¹⁰¹ In other words, one could say that Rasimus has identified three different traditions of mythologoumena and theologoumena which, although they maintain distinct individualities, also present many similarities one with the other. This is also

⁹⁸ Schenke (1981), 607-612. The problem of the existence of a non-Christian gnosis has already been addressed in previous chapter; *supra* Part I.1.

⁹⁹ Wisse (1981), 575-576.

¹⁰⁰ See particularly Rasimus (2009), 9-62. It is worth noting that other scholars, such as Turner (2001), consider all these movements under the label of Sethianism.

¹⁰¹ A very clear and visual explanation of these three mythologies and their overlaps can be found in Rasimus (2009), 62.

the reason that led me to discuss these three traditions in a single section of the present work.¹⁰² Although each one of these three blocks of myths and doctrines have an internal and separated coherency, they are often so strictly intertwined that feminine imagery is more easily understood if one compares the three traditions. The proximity between these three groups is such that Rasimus has even proposed to adopt the definition of ‘Classical Gnosticism’ in order to indicate these three trends of mythologoumena and theologoumena, thus creating a new category that accounts for both the differences and similarities between texts usually considered Sethian. Rasimus’ research has thus showed some frailties of previous definitions and it has also defined in detail the domains of the three different traditions (Sethianism, Barbeloitis and Ophitism). Nevertheless, his proposal of using ‘Classical Gnosticism’ to indicate all three groups will not be embraced here. As a matter of fact, I believe that the use of the adjective ‘Classical’ somehow delegitimises other forms of Gnosticism, suggesting not only the idea of a chronological precedence but also the theological primacy of these movements over the others – all assumptions that need to be proved further. Hence, although I recognise the validity of his research, I will rather employ these three categories as *theoretical constructs*, without necessarily linking them to specific historical groups nor specific texts. For instance, in my analysis I will often resort to statement such as ‘these texts combine Sethian and Ophite elements’, without implying that the text at hand was produced or redacted by a specific historical and identifiable group or groups.¹⁰³

Among Gnostic movements, Valentinianism stands out in many regards. First, it ought to be said that Valentinianism is the most widely documented forms of Gnosticism, especially in heresiological literature. The name ‘Valentinians’ has a heresiological origin and it is attested for the first time in Justin.¹⁰⁴ Notwithstanding, a similar term appears also in *TestTruth*, where the author mentions the ‘disciples of Valentinus’, thus suggesting the existence of a

¹⁰² See *infra* Part II.

¹⁰³ For this very reason, it is therefore superfluous to provide here a list of all works which fall under each definition of Sethian, Barbeloite or Ophite. For a classification, see Turner (2001), 60-62.

¹⁰⁴ Justin, *DialTryph* 35, 6.

Gnostic movement which recognised Valentinus as its founder.¹⁰⁵ In spite of the denomination chosen in this research, it ought to be noted that the author of *GosPhil*, a Valentinian gospel, refers to his fellow Valentinian readers as ‘Christians’ (ΧΡΙΣΤΙΑΝΟΣ) on numerous occasions, thus suggesting that they also employed this term to define themselves.¹⁰⁶ Secondly, unlike the abovementioned Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite Gnostics, the Valentinian Gnostics were organised as a philosophical school of the Antiquity – that is, an organised group with a line of teachers and disciples.¹⁰⁷ As the name suggests, the founder of the Valentinian school was Valentinus, who was supposedly active in Rome around the second half of the second century. The relevance of Valentinus’ teachings for the Valentinian school was questioned in the early 1990s by Marksches. He advanced the hypothesis that Valentinus’ disciples were the true founders of Valentinianism, claiming that Valentinus’ teachings did not show any Valentinian imprint.¹⁰⁸ While Marksches’ proposal gained great attention from the scholarly community, it did not also gain its consensus. In fact, most recent studies have proved the founding role played by Valentinus within the Valentinian school.¹⁰⁹ As usual in many philosophical schools of the antiquity, Valentinian school sprang from Valentinus’ disciples as well as from the disciples of his immediate disciples. Within Valentinianism, there were two main ramifications – the western school and the eastern one¹¹⁰ – which took different stands concerning the soteriological destiny reserved for the psychic nature.¹¹¹ In truth, even Marksches admitted that these distinctions should be taken with a grain of salt, for some eastern elements are present in the western schools and vice versa. The main representatives of the western school were Ptolemy and Heracleon, who were probably active respectively in Rome and Alexandria; whilst Theodotus and the author of *GosPhil* could be identified as

¹⁰⁵ *TestTruth* XI, 56, 1-5.

¹⁰⁶ *GospPhil*. II, 52, 21-25; 62, 26-32; 64, 22-31; 67, 19-27; 74, 13.

¹⁰⁷ For a complete overview of numerous reasons why the Valentinians can be rightfully called a school, see Layton (1980) and Marksches (1997).

¹⁰⁸ Marksches (1992).

¹⁰⁹ Chiapparini (2012) and (2014); Thomassen (2006); Dunderberg (2008); Quispel (1996) and (1947).

¹¹⁰ For an investigation of the differences, see Thomassen (2006) and Kaestli (1980). Against this classification, see Kalvesmaki (2008).

¹¹¹ This is attested widely in heresiological sources, see Hippolytus, *Ref* VI, 35, 5-7 and Tertullian, *AdVal* IV, 1-3.

the main representatives of the eastern school. A good summary of the Valentinian beliefs shared by both schools has been proposed by Thomassen. He has listed three elements: a) belief in the historical appearance of the Saviour; b) a protological speculation about the origins of the divine plurality; c) a ritually enacted redemption.¹¹² In addition to Thomassen's list, I would also underline the importance of three other elements: d) the belief in a cosmological and anthropological hierarchy of three natures: pneumatic (spiritual), psychic (soul) and hylic (material) natures;¹¹³ e) the separation of Sophia, which is one of the peculiarities of the Valentinian feminine imagery; f) the ritual of the bridal chamber as the eschatological restoration of the lost syzygial unity.¹¹⁴ Within the Nag Hammadi library, there are at least four Nag Hammadi treatises – *TriTrac*, *GosTruth*, *GosPhil* and *ExVal* – which are widely acknowledged as Valentinian texts. Likewise, the information available in the heresiological literature is more extensive than for any other Gnostic movement. In addition to Justin, Irenaeus, Hippolytus and Epiphanius, the Valentinian gnosis is also the polemical object of Tertullian's *AdVal*. Moreover, quite exceptionally, some fragments and works of Valentinian teachers are extant in polemical sources: there are six fragments of Valentinus reported by Clement of Alexandria;¹¹⁵ forty-eight fragments of Heracleon's lost *Commentary on the Gospel of John* can be found in Origen's own *ComJn*; Ptolemy's *EpFl* has been entirely reported in Epiphanius;¹¹⁶ and fragments from Theodotus survived in Clement of Alexandria *ExTheod*.

The category of Simonian gnosis has often been overshadowed by the uncertainty regarding the historical Simon, thus also raising many suspicions regarding the existence of a so-called Simonian gnosis. The term 'Simonians'¹¹⁷ is first attested in Irenaeus, although Justin is the first one to

¹¹² Thomassen (2006), 2-3.

¹¹³ There are however two conflicting anthropologies in Valentinian doctrines, *infra* III.4.1.

¹¹⁴ Marksches (2003), 89-94 has already noted the importance of this feature within Valentinian speculation.

¹¹⁵ Clement of Alexandria, *Strom* II, 36, 2-4; II, 114, 3-6; III, 59, 3; IV, 89, 1-3; IV, 89, 6 – 90, 1; VI, 52, 3-4.

¹¹⁶ Epiphanius, *Pan* I, 33, 3-7.

¹¹⁷ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 23, 4 (lat. *Simoniani*). For a detailed overview of the ancient sources on Simon Magus, *infra* III.1.

name Simon's disciples.¹¹⁸ From a scholarly perspective, the teachings of Simonian gnosis have not been the subject of many studies; nonetheless, some scholars have tried to identify the core teachings of Simon and his disciples.¹¹⁹ In particular, Haar has focused his research on the Gnostic affiliation of Simon Magus. Although Haar has concluded that an absolute answer on Simon's identity is impossible, his research has highlighted an essential theologoumenon of the so-called Simonian gnosis: the identification between Simon and a redeeming First God, whose divine nature is proven by the ability to perform wonders. This is indeed the founding stone on which Simon and his disciple allegedly built their message. In addition to it, I believe it is worth underlining another element of Simonian gnosis, one that is directly related – albeit not exclusively – to feminine imagery. Within this Gnostic system, all three feminine aspects (that is, the feminine in the Godhead, the fallen feminine and the incarnated feminine) come together in a single character, Helena of Tyre. In the last section of my work, I will express my doubts regarding the existence of this Gnostic movement.¹²⁰ Nevertheless, I will also show that the representation of Helena is crucial to understand better how this Gnostic movement gained such a prominent role in heresiological literature.

Although these classifications are very useful for the purpose of historical research, they should not be understood rigidly. To use Thomassen's words, one should rather assume 'a decentralised proliferation of groups and teachers, each of them producing their own version of the [...] system based on a common pattern'.¹²¹ Although he was referring to Valentinianism, I believe his observation applies also to the development of Gnosticism as a whole. Hence, in analysing Gnostic texts, one has always to account for a certain degree of fluidity. Although this does not compromise the identification of specific movements, it can certainly not be underestimated. The fluidity of individual mythologoumena and theologoumena is particularly visible in the late Gnostic production, which I will analyse in IV.2 and IV.3. As a matter of fact, the groups of mythologoumena and theologoumena outlined thus far will be also

¹¹⁸ Justin, *ApPr* I, 26.

¹¹⁹ See Haar (2003), Lüdemann (1987) and Wilson (1979).

¹²⁰ *Infra* IV.1.

¹²¹ Thomassen (2006), 494.

used as the interpretative key of the other two texts considered in my research, the *Bar* and the *ExSoul*. These texts display elements from more than one movement, thus testifying the fluidity of Gnostic features.

I.4 Concluding Remarks on Methodology

In this first Part, I have provided a general overview of the issues faced by scholars who undertake research on Gnosticism.

First, I have proposed a *working definition* of Gnosticism. Expanding on the Messina definition, I have clarified that I use the term Gnosticism to indicate Christian dualistic theologies which developed around the second century. Gnostic theologies were mostly expressed in a mythological form, whence the use of the terms mythologoumenon and theologoumenon to indicate Gnostic doctrines. Furthermore, I have stressed that Gnostic mythologies varied from movement to movement, although they were all structured according to the principle of typological resemblance – that is, the idea according to which each level of reality resembles the level above. Lastly, I have underlined that Gnostic movements were highly syncretistic and deeply influenced by both Platonic philosophies and Judaism.

Secondly, I have discussed the issues involved in studying the Gnostic textual sources. Prior to the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library in 1945, Gnosticism was mainly known through polemical heresiological sources. Only after the publications of the Nag Hammadi treatises, it has been possible to compare the heresiological accounts with some original Gnostic works. Both the heresiological sources and the Nag Hammadi treatises are not exempt from problems. On the one hand, the heresiological sources are polemical and, often, misrepresent Gnostic theologies. On the other hand, Nag Hammadi treatises are Coptic translations of originally Greek texts, thus presenting several problems concerning the translation and the use of language. As long as one acknowledges the limits of both heresiological and Nag Hammadi evidence, these sources ought to be considered valid tools for the study of the representation of the Gnostic feminine imagery.

Thirdly, I have illustrated the main mythologoumena and theologoumena of the Gnostic movements which will be employed in this work. In addition, I have

clarified that I will employ these categories as working categories for the sake of historical research, without investigating whether these categories corresponded to identifiable Gnostic groups.

Having outlined some general methodological grounds for the investigation of Gnosticism, it is now time to move on to the investigation of the role and functions of feminine imagery within different Gnostic movements.

II. The Soteriological Feminine in Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite Texts

This part of my work investigates the Gnostic feminine imagery as presented in *ApJohn*, *HypArch* and *OrigWorld* and two accounts of Irenaeus, namely *AdHaer* I, 29 and I,30. These texts, which present a majority of Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite mythologoumena and theologoumena,¹ are grouped together because of the similarities of their feminine imagery. In this regard, two elements are particularly striking: 1) the way in which typological resemblance shapes the roles and functions of female characters; 2) the portrayal of female characters who are both in need of salvation and soteriological agents.

Hence, Part II has two main trajectories. First, it aims at showing that typological resemblance links all female characters together in *ApJohn*, *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*. By the term typological resemblance, I mean that each ontological level of the Gnostic world – and, consequently, each female character in it – is structured to mirror the upper level.² According to this principle, all female beings are intimately connected one with another, since they bear a typological resemblance with the female character that is ontologically superior to themselves. The importance of typological resemblance for female characters is even stated explicitly in *HypArch*, where it is said that ‘she (Pistis Sophia) established each of his offspring in conformity with its power – after the pattern of the realms that are above, for by starting from the invisible world the visible world was invented (αὐτὴ ἀσκαθίστα ἡνεῖ τὴν οὐρανὴν ποῦα ποῦα κατὰ τετραβὸν κατὰ πτύπος ἡαίων ἐτήπσα ντήπε χε εβολ 2ῆ νεοήπ λυζε ανετογον2 εβολ)’.³ Secondly, it aims at examining how and to what extent female characters enact

¹ For the definitions of Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite traditions, *supra* I.3.

² For a description of the mechanism of typological resemblance, *supra* I.1. Being the typological resemblance a cosmological principle, it does not exclusively interest female characters, but also male ones. Nevertheless, it has severe repercussions on the descriptions, roles and functions of female characters for it generates confusions between them. This issue will be discussed in several occasions, see particularly *infra* II.2.5 and II.3.5.

³ *HypArch* II, 87, 8-11.

a soteriological role in these Gnostic mythologies. By defining their role with the adjective soteriological, I am relying on the Gnostic idea that salvation equals knowledge, since salvation occurs when one acknowledges that one's true self is consubstantial with the divine. Hence, I will show that most female characters are considered soteriological agents insofar as they are the main and primary instruments of divine revelation.

Given the intricacy of these matters, this part will be organised into four chapters. The first chapter (II.1) will provide a general overview of the primary sources, explaining also the criteria employed for their selection. The remaining three chapters will deal respectively with the three aspects of the feminine – namely, the intra-pleromatic feminine (II.2), the fallen feminine (II.3) and the incarnated feminine (II.4), according to the texts which I have chosen to examine.

II.1 Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite Sources and Selection Criteria

The selection of *ApJohn*, *HypArch*, *OrigWorld*, *AdHaer* I, 29 and I, 30 among the numerous texts which fall under the umbrella of Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite works has been a hard, but necessary, task. For this reason, after a brief introduction of the texts, I will explain in detail the criteria which I have used to select them.

The book of *ApJohn* has an extremely complex textual history. This text is known to us in four different Coptic translations: two long versions (NHC II, 1 and NHC IV, 1) and two short versions (BG 8502, 2 and NHC III, 1).⁴ Unlike the majority of Nag Hammadi treatises, it is possible to establish a *terminus post quem* – that is, around 180 CE – for the composition of *ApJohn*, since a very similar version of the myth is attested in Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 29. Although the identification of *AdHaer* I, 29 with a primordial version of *ApJohn* is not universally acknowledged,⁵ the majority of scholars agree that there is striking correspondence between the two narratives. In fact, most scholars (including myself) consider *AdHaer* I, 29 to reflect the earliest version of *ApJohn*.⁶ This hypothesis would be confirmed by the complex mythology and language of the four Coptic versions of *ApJohn*, which are indeed more elaborated than that of Irenaeus. Concerning the affiliation of *ApJohn* to one of the above-mentioned three Gnostic movements, there is no definitive answer since it displays an interesting mixture of Barbeloite, Sethian and – albeit to a lesser extent – Ophite mythologoumena and theologoumena.

⁴ In this work, I will mostly use the long version of Codex II. The differences with other texts will be highlighted only where relevant for the analysis at hand. For further information on different versions of *ApJohn*, see King (1997) and Wisse (1997). For the Coptic text and its translation, see Waldstein – Wisse (1995). Amendments will be made occasionally to the translation.

⁵ Wisse (1971), 208; Waldstein – Wisse (1995), 1, claim that the version known to Irenaeus was the source of *ApJohn* and not the book of *ApJohn* itself, which they hypothesize that it was written around the beginning of the third century CE.

⁶ Simonetti (1999), 45; King (1997), 105.

HypArch (NHC II, 4)⁷ is a Gnostic treatise which presents mainly Ophite and Barbeloite features.⁸ The author and the date of composition are unknown, but Bullard, who produced one of the first critical editions, hypothesized that *HypArch* was composed originally in Greek around the third century in Egypt.⁹ The most striking element of this treatise lies in the dependence upon the Genesis' stories, which are however interpreted in a strongly mythological sense. This Gnostic interpretation of Genesis' story establishes a clear link between *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*, so much so that Bullard speculated regarding the existence of a common source.¹⁰

OrigWorld (NHC II, 5) is one of the most obscure Gnostic treatises.¹¹ Unlike other Nag Hammadi treatises, the title of this work has been assigned to the text by modern scholars. Bethge claims that it does not belong to a specific tradition and that it was composed in Alexandria around the end of the third century or the beginning of the fourth century.¹² On the contrary, Rasimus lists this among the purely Ophite treatises and the following analysis of the feminine seems to confirm his theory.

The heresiological sources that describe Ophite, Sethian or Barbeloite mythologies are numerous, although not very consistent with one another. The heresiological accounts that will be considered in the following chapters are:

- a) The above-mentioned Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 29;
- b) The Ophite account in Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 30;¹³
- c) The Ophite account of Hippolytus, *El* V, 7-9;¹⁴
- d) Epiphanius, *Pan* I, 26.¹⁵

⁷ For the Coptic text and the translation, see Bullard (1989). I have also consulted Bullard – Krause (1970) and Bullard (1996). Amendments will be made occasionally to the translation.

⁸ Rasimus (2009), 61.

⁹ Bullard (1989), 220-222.

¹⁰ Bullard (1989), 222.

¹¹ For the Coptic text and the translation, see Bethge (1989).

¹² Bethge (1989), 12-14.

¹³ For the Greek and Latin texts of Irenaeus' work, see respectively Harvey (1857), Doutreleau – Rousseau (1965) and (1979). For the English translation see Unger (2012).

¹⁴ For the edition and translation of this text, see respectively Marcovich (1986) and Litwa (2016). I have made occasional amendments to the translation.

¹⁵ For the edition of the Greek text and translation, see respectively Holl (1915) and Williams (2009). I have made occasional amendments to the translation.

In the following analysis, I will focus mainly on Irenaeus' account, for it displays the most evident connections with the texts of *ApJohn*, *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*. Nevertheless, Hippolytus' and Epiphanius' accounts will be considered when relevant.

Before analysing these texts, it may be useful to explain further the criteria that I employed to select them among Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite works.¹⁶ The first criterion is the predominance of feminine imagery in these treatises. Although feminine imagery is crucial to the majority of Gnostic productions, it plays a more prominent role in some works than in others. For instance, this criterion led me to choose *ApJohn* over other Barbeloite texts, where feminine imagery plays a more marginal role. A second criterion concerns the success that some texts gained among Gnostic circles. Indeed, *ApJohn*, which is extant in no fewer than four versions, enjoyed clearly a wide and significant circulation. That is also confirmed by the fact that different versions were known to anti-Gnostic writers such as Irenaeus. A third criterion concerns the narrative affinities between *ApJohn* and *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*. Indeed, the narrative structures of these works follow roughly the plot of *ApJohn*. In any case, these treatises will be considered not only for their connections with *ApJohn*, but also as texts in their own right. Lastly, I believe that this selection is fairly representative of the three blocks of Sethian, Ophite and Barbeloite mythologoumena and theologoumena, thus providing a good overview of the feminine imagery within these Gnostic movements. Nevertheless, the theologoumena and mythologoumena found in this investigation ought not to be considered automatically valid for other texts that fall under the labels of Ophite, Sethian or Barbeloite texts, since Gnosticism is extremely variegated and one can never assume immediate correspondence. Besides constituting a good case study for Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite movements, I also believe that the findings of this investigation may have vast applications in contemporary research, since they may help scholars to shape further the elusive notion of Gnosticism.

¹⁶ This problem has already been mentioned in the Introduction.

II.2 Intra-Pleromatic Representations of the Feminine: Trinitarian Feminine Imagery

The first place where the feminine appears in Gnostic mythologies is in the Pleroma, that is, the totality of divine beings that dwells in the highest celestial spheres.¹⁷ Since the names and functions of these pleromatic female beings vary from text to text, only a detailed analysis of each textual instance allows us to highlight the similarities between these Gnostic accounts.

II.2.1 Barbelo in *The Apocryphon of John* (NHC II, 1)

ApJohn is structured as dialogue between the disciple John and the Saviour. At the beginning of the book, a figure appears to John in the mist of light as a three-formed likeness, saying: ‘I [am the Father], I am the Mother, and I am the Son (ΑΝΟΚ [ΠΕ ΠΕΙΩΤ ΑΝΟΚ ΠΕ] ΤΜΑΛΥ ΑΝΟΚ ΠΕ ΠΩΗ[ΡΕ]).’¹⁸ The Saviour encourages John not to be scared of this appearance of the divine, adding: ‘you are not unfamiliar with this idea (ΑΓΓΙΔΕΑ), are you?’¹⁹ Not surprisingly, such an opening statement has puzzled those scholars who deem the *ApJohn* to be an essentially non-Christian text.²⁰ Indeed, for the text is presenting God as a Trinity, the traits of which are also markedly Christian.²¹ If so, the representation of the Trinity becomes extremely interesting since it describes the third Trinitarian person as a female, rather than presenting the more “orthodox” thrice-male Trinity.²² In this regard, a more detailed analysis of the

¹⁷ For the sake of clarity, it is worth specifying that I will be using the term Pleroma to indicate the superior celestial sphere in which the divine aeons dwell despite the fact that it does not appear in all these texts but only in some (such as *ApJohn*).

¹⁸ *ApJohn* II, 2, 13-15.

¹⁹ *ApJohn* II, 2, 11. For an analysis of *ApJohn*’s Trinitarian representation, as well as its Jewish and Middle Platonic background see Waldestein (1997).

²⁰ For instance, Pearson claims that only the frame story of *ApJohn* is Christian, whereas the contents are pre-Christian, see Pearson (2007), 63.

²¹ This claim is supported by many studies, see Rasimus (2009); Luttikhuisen (2006), 17-21; Simonetti (1999), XIX-XXVII; Waldestein – Wisse (1995).

²² The identification of the Holy Spirit with a feminine being is grounded in the Jewish feminine name *rhua* (רוּחַ). For an evangelical perspective, the identification of the Spirit with a maternal figure could have its scriptural justification in *Mt* 12:50, ‘For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’ Nevertheless, the majority of early Christian theologian usually described the Trinity by using a masculine terminology, see Bates (2015). For a feminist reading of the Trinitarian articulations, see Soskice (2008), 66-83 and 100-124. Therefore, the Gnostics represent an exception, together with Origen, who used

three Trinitarian persons in *ApJohn* might help understanding the role of the Mother.

Although the text presents a straightforward Trinitarian articulation of the divine, the identification of each person is made quite challenging by the proliferation of divine beings that characterises Gnostic mythologies. The first person of this Trinity – that is, the Father as the highest and transcendent divinity – is probably the least problematic, since he is identifiable with the Monad, the Invisible Virginal Spirit.²³ By contrast, the identification of a specific female character with the second person of this Trinity is made trickier by the fact that the appellative **ΜΑΛΛΥ** is not an exclusive attribute of a single character in Gnostic sources; rather it works for several female figures.²⁴ Since the Trinity of *ApJohn* belongs exclusively to the highest celestial regions, an educated guess would be to identify the second person of the trinity with Barbelo (**ΒΑΡΒΗΛΩ**),²⁵ the First Power of the Virginal Spirit.²⁶ This character is described as follows:

And [his (Virginal Spirit) thought became] actual and she came forth
(**ΑΥΩ [ΤΕΦΕΝΝΟΙΑ ΑΣΩΠΕ ΝΟΥ] ΖΩΒ' ΑΥΩ ΑΣΩΛΠ**), [namely] she
who had [appeared] before him in the [shining] of his light. This is the
First [Power (**ΤΕΤΩΡΠ ΝΟΜ**) which was] before all of them (and)
[which came] forth from his mind (**ΝΤΑΖΟΥΩΝΖ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΗ ΠΕΦΜΕΕΥΕ**).

the appellative Sophia as an *ἐπίνοια* of the Son, see Origen, *ComJn* II, 87-88. For a brief but comprehensive overview of the Holy Spirit in early Christian tradition, see Quispel (2008a).

²³ See *ApJohn* II, 2, 35 – 4, 26. Especially, *ApJohn* II, 4, 10-15: 'His [aeon] is indestructible, at rest and existing in [silence, reposing] (and) being prior [to everything. For he] is the head of [all] the aeons, [and] it is he who gives them strength in his goodness.'

²⁴ In the following chapters, I intend to prove that the ambiguities in the use of the term mother are likely due to the typological correspondence between the different ontological levels of realities within Gnosticism.

²⁵ The origin and meaning of the name **ΒΑΡΒΗΛΩ** have not been determined yet. For more details, see Pétremont (1984), 136 and Stroumsa (1984), 61-62.

²⁶ The identification of Barbelo with the Mother is not accepted by all scholars: while Pagels (1979), 51-52 is persuaded of it, Hoffman (1994), 29-31 denies it. However, the latter position is compromised by the fact that Hoffman has a very specific and narrow notion of the Trinity, which corresponds to the mainstream one. This is indeed the only reason adduced to justify his position, for he admits that Barbelo is often called "Mother" and "Holy Spirit". Buckley (1986), 41-42 suggested a third alternative, proposing to identify all three persons with Barbelo: 'The Father and the Spirit can be equated. When the Father is reflected in the water, his thought, Ennoia, manifests herself as an anonymous figure. She is both the Father and herself.' On the contrary, Turner (2001), 754 identified the 'maternal figure' of Barbelo as her main characteristic, thus justifying her appellative of 'Mother'.

She [is the Forethought of the All ([ΤΠΡΟΝΟΙΑ Π]ΕΣΟΥΘΕΙΝ) – her light [shines like his] light (Ε[ΤΡ ΟΥΘΕΙΝ ΖΗ ΠΕΙΝΕ ΝΤΕ ΠΕΦ]ΟΥΘΕΙΝ) – the [perfect] power which is [the image] of the Invisible Virginal Spirit (ΘΙΚΩΝ ΉΠΙΑΤΝΑΥ [ΕΡΟΦ ΜΠ]ΑΡΘΕΝΙΚΟΝ ΜΠΝΑ) who is perfect. [The First Power] ([ΤΨΟΡΠ ΝΘ]ΟΜ), the glory of Barbelo (ΠΕΘΟΥ ΉΒΑΡΒΗΛΩ), the perfect glory in the aeons, the glory of the revelation, she glorified the Virginal Spirit [...] This is the First Thought (ΠΨΟΡΠ΄ ΉΜΕΕΥΕ), his Image (ΉΤΕΦΖΙΚΩΝ); she became the Womb of Everything (ΉΜΗΤΡΑ ΉΠΤΗΡΦ) for it is she who is prior to all of them, the Mother-Father (ΤΉΗΤΡΩΠΑΤΩ[Ρ]), the First Man (ΠΨΟΡΠ΄ ΉΡΩΜΕ), the Holy Spirit (ΠΝΑ ΕΤΟΥΑΛΒ), the thrice-male (ΠΨΟΜΤ΄ <Ν>ΖΟΥΤ), thrice-powerful (ΤΨΟΜΤΕ ΉΘΟΜ), the thrice-named androgynous one (ΠΨΟΜΤ΄ ΉΡΑΝ ΉΖΟ[Ο]ΧΤ ΕΖΙΜΕ), and the eternal aeon among the invisible ones, and the first to come forth.²⁷

As in other Gnostic mythologies, the Pleroma appears to be organised in syzygies; and the Invisible Spirit and Barbelo are the primordial and original syzygy (ΣΥΖΥΓΟΣ).²⁸ Besides being the Virginal Spirit's companion, Barbelo is also considered to be his emanation. In this regard, the analysis of the term ΑΣΘΩΛΠ used to indicate the emanation of Barbelo is only partially helpful, since the Coptic text uses different words each time to describe the 'coming forth' of aeons.²⁹ However, I believe this concept expresses well what the Gnostic author envisioned. Following Turner's investigation of the emanative process in Sethian texts, I am convinced that the language of emanation of *ApJohn* and its speculation about the generation in the superior realm draws heavily from Platonic and Middle-Platonic philosophy, thus envisioning an

²⁷ *ApJohn* II, 4, 26 – 5, 11.

²⁸ The use of the word 'syzygy' to indicate a male-female couple is common among Gnostic scholars, but there are nonetheless some who rejected it in the case of *ApJohn*, see Buckley (1986), 43-44, who claims that the syzygy is not necessarily composed of couples of opposite genders. However, she fails to support her hypothesis with sufficient textual evidence.

²⁹ *ApJohn* uses a variety of terms and periphrases, such as ΑΣΘΩΛΠ, ΟΥΩΝΖ, ΕΙ. In this regard, a comparison with the language of generating in the Valentinian *GosPhil* is extremely useful for it denotes the distance between the sacramental language of Valentinian texts and the more mythological language of *ApJohn*. For a study of the generative language of *GosPhil*, see Buckley – Good (1997).

emanation which implies knowing both itself and the originating principle.³⁰ As a matter of fact, Barbelo is not *generated* by the Invisible Virginal Spirit, for he is immovable, rather she *appears* (ϥωλπ) as result of an intellectual action of the Father. The use of this terminology suggests that *ApJohn* distinguishes between the intellectual emanation through which Barbelo comes forth and the material and *ignorant* generation through which the inferior world comes into existence.³¹ As a matter of fact, the Coptic translator uses the verbs ϥΙΝΕ ΕΒΟΛ and ΟΥΩΝΖ ΕΒΟΛ to describe Yaldabaoth's birth from Sophia.³² Furthermore, this is the only occurrence in which the Virginal Spirit is directly involved in the process of becoming, albeit in a purely intellectual and noetic form, thus showing that the author of *ApJohn* is concerned with preserving the transcendence of the highest divinity. Therefore, the generation of the rest of the Pleroma happens when both the Virginal Father and Barbelo wish to bring forth in an intellectual manner. To be precise, the generation of the remaining pleromatic aeons is carried forward by Barbelo with the consent of the Virginal Spirit. Again, the Coptic translation uses the word ϥωλπ to indicate the coming forth of the Pentad of aeons.³³ Hence, will and action coincide in the original syzygy since they generate together in an intellectual manner. From this moment forward, all deeds will be performed by the two as one, since Barbelo is the operating and active power of the Virginal Spirit; it is she who performs the deeds thought by the Virginal Spirit's mind. Her power comes from the Virginal Spirit, therefore she mirrors the power of her companion, as the text specifies: 'her light [shines like his] light' (ϥ[ΤΡ ΟΥΟΕΙΝ ΖΗ ΠΕΙΝΕ ΝΤΕ ΠΕQ]ΟΥΟΕΙΝ) and she is his 'Image of the perfect Virginal Spirit' (ΘΙΚΩΝ ΜΠΑΤΝΑΥ [ΕΡΟQ ΜΠ]ΑΡΘΕΝΙΚΟΝ ΜΠΝΑ).

The author of *ApJohn* used several epithets to describe Barbelo, thus leaving precious clues for understanding her role and functions. All of her names hint at the intimate connection that she has with the Virginal Spirit. First, she is

³⁰ This dependence on Platonic texts is clearly proved by Turner (2000), 187-188. Although his analysis is referred to *All* and *StSeth*, *ApJohn*'s description of Barbelo's actions and generation displays similar features.

³¹ In *ApJohn* II, 9, 25 – 10, 10. Also King (2000), 126-127, stresses the opposition between the noetic production of the syzygy and Sophia's sexual generation of Yaldabaoth.

³² This episode will be discussed in the next chapter, *infra* II.3.1.

³³ *ApJohn* II, 5, 14-32.

between the three persons. Moreover, within this Gnostic Trinity, Barbelo becomes the acting force of the Virginal Spirit, she who emanates the rest of the Pleroma by working in syzygy with her male counterpart.³⁹

To sum up, in the description of Barbelo given by *ApJohn*, Barbelo is the female counterpart of the primordial syzygy, whose male part is the Invisible Virginal Spirit. Being the perfect syzygy, the two entities always act as one: he is the will who conceives thoughts – the first of which is Barbelo – and she is the active power who realises his thoughts. Despite this unity, it is possible to detect a hierarchy, for the Virginal Spirit is not only ontologically prior to Barbelo, but she can also generate exclusively with the consent of the Virginal Spirit whilst he can generate on his own. Indeed, the Virginal Spirit emanated Barbelo out of himself, whilst Barbelo needed the consent of his companion to generate the Pentad of aeons.⁴⁰ Hence, so far, *ApJohn* presents a female character that puts in actions the will of her partner but needs the intervention of a male figure to validate her action. In this sense, Barbelo embodies the Barbeloite mythologoumena and theologoumena about feminine imagery. Nevertheless, it is worth highlighting that *ApJohn*'s speculation on Barbelo proves that feminine imagery was employed by Gnostics in their Trinitarian formulation, thus putting great emphasis on female characters.

II.2.2 Barbelo according to Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* I, 29

A similar representation of Barbelo is visible in Irenaeus' *AdHaer* I, 29, which has been widely recognised as a summary of *ApJohn*.⁴¹ However, it is unlikely that Irenaeus had access to any of the four versions of the Nag Hammadi library, since it is possible to detect some discrepancies between the five accounts. Therefore, it is likely that Irenaeus' source represents an older

³⁹ It is indeed possible that this description of the Gnostic Trinity echoes Plato, *Timaeus* 48-52, as observed by Turner (2000a), 90. As a matter of fact, the Platonic and Christian perspective ought not to be considered as mutually exclusive.

⁴⁰ *ApJohn* II, 5, 10-20: '<She> requested from the invisible, virginal Spirit – that is Barbelo – to give her Foreknowledge. And the Spirit consented. And when he had [consented], the foreknowledge came forth, and it stood by the forethought; it originates from the thought of the Invisible, Virginal Spirit.'

⁴¹ *Supra* II.1.

version of *ApJohn*.⁴² Irenaeus' description of Barbelo is shorter than the one reported above, but consistent overall with what I have shown previously:

Certain ones of them (Ophites) propose that there is a certain Aeon in a Virginal Spirit who never grows old. They call her Barbelo. There also exists an unnameable Father who thought of revealing himself to this Barbelo. This Thought [Barbelo], however, came forward and stood before him and asked him for Foreknowledge [...] While Barbelo gloried in them and looked upon the Majesty and took delight in a conception, she gave birth to a Light similar to the Majesty. They say she is the beginning of all light and generation, and that when the Father saw this Light, he anointed it with his kindness that he might be made perfect.⁴³

Concerning Barbelo's emanation, Irenaeus' account is mostly faithful to the Coptic account, since it describes it as a sort of intellectual self-contemplation. Most importantly, the dynamics of the generation of the rest of the Pleroma seem similar to that described in *ApJohn*. It would appear that this account conveys the idea that Barbelo is unable to generate on her own and that she needs the approval of the Father to generate Foreknowledge. Nonetheless, the dynamic of the relationship between Barbelo and the Father is mostly ignored by Irenaeus, thus leaving the dynamics of the syzygy undiscussed. Overall, this heresiological account does not entirely misrepresent Barbelo's role and function within the Pleroma, but it seems to stress Barbelo's dependence upon the Father.

II.2.3 Incorruptibility in *The Hypostasis of Archons* (NHC II, 4)

⁴² For more information on this hypothesis, see King (1997) and Simonetti (1999) 117-121. On the contrary, Wisse is quite skeptical, see Wisse (1971), 217. Nevertheless, the following analysis will show that there is a certain correspondence between the two versions of *ApJohn*.

⁴³ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 29 1: *Quidam enim eorum Aeonem quondam numquam senescentem in virginali Spiritu subiciunt, quem Barbelon nominant: ubi esse Patrem quondam innominabilem dicunt. Voluisse autem hunc manifestare se ipsi Barbeloni. Ennoeam autem hanc progressam stetisse in conspectu eius et postulasse Prognosis. [...] In quibus gloriantem Barbelon et prospicientem in magnitudinem et conceptu delectam in hanc, generasse simile ei Lumen. Hanc initium et luminationis et generationis omnium dicunt. Et vidente Patrem Lumen hoc, enxisse illud sua benignitate, ut perfectum fieret.*

The name Barbelo is replaced by ‘Incorruptibility’ in the narrative of *HypArch*.⁴⁴ As mentioned briefly in II.1, the plots of *ApJohn* and *HypArch* are quite similar; however, the former discusses the composition of the Pleroma at length, whilst the latter is mainly focused on the extra-pleromatic events.

Although *HypArch* provides less information concerning the highest female deity than *ApJohn*, it represents an additional step towards a more detailed understanding of intra-pleromatic feminine imagery. Indeed, the characters of Barbelo and Incorruptibility are similar only to a certain extent. On the one hand, just as Barbelo, Incorruptibility seems to transcend everything that is located in the inferior world. On the other hand, Incorruptibility plays a more meaningful role in the overall economy of salvation than Barbelo does. In this regard, the most meaningful element is the so-called ‘theophany above the waters’, which is a crucial mythologoumenon of Gnosticism that describes the creation of humankind by the superior deities.⁴⁵ The episode develops roughly as follows in most accounts.⁴⁶ In the midst of light, a deity appears to belie the Chief Archon’s claim to be the only God; and, upon the revelation of this deity, a divine reflection appears into the waters below. At the appearance of this divine reflection, the archons who live in the inferior realm – that is, Yaldabaoth’s offspring – are impressed by its beauty and decide to have it for themselves by replicating it. However, they are unable to grasp the image because they are ignorant beings and they can only create an imperfect copy of the divine reflection, namely Adam. The peculiarity of *HypArch*’s account of the theophany above the waters consists in identifying the deity which appeared to the archons in the waters with Incorruptibility:

⁴⁴ *HypArch* II, 87, 1 – 88, 10. The attribution of this name to the highest female divinity supports Williams’ theory regarding the immovability of the spiritual element in Sethian tradition even if he does not make an explicit connection with *HypArch*, see Williams (1985).

⁴⁵ King (2000), 99 has identified four essential elements that constitute the syncretistic cultural background of this Gnostic myth: a) The Platonic notion that humankind has been modelled from the Idea of Man; b) *Gen.* 1:2-3, according to which light has been brought into the world from a watery darkness; c) Jewish Wisdom traditions that viewed Sophia as God’s instructor; d) The Johannine connection between Christ and the creative speech of God. Its importance has also been illustrated by Lettieri (1996) and (1995), who has shown how this myth represents the Christological core of Gnosticism for its baptismal elements.

⁴⁶ *ApJohn* II, 14, 24 – 15, 13; *OrigWorld* 103, 15-32.

As Incorruptibility (ΑΤΜΗΤ'ΑΤΤΕΚΟ) looked down into the regions of water, her image (ΑΠΕCΙΝΕ) appeared in the waters (ΖΗΝΗΤΩΒ); and the authorities of the darkness became enamoured of her (ΑΝΕΡΞΟΥCΙΑ ΗΠΚΑΚΕ ΜΕΡΙΤC). But they could not lay hold of her image (ΗΠΟΥΘΩΝCΟΜ ΔΕ ΝΤΕΖΕ ΠΙΝΕ ΕΤΗΜΑΥ), which had appeared to them into the waters, because of their weakness (ΤΟΥΜΗΤΩΒ) – since psychic beings cannot lay hold of pneumatic beings (ΧΕ ΗΨΥΧΙΚΟC ΝΑΨΤΕΖΕ ΗΠΝΕΥΜΑΤΙΚΟC ΑΝ) – for they were from below, while she was from above. This is the reason why “Incorruptibility looked down into the regions (etc.)”: so that, by the Father’s will (ΖΗ ΠΟΥΨ ΗΠΕΙΩΤ), she might bring the Pleroma into union with the Light. The archons laid a plan and said, “Come, let us create a man that will be soil from the earth” (ΑΝΑΡΧΩΝ ΧΙ ΝΟΥCΥΜΒΟΥΛΙΟΝ ΠΕΧΑΥ ΧΕ ΑΗΗΕΙΤΗ ΝΤΗΤΑΜΙΟ ΝΟΥΡΩΜΕ ΝΝΟΥΧΟΥC ΕΒΟΛ ΖΗ ΠΚΑΖ). They modelled their creature as one wholly of the earth (ΑΥΡΠΑCCE ΗΠΟΥΤΑ[ΜΙΟ] ΕΥΡΜΗΚΑΖ ΤΗΡ<Q> ΠΕ).⁴⁷

Unlike *ApJohn*, where the image above the water is a male being,⁴⁸ *HypArch* raises Incorruptibility to the prototype of every human being – namely, the luminous being revealed above the waters in whose image human beings are made. Nonetheless, the first human created in her image is a man, for the archons try to lure her down by reproducing improperly her male counterpart.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ *HypArch* II, 87, 11-27.

⁴⁸ *ApJohn* II, 14, 13-35: ‘And a voice came forth from the exalted aeon-heaven: ‘The Man exists and the Son of Man.’ And the chief archon, Yaldabaoth, heard (it) and thought that it was from his mother. And he did not know from where it came. And he taught them, the holy and perfect Mother-Father, the complete foreknowledge, the image of the Invisible One who is the Father of the all (and) through whom everything came into being, the First Man. For he revealed his likeness in a human form. And the whole aeon of the chief archon trembled, and the foundations of the abyss shook. And of the waters which are above matter, the underside was illuminated by the appearance of his image which had been revealed. And when all authorities and the chief archon looked, they saw the whole region of the underside which was illuminated. And through the light they saw the form of the image in the waters.’ Luttikhuizen (2006), 60 claims that in the long version of *ApJohn* II, 14, 18-24 the image in the water must be identified with Pronoia. Although Luttikhuizen’s hypothesis might be validated by association with *HypArch*, it must be noted that *ApJohn*’s text refers to the First Man (often the Son), whilst Barbelo is called the ‘First Man’ only twice in Codex III and BG (*supra* II.2.1). Consequently, it remains possible that, in Codex II, the appellative ‘First Man’ is referring to the Son, rather than to Barbelo.

⁴⁹ *HypArch* II, 87, 27 – 88, 1 continues: ‘Now the archons [...] had taken [some soil] from the earth and modelled their [man], after the body and after the [image] of God that had appeared [to them] in the waters. They said, “[Come, let] us hold of it by means of the form that we have modelled, [so that] it may see its male counterpart [*lacuna*], and we may size it with the form we have modelled”’

Given the inferiority of their psychic nature, this archontic evil plan fails and they cannot lay hold of the luminous pneumatic being.⁵⁰ The anthropological resemblance that humankind shares with Incorruptibility proves both her primary role in the creation of humankind and her importance at a soteriological level. Hence, Incorruptibility's generative power in *HypArch* – even if it takes an indirect form – is greater than that of Barbelo in *ApJohn*. Incorruptibility's power is visible not only in the superior realm, but it reaches also the inferior realm in which the fashioning of humankind takes place. Furthermore, this episode reveals that she is an essential soteriological character. Her historical revelation above the water is not only the beginning of the history of humankind, but also the beginning of the history of Salvation since her voice 'came forth for the assistance of Adam' (ΕΤΕΡΕ ΤΒΟΗΘΙΑ ΝΑ`ΔΑΜ).⁵¹

However, in Gnostic scholarship, the identification of Incorruptibility with the highest female visible manifestation of the Pleroma is not shared by all scholars. For instance, Bullard has taken a slightly different stand, proposing the identification of Sophia with the highest spiritual divinity.⁵² Such identification is, however, the consequence of his failure to consider the typological resemblance between different Gnostic levels of reality. In this respect, his identification is only partially correct. On the one hand, Bullard is right in underlining how close is the relationship between these two expressions (Sophia and Incorruptibility) of the feminine within the Pleroma. On the other hand, he fails to acknowledge that there is a hierarchy of beings where each one plays a different role. As I will show later on, *HypArch* mentions Sophia exclusively to intend the lower and defective aeon of the Pleroma, rather than the higher female being.⁵³ For this reason, it is preferable

⁵⁰ In these passages – especially *HypArch* II, 87, 15-20 and II, 87, 25-27 – *HypArch* seems to postulate the existence of three natures: the pneumatic (spiritual) nature of those who dwell in the realm above; the psychic (soul) nature of those who dwell in the inferior world; lastly, the hylic nature of those who have been created by the psychic beings. The debate concerning the existence of three natures in these Gnostic movements will be discussed later on, *infra* II.4.3.

⁵¹ *HypArch* II, 88, 16-18. It is worth noting that βοηθός is the same word used to describe Eve in *Gen.* 2:18-20.

⁵² Bullard and Krause (1970), 56-58.

⁵³ This is indeed the case of *HypArch* II, 93, 32 – 94, 35. For the analysis of Sophia in *HypArch*, *infra* II.3.3.

to maintain the name of Incorruptibility to indicate the highest female divinity of the superior realm, being also aware that she maintains a clear link with all other female characters.

Overall, Incorruptibility appears to be far more relevant for the economy of salvation than Barbelo. She is the revealing agent insofar as she – in the form of spirit – assists Adam in becoming a spiritual man and rising above the ground.⁵⁴ Moreover, she is the object of the revelation insofar as she is the divine being who manifests above the waters to inhabitants of the inferior world. In addition, her actions are motivated by a specific cosmological and soteriological reason: ‘so that, by the Father’s will, she might bring the Pleroma into union with the light.’⁵⁵ By revealing herself to the inferior world, she is preparing the way for the pneumatic beings to be reunited with the Pleroma, that is, the totality of the aeons. Notwithstanding Incorruptibility’s pivotal role, it is worth noting that the text stresses also her dependence upon the Father’s will. Hence, as in most Gnostic mythologies, the dynamics of subordination of the will of a female being to a male superior being are maintained, albeit *HypArch* does not stress them as of utmost importance.

II.2.4 Pleromatic Feminine? Textual Evidence in *On the Origin of the World* (NHC II, 5)

The logic of the *typological resemblance* between female beings, which is at the core of these Gnostic texts, has one major risk: it may cause narrative overlaps between characters. If the higher female beings are mirrored in the lower ones, it follows that the lower ones have similar powers, albeit imperfect. Since most Nag Hammadi texts are the result of multiple revisions, the risk of narrative misunderstandings increases exponentially. Whereas this problem is only marginally present in *ApJohn* and *HypArch*, this overlapping between female pleromatic beings is especially visible in the *OrigWorld*.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ See *infra* II.4.2.

⁵⁵ *HypArch* II, 87, 22-23.

⁵⁶ For the edition and translation of the Coptic text, see Bethge (1989).

Like *HypArch*, *OrigWorld* is mostly concerned with extra-pleromatic events.⁵⁷ However, while the plot of *ApJohn* and *HypArch* presents a coherent development of the extra-pleromatic events – albeit with many digressions and few repetitions – the sequence of events in *OrigWorld* is quite confused. For instance, some episodes are re-told two or three times throughout the book, sometimes with major variations as in the case of the theophany above the waters. Within this chaotic narrative, the roles and functions of the different female characters are often intertwined. The most interesting passage about the highest female divinity is the following:

After the natural structure of the immortal beings had completely developed out of the infinite, a likeness then emanated from Pistis (ΟΥΕΙΝΕ ΑΦΖΤΕ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΗ ΤΠΙCΤΙC); it is called Sophia (ΤCΟΦΙΑ). It exercised volition and became a product resembling the primeval light (ΑΦ'ΟΥΩΨ ΑΦΨΩΠΕ ΝΝΟΥΕΡΓΟΝ ΕΦΕ<Ι>ΝΕ ΜΠΟΥΘΕΙΝ' ΕΤΨΟΟΠ' ΝΨΩΡΠ'). And immediately her will manifested itself as a likeness of heaven (ΑΥΩ ΝΤΕΥΝΟΥ ΑΦΟΥΩΝΖ ΕΒΟΛ ΝΒΙ ΠΕCΟΥΩΨ' ΕΦΟ ΝΝΙΝΕ ΝΠΕ ΕΥΝΤΑΦ ΜΜΑΥ), having unimaginable magnitude; it was between the immortal beings and those things that came into being after them, like [lacuna] she functioned as a veil dividing mankind from the things above. Now the eternal realm (aeon) of truth has no shadow outside it, for the limitless light is everywhere within it. But its exterior is shadow, which has been called by the name darkness. [...] It was from <in> the abyss that [it] (shadow) appeared, deriving from the aforementioned Pistis (Ν[ΤΑC]ΟΥΩΝΖ ΕΒΟΛ <Μ>ΠΝΟΥΝ' ΕΒΟΛ ΖΗ ΤΠΙCΤΙC' ΝΤΑΝΨΑΧΕ ΕΡΟC).⁵⁸

The first lines of this passage seem to suggest the existence of two female beings: Pistis (ΤΠΙCΤΙC), a pre-existent female immortal being developed out of the infinite, and Sophia, the daughter of Pistis (ΤCΟΦΙΑ). Hence, one would be inclined to identify Pistis as the higher female being and Sophia with the lower

⁵⁷ *OrigWorld* II, 98, 7-9: 'Let us therefore concern ourselves with the facts of the matter; and furthermore, with the first product, from which chaos was projected'. *OrigWorld* seems to detain a special relationship not only with the two works of Codex II here illustrated, but also with *Eug*. For more details on the similarities with *Eug*, see Painchaud (1995).

⁵⁸ *OrigWorld* II, 98, 11 – 99, 2.

female aeon.⁵⁹ However, Pistis is portrayed also as the lower and defective Sophia, since she is identified with the female being who caused the darkness and who defected: ‘Now when Pistis saw what had resulted from her defect, she became disturbed’ (Νῆταρε τπιστικ δε ναγ απενταζωωπε εβολ ζῆ πεσωτα ασωτα ασωτορτῆ).⁶⁰ If so, the transcendence of the primordial deity would be tainted utterly, for it would become the cause of the darkness from which chaos originated.⁶¹ In addition, it is important to highlight that Pistis does not seem to have a proper partner, nor it is mentioned explicitly that she is part of a syzygy. Both these elements – that is, her defectivity and her being without a partner – are usually associated with the lower Sophia and not the highest female being.

Before drawing conclusions regarding these characters, a few observations on terminology are again in order. It is possible to detect two different uses of the names of Pistis and Sophia in *OrigWorld*: on a few occasions, these names are used together to refer to a single character named ‘Pistis Sophia’ (τπιστικ σοφια);⁶² in others, they are used individually to indicate two different characters.⁶³ Moreover, although this character will be discussed in section II.3.4, it is worth anticipating that Sophia generated another aeon called Zoe, which is occasionally named ‘Sophia Zoe’ (σοφια ζωη).⁶⁴ The association between a proper name (Zoe) and ‘Sophia’ seems to suggest that, in this case, the name ‘Sophia’ functions as an epithet rather than as a proper name. This hypothesis seems supported by the fact that the name ‘Sophia’ alone recurs rarely. Against this theory there is the fact that in one of these occurrences,

⁵⁹ This would also be confirmed by the episode of the theophany above the waters, where Pistis’ likeness appears to the archons in *OrigWorld* II, 103, 29-32; II, 107, 18-22.

⁶⁰ *OrigWorld* II, 99, 29-30.

⁶¹ The text is extremely clear about the ontological priority of the light over darkness, see *OrigWorld* II, 97, 24 – II, 98, 7.

⁶² *OrigWorld* II, 100, 1; II, 100, 10; II, 100, 28; II, 104, 3; II, 104, 17; II, 106, 11; II, 108, 29-30. It is worth highlighting that this name occurs also in *HypArch* II, 87, 7-8 and II, 94, 2-8, where it is referred to Sophia the lower aeon, the mother of Yaldabaoth.

⁶³ Pistis is also used in: *OrigWorld* II, 99, 23; II, 99, 29; II, 100, 20; II, 103, 15; II, 103, 29; II, 104, 28; II, 106, 19; II, 112, 3; II, 113, 7; II, 115, 7. Sophia is also used in: *OrigWorld* II, 106, 6; II, 112, 1; II, 113, 22; II, 115, 31. In addition, it is important to mention that one of Yaldabaoth’s offspring is called Sophia and she is in charge of the sixth heaven, see *OrigWorld* II, 102, 1 and II, 102, 25-31.

⁶⁴ *OrigWorld* II, 113, 12-13.

Sophia is explicitly called the ‘daughter of Pistis’ (ΑΤΣΟΦΙΑ <N>ΠΙΣΤΙΣ),⁶⁵ thus granting her a clear status of individual entity. There are two possible explanations to unravel this intricate labyrinth of names: either one of the redactors mistakenly inserted this clarification or Pistis is indeed the highest female aeon in the Pleroma, as well as the defective one. However, if the second option is true, *OrigWorld* would be the only Gnostic document in which the highest female divine principle is directly involved in the defection.⁶⁶

In conclusion, I believe it is worth considering the following four points when approaching the feminine imagery in *OrigWorld*. First, one should consider that *OrigWorld*’s narrative is entirely concerned with the events of the lower world. Secondly, the occurrences of the name ‘Sophia’ are very limited compared to the ones of ‘Pistis’ and ‘Pistis Sophia’. Thirdly, the name ‘Pistis Sophia’ is also used in *HypArch* to indicate Sophia, the fallen aeon.⁶⁷ Fourthly, the copyists and translators of the Nag Hammadi codices were not very careful in their translation.⁶⁸ Lastly, Irenaeus distinguished the higher female character from the lowest Sophia in his description of the Ophite system. These considerations make me more inclined not to consider Pistis as the highest female aeon, but rather as one of its lower manifestations. Consequently, the discussion concerning this character is postponed to the following chapter on the fallen feminine.⁶⁹

II.2.5 Ophite Pleromatic Feminine according to Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* I, 30

The overlapping of female characters is visible also in the heresiological literature, particularly in Irenaeus’ account of the Ophite mythology.

⁶⁵ *OrigWorld* II, 106, 6.

⁶⁶ The only parallel that one could establish is with the *Book of Baruch* of the Gnostic teacher Justine. However, the parallel would be incorrect for Edem (the highest female character) is psychic by nature, therefore she does not belong to the pneumatic Pleroma. This topic will be discussed further, see *infra* IV.2.

⁶⁷ For instance, *HypArch* II, 87, 8 and 95, 7.

⁶⁸ This is very well explained by Waldestein – Wisse (1995), 6-7.

⁶⁹ *Infra* II.3.4.

Nonetheless, Irenaeus maintains – at least nominally – the distinction between the upper female pneumatic being, called Ennoia, and the lower pneumatic being, called Sophia. However, in his *AdHaer* I, 30, the heresiologist attributes to the highest female being those features that are proper to Sophia, the lowest manifestation of the Pleroma:⁷⁰

Moreover, below these there exists the Holy Spirit, and under this superior Spirit exist the separated elements – water, darkness, abyss and chaos – over which Spirit moved. This Spirit they call First Woman. After that, First Man, together with his Son took delight in the beauty of the Spirit, who is the woman, and by illuminating her, generated from her an incorruptible Light, the Third Man, whom they call Christ, the son of the First Man and Second Man and of First Woman. In other words, both the Father and the Son were wedded to the Woman whom they called the Mother of the Living. When she was not capable of enduring or receiving the greatness of the lights, they say that she was completely filled and then overflowed on the left side. Thus, their own son, Christ, as of the right side and elevated to the upper region, was immediately caught up with the Mother into the incorruptible aeon.⁷¹

Irenaeus' text is intentionally polemical. On the one hand, Ennoia is explicitly recognised as the Holy Spirit, thus – contrarily to *AdHaer* I, 29 – a part of the Trinity; on the other hand, she displays all those features that are usually attributed to Sophia: proclivity to passions, inability to restrain herself and liminality between the pleromatic and extra-pleromatic world. The identification made by Irenaeus between the First Woman and these “defective” traits is made possible by mythologoumena such as that of *HypArch*, in which the female character is explicitly identified with the spirit

⁷⁰ This character is analysed at length later on, *infra* II.3.5.

⁷¹ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 30, 1-2: *Sub his autem Spiritum sanctum dicunt, et sub superiori spiritu segregate elementa, aquam tenebras abyssum chaos, super quae ferri Spiritum dicunt, Primam Foeminam eum vocantes. Postea, dicunt, exultantem primo homine cum filio suo super formositate spiritus, hoc est foeminae et illuminante eam, generavit ex ea lumen incorruptibile, tertium masculum, quem Christum vocant, filium Primi et Secundi Hominis et Spiritus sancti Primae Foeminae. Concubentibus autem patre et filio foeminae, quam et matrem viventium dicunt, cum autem non potuisset portare neque capere magnitudinem luminis, superrepletam et superbullientem secundum sinisteriores partes dicunt: et sic quidem filium eorum solum Christum, quasi dextrum et in superiora allevatitum, arreptum statim cum matre in incorruptibile Aeonem.*

within Adam.⁷² In this manner, Irenaeus is de-potentiating the Gnostic Trinity by misrepresenting the main female pleromatic character. This is also proved by the fact that, after the fall, she requires the help of her own son to be uplifted to her proper status,⁷³ as proven by the metaphorical opposition between left and right.⁷⁴ The heresiological mechanism that drives Irenaeus is indeed ingenious: counting on Gnostic typology, he is retro-projecting Sophia's sin to the primordial syzygy, to the Trinity itself. He can easily project on the highest female being some of the features of the fallen feminine, by relying on the connection between female characters granted by the typological structure of the cosmos. In order to do so, he re-proposes Sophia's sin – that is, the ignorance that drives her to wanting to be like the Father – at a primordial level, by making the Mother-Holy Spirit tainted by sexual desire.⁷⁵ Rather than being the rightful bride of the Virginal Spirit (here First Man), Ennoia's lust causes her to be with both the Father and the Son, whose powers she cannot bear. In this text, both Sophia and Ennoia want to be like the Father; however, both of them fail to achieve such resemblance.

Hence, *AdHaer* I, 30 presents a superior pleromatic being who is utterly tainted by error and sin. The intelligence of Irenaeus' account lies in his ability to use the typological structure of Gnostic mythologies to his advantage. Using the confusion between different female characters caused by typological resemblance, Irenaeus attempts to undermine the Ophite theology, which envisions a female entity within the Trinity.

II.2.6 Concluding Remarks on the Intra-Pleromatic Feminine

⁷² There is no evidence that Irenaeus knew *HypArch* directly, but he probably had access to other Gnostic – likely Ophite – sources which displayed similar mythologoumena. These mythologoumena will be discussed later on, *infra* III.4.2.

⁷³ In this regard, *AdHaer* I, 30 resembles Irenaeus' account on the Valentinian Gnostics, *infra* III.3.1.

⁷⁴ In antiquity, the left was considered the defective part, whereas the right was the dominant part. For this reason, it was also common to associate the right with male gender and the left with female gender, as in the present case.

⁷⁵ The use of sexual language to refer to Sophia's sin is an extremely important feature of all Gnostic myths, as the following chapter will explain; *infra* II.3.

Each text analysed so far adds few important pieces to the puzzle of the representation of the feminine within the Gnostic Godhead. *ApJohn* provides precious information concerning the ontological status of the highest female divinity, describing the functions of the primordial cosmological unity – the syzygy – and the Gnostic Trinitarian role attributed Barbelo. Here, the Father and Barbelo are considered an inseparable unity, of which he is the intellectual principle and she is the operative power. Furthermore, Barbelo is considered the third person of the Gnostic Trinity, composed by Father-Mother-Son. Hence, she represents the generative power of the Trinity, for she is the one who begets the rest of the aeons. By assuming a female character as part of the Trinity, *ApJohn* is proposing an original Trinitarian model in which the role of the Spirit, albeit subordinated to the Father's will, is conceived as feminine insofar as it is generative. However, Barbelo does not retain any specific soteriological function in *ApJohn*, as she instead does in other Ophite, Barbeloite and Sethian texts. The portrayal of Barbelo in the four Coptic versions of *ApJohn*'s coincides roughly with that of *AdHaer* I, 29. Here, however, the heresiologist tends to stress the subordination of Barbelo to the Virginal Spirit, thus diminishing the importance of the syzygy and de-potentiating the innovative stand of the Trinitarian speculation of *ApJohn*.

In *HypArch*, although the highest female being seems to maintain some Barbeloite features, Incorruptibility's field of action is wider than that of male Trinitarian characters. As a matter of fact, by making her the protagonist of the theophany above the waters, Incorruptibility assumes here a prominent soteriological function, becoming both the revealed divine being and the revealing divine agent. On the one hand, Incorruptibility represents the prototype of all humankind, because it is in likeness of her image that humanity was made; on the other hand, she is also the spiritual and divine part hidden in Adam.

Furthermore, this chapter shows that Pistis Sophia of *OrigWorld* should be considered dissimilar to both Barbelo and Incorruptibility, for she is a lower manifestation of the Pleroma associated with the fallen feminine, rather than the higher female being. The overlay between different female characters is

probably caused by the confusion generated in the transmission due to the typological resemblance. Lastly, the last paragraph shows that Irenaeus, having understood the mechanism of typological resemblance which governs Gnostic cosmologies and Gnostic characters, proposes an interpretation of the Gnostic myth in which the highest female being is tainted by the sin of the fallen feminine in order to stress the absurdity of this Gnostic Trinity.

Having clarified the functions of the highest female pneumatic manifestations, it is now time to turn to the lower ones in order to understand how Ophite, Barbeloite and Sethian Gnostics portrayed the fallen female entities.

II.3 Divine Duplicity: Paradoxical Female Characters

The previous section has revealed that feminine characters play a primary and essential role within Gnostic mythology for they are both the main generative powers and, in some cases, divine agents of revelation and salvation. However, the analysis conducted hitherto has shown only one side of the coin, for the most famous and well-studied aspect of Gnostic feminine imagery focuses on a female being in a fallen state, namely, Sophia.⁷⁶ In Gnostic mythologies, Sophia is the defective aeon, who is mostly portrayed as an inferior aeon in a state of distress. However, the interesting characteristic of the Gnostic representations of Sophia lies in her paradoxical nature: she is not only the aeon responsible for the intra-divine rupture that resulted in the creation of an inferior world and its tyrant, but also a soteriological agent – occasionally, the only one – who opens the way to the ascent of the spiritual humans.

In the introduction,⁷⁷ I have underlined that the use of the term ‘fallen feminine’ is meant to recall the first chapters of Genesis, specifically Eve’s fall from the Garden of Eden. In the case of Ophite, Barbeloite and Sethian mythologies, the connection with the book of Genesis is particularly significant, and many scholars have considered it as a proof of the Jewish origins of Gnosticism. This dependence has been valued to such an extent that some scholars, like MacRae, have concluded that the entire notion of a fallen feminine within Gnosticism, especially in the person of Sophia, needs to be traced back to the Genesis account of Eve’s Fall.⁷⁸ Such a neat contraposition between Christianity and Judaism in the second and third centuries does not account for the numerous interactions between Judaism and Christianity. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that Gnostic readings were always

⁷⁶ Most likely, her name comes from the Jewish tradition of Wisdom, from which the character of Sophia borrows a few characteristics, such as the role of epistemological instructor and descendent spirit of God. The most complete analysis of the Jewish features of Sophia in Ophitism, Sethianism and Barbeloism is found in MacRae (1970), 86-101.

⁷⁷ *Supra* Introduction, 5-6.

⁷⁸ In his opinion, this is the decisive element to confirm the predominantly Jewish background of Sophia, see MacRae (1970), 98-99. He goes even as far as claiming that ‘we may say that the very intention of the Gnostic myth is to provide a “true” esoteric explanation of the Genesis story itself’. In favor of an exclusive Jewish background for Sophia’s myth, see also Dahl (1981).

influenced by both Jewish and Christian elements. Nevertheless, I will argue for the preponderance of Christian elements over Jewish ones.⁷⁹ There are three main reasons which I believe are relevant for my argument. First, it is worth reminding ourselves that the rejection of the God of Genesis and his instructions is explicit in all of the texts considered in this chapter. Moreover, there is no evidence to suggest that it is merely a rejection of a specific interpretation of this book, such as the pharisaic one, rather than a rejection of the Jewish exegeses *tout court*.⁸⁰ In this regard, the most striking example is the liberating effect of the eating from the Tree of Knowledge, which is attributed by Gnostics to Eve's action. Secondly, some episodes of *ApJohn*, *HypArch* and *OrigWorld* present marked similarities with Christian narratives. For instance, the theophany above the waters – which recalls clearly the baptismal narration of the Gospels⁸¹ – is strictly connected with the creation of humankind; thus, Gnostic theologians are devising powerful theological instruments that super-impose a Christian reading of Genesis onto the Jewish text. Thirdly, soteriological events are considered in a historical-typological perspective – that is, involving the descent of a divine Redeemer who acts directly in human history – as is proper to the Christian tradition rather than to a Jewish messianic one. Likewise, Gnostic texts often describe Sophia's

⁷⁹ There are many speculations about the Gnostic view of the book of Genesis and, in truth, few scholars have explored the possibility that these Gnostics had a primarily Christian perspective. For scholars who advocate the Jewish origins of Gnosticism, see Pearson (1990), 124-135; Stroumsa (1984), 9; MacRae (1970), 97. On the contrary, although Turner claims that Sethianism pre-existed Christianity, he is forced to conclude that the *ApJohn* and *HypArch* are only known to us in their Christian form; see Turner (2001), 127-178. Luttikhuizen (2003) shows how the Gnostic re-reading of Genesis stories fits the Graeco-Hellenistic background of the second century and it is inserted in the intra-Christian debate concerning the interpretation of Genesis at a later time. In a later work – Luttikhuizen (2006), 11-12 – he takes however a milder stand, admitting the possibility that Sethians, Barbeliotes and Ophites drew also from early Christianity, but rejecting the idea that Gnosticism is a proper Christian movement. Similarly, Rasimus (2009), 130-132 highlights the dependence of the feminine on both Jewish Wisdom and Pauline literature.

⁸⁰ Similarly, Luttikhuizen (2006), 19-28 insists that *ApJohn* 'meant to defy, if not ridicule, the monotheistic belief in the biblical creator and ruler of the world'. Later on, he notes another element that could support this claim: the rejection of the authority of Moses. He argues that *ApJohn* is referring to an intra-Christian debate regarding the interpretation and value of Genesis and I am inclined to agree with him.

⁸¹ The resemblance between the theophany above the waters and the baptismal descriptions of the Gospels has been extensively studied by Lettieri (1995). He highlights three main points. First of all, both episodes take place in the water, that is, the waters of the inferior realm and the Jordan River. Secondly, both narrations describe the divine revelation (theophany) as a voice coming from above. Thirdly, this voice acknowledges and validates previous announcements: the Baptist announcement in the case of the Gospels and Sophia's one in the case of Gnostic accounts.

actions throughout history, including her intervention in support of the lost spiritual seed. Hence, although the Gnostic Sophia has much in common with the Jewish Eve, the latter is not sufficient to account alone for the most important feature of Sophia's story: her restoration to the divine rank and her soteriological role in the history of Salvation as envisioned by Ophite, Barbeloite and Sethian texts.

In addition to the Jewish influence, the fallen feminine in these Gnostic movements also presents some significant Platonic elements.⁸² As mentioned in Part I.1, the belief that the female gender was defective – thus, fallen – and inferior to male gender was a mainstream cultural belief in the Hellenistic culture and such a gender imagery was proper to the Platonic philosophies. In his latest works, Turner discussed at length the extent of the relationship between Platonism and Sethian Gnosticism.⁸³ He identifies three main Platonic features in Sethian works: 1. The opposition between a superior realm – which is intellectual and immaterial – and an earthly realm, which is instead material and defective; 2. The use of the model/copy Platonic structure of the cosmos; 3. The representation of the Gnostic creator of the world as parody of the creator of both Genesis and Plato's *Timaeus*.⁸⁴ As the following textual analysis will prove, all of these Platonic features are extremely significant for the representation of the fallen feminine in Ophite, Barbeloite and Sethian texts alike. In this regard, following Turner's list, I believe it is useful to indicate why Platonic influences are essential for the representation of the feminine: 1. the inferior world is caused by the fallen female aeon, Sophia; 2. The Platonic model/copy structure of the cosmos is intertwined with the typological

⁸² By contrast with my interpretation of *ApJohn*'s cosmology as a result of Platonic influences, Luttikhuisen (2006), 30-43 believes this book is mostly influenced by Aristotelian doctrines, albeit he admits few Platonic traits. Nonetheless, I remain convinced that the typological structure of the Gnostic κόσμος is more likely the result of Platonic speculations on the perfect world of the ideas and the inferior imperfect world of copies, particularly *Timaeus* and *Parmenides*. In this regard, see Turner (2006).

⁸³ See Turner (2006) and Turner – Majercik (2000). Particularly, Turner (2001), 28 highlights the connection between Plotinus' hypostases and the Gnostic ontological levels of reality.

⁸⁴ See Turner (2000a), 90-91 and (2001), 747-749. I am not inserting in this list the so-called 'masculinization of the Mother' (Turner 2001, 81, 179-220), which he detects mainly in those Sethian texts that display an 'ascent pattern', which are not considered in this investigation (*All*, *StSeth*, *Zos* and *Mar*).

resemblance that links together female characters;⁸⁵ 3. The creator of the world is the illegitimate abortion of Sophia. Moreover, Turner acknowledged the main soteriological role played by female characters, especially in those texts that display a “descending pattern”, like *ApJohn* and *HypArch*.⁸⁶ Concerning the influence of Platonism on the representation of the fallen feminine, one clarification is in order. If, on the one hand, it is correct to say that Gnosticism shares the ontological hierarchy of Platonic systems; on the other hand, Gnostics understood the divine in a way entirely alien to the Platonic sensibility. While the latter interpreted divine beings as immutable and immobile, Gnostics portrayed the divine not only as part of the historical stream but also as subject to passions. This is indeed the case of the fallen feminine, for the primary feature of the fallen feminine is being passionate.⁸⁷

Besides these Jewish and Platonic influences, it is worth underlining the Christian core of the Gnostic fallen feminine imagery. In all the accounts that I am about to analyse, the events surrounding Sophia’s fall make sense exclusively *in the light of* her restoration, a restoration that will happen by means of a Redeemer, who is often – albeit not always⁸⁸ – identified with Christ. However, contrarily to “orthodox” Christian texts, the soteriological role of this Christological Redeemer in Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite theologies is completed by female characters, who assume a significant soteriological role in the Gnostic economy of salvation. Such soteriological functions may appear to contradict the very core of Gnostic mythology, causing an apparently aporetic dilemma: how can Sophia, who is responsible for the intra-divine rupture, also be a soteriological agent? This paradox is the

⁸⁵ However, unlike the Platonic paradigm of model/copy, the typological resemblance has a historical value, *Supra* I.1.

⁸⁶ See Turner (2001), 80-81, 127-178, 747-749. By ‘descending pattern’, Turner means those works that present ‘the advent of salvific enlightenment as a gift conferred through the earthly descent of transcendent beings’. In this category, he also listed *TriProt*, *HypArch*, *ThNor*, *ApAd*, *Mel* and the *GosEg*. On the contrary, Turner identified the ‘ascent pattern’ as a ‘self-actualised assimilation to transcendent realities encountered during the heavenly ascent of a visionary’.

⁸⁷ In truth, pagan philosophers were not the only ones to reject this portrayal of the divine, since it was unacceptable for many Christians too, albeit for different reasons. The identification of the ‘subjection to passions’ as one of the most important characteristics of Gnosticism has been discussed by Lettieri (2012).

⁸⁸ The following analysis of *HypArch* will prove that even in the case where the Redeemer is not identified with a male Saviour, the soteriological mechanism remains primarily Christian.

core of this section, which aims at analysing key passages of these Ophite, Barbeloite and Sethian texts, showing both differences and similarities in the representation of the fallen feminine among different Gnostic texts.

II.3.1 The Fallen Sophia: *The Apocryphon of John* (NHC II, 1)

The paradoxical nature of the feminine in Gnosticism is particularly stressed in *ApJohn*, thus highlighting the opposition between the transcendence of the mother Barbelo and the defectiveness of Sophia. The more a text stresses the transcendence of the highest female character, the more it will need to emphasise the pejorative aspects of the fallen feminine. For instance, contrarily to other narratives, *ApJohn* interprets Sophia's fall outside of the Pleroma as an act of ὕβρις:

And the Sophia of the Epinoia (ΤΣΟΦΙΑ ΔΕ ΝΤΕΠΙΝΟΙΑ), being an aeon, conceived a thought from herself (ΑCΜΕΕΥΕ ΖΗ ΟΥΜΕΕΥΕ ΕΒΟΛ ΝΖΗΤC) and the conception of the Invisible Spirit and foreknowledge. She wanted to bring forth a likeness out of herself (ΑCΟΥΩΨ[Ε] ΕΟΥΩΝΖ ΕΒΟΛ ΝΟΥΕΙΝΕ ΝΖΗΤC) [*lacuna*] without the consent of the Spirit (ΑΧΜ [ΠΟΥΩ]Ψ ΜΠΕΠΝΑ), – he had not approved (ΕΜΠΕQΡCΥΝΕΥ) – and without her consort (ΑΥ[Ω ΑΧΜ Π]ΕCΩΒΡ) and without his consideration. [...] And because of the invincible power that was in her, her thought did not remain idle and a product came out of her which was imperfect (ΟΥΖΩΒ` ΝΑΤΧΩΚ) and different from her appearance, because she had created it without her consort (ΑCΤΑΜΙΟQ` ΑΧΜ ΠΕCΩΒΡ ΝΖΕΤΡ).⁸⁹

Here, Sophia's defection is caused by her desire to generate like the Father, that is, without the help or consent of her syzygial counterpart.⁹⁰ This description contains two major implications. First, it would appear that Sophia's actions are limited by the same syzygial rule that regulated Barbelo's procreation, that is, the fact that both male and female members of the syzygy

⁸⁹ *ApJohn* II, 9, 25 – 10, 5.

⁹⁰ I am referring here to the primordial Father's generation of Barbelo. Indeed, this is the only generation which is accomplished without a syzygy being involved.

need to take part in the generation.⁹¹ Secondly, by wanting to generate on her own, Sophia threatens the cosmological order of the Pleroma, thus causing the disruption of the pleromatic peace. In a sense, *ApJohn* is attributing to Sophia a *form of original sin*. Just as in *Gen. 3:5* Eve's desire to eat from the tree is the result of the human desire to be 'ὡς θεοὶ' ('like gods', namely like the Father), so it is Sophia's sin.⁹² Correspondingly, just as Eve is expelled from Eden following her transgression, so Sophia is expelled from the Pleroma because of her sin. Moreover, just as Eve's betrayal causes the fall of humankind in Genesis, so in the Gnostic myth Sophia's actions have no less serious consequences since her 'adultery' originates the counterfeit Spirit, hypostatised in her offspring Yaldabaoth.⁹³

Hence, the cause of Sophia's original sin is identified with her inability to restrain her desire to generate. This female aeon seems here to bear an intrinsic fault that makes her and her offspring responsible for the intra-divine fracture because of her unrestrained passion. Hence, *ApJohn* proposes a highly pathological representation of the divine,⁹⁴ for Sophia is subject to passions even if she is a divine pleromatic being. This association has the unprecedented consequence of incorporating error and sin directly into the divine world, albeit not into the higher sphere of Barbelo. By claiming that Sophia is both a divine being and a fallen one, *ApJohn* is essentially admitting that a female divine being has originated all the evils in the world:

For from that fate came forth every sin (ΕΒΟΛ ΓΑΡ ΖἼ ΤΖΙΜΑΡΜΕΝΗ
ΕΤΙΜΟ ΛΥΟΥΩΝ<2> ΕΒΟΛ ΝΒΙ ΜΗΤΨΑΓΓΕ ΝΙΜ) and injustice and

⁹¹ It is worth reminding ourselves that in the case of Barbelo, the generation of the Pleroma followed the approval granted her by the Virginal Spirit, since Barbelo acted as the active force of the Father's will. Furthermore, this passage invalidates Buckley (1986), 48 who claims that 'syzygial partnership is not a prerequisite for creation in *ApJohn*'. I strongly disagree with Buckley to this regard, since the Virginal Spirit is the only being able to conceive on his own and there is no evidence that anyone is allowed to generate outside of the syzygy in *ApJohn*. Therefore, I believe that syzygial partnership is indeed necessary to generate, otherwise Sophia's sin would be inexplicable.

⁹² In this regard, Lanzillotta's remarks on the importance of Plato's doctrine of the 'ὁμοίωσις θεῷ' for Gnostic texts show how the influences of both Platonism and Judaism are strongly present in Gnosticism, see Lanzillotta (2013).

⁹³ *ApJohn* II, 27, 21 – 28, 32.

⁹⁴ This word needs to be understood in the Greek sense of πάθος.

blasphemy and the chain of forgetfulness and ignorance and every severe command and serious sins and great fears.⁹⁵

The theodicy presented by the Gnostic myth of Sophia is unprecedented in Christian theology, since it takes a direction opposite to most of its contemporary theological speculations.⁹⁶ By contrast with the so-called “orthodox” theologians, the Gnostics incorporated the error into the divine world, thus making the divine itself responsible – albeit indirectly – for the evils suffered by humankind. In this respect, both the rigid hierarchical order and the opposition male/female of Gnostic myths functioned as safety-nets, distancing the supreme divine being from this scandalous event. In this perspective, Sophia’s gender becomes a discriminating factor: it is her feminine nature – a nature considered prone to passions and generation, as recognised by the dominant cultural paradigms – to make her the most suitable candidate for causing the world’s evils. In other words, if a female divinity is responsible for this evil, the male divinities are not tainted by her sin. Therefore, by making Sophia responsible for the original divine sin and the rupture in the divine world, this Gnostic myth is also suggesting divine involvement (at least in its feminine aspect) in the origin of evil.

Moreover, contrary to the syzygial couple of the Virginal Spirit and Barbelo, Sophia seems unable to accord her will and her actions. This attitude disqualifies her further from the divine rank to which she however belongs:

Then the mother began to move to and fro (ΑΣΡΑΡΧΕΣΘΕ ΘΕ ΝΨΕΕΙ ΝΒΙ ΤΗΜΑΥ). She became aware of the deficiency (ΑΣΗΜΕ ΑΠΩΤΑ) when the brightness of her light diminished. And she became dark because her consort had not agreed with her (ΑΥΩ ΑΣΖΤΟΜΖΤΗ ΕΒΟΛ ΧΕ ΉΠΕΔΡΨΜΦΩΝΕ ΝΗΜΑΣ ΝΒΙ ΠΕΣΩΒΡ ΖΩΤΡ).⁹⁷

⁹⁵ *ApJohn* II, 28, 22-26. As I will show in the following sections, this theological position is not exclusive of *ApJohn*, for it is present in all Gnostic texts; nonetheless, such peculiar notion of the divine is made particularly clear in this version of Sophia’s fall.

⁹⁶ For a good overview of this issue, see Ramelli (2013).

⁹⁷ *ApJohn* II, 13, 13-17.

It is interesting to note that this passage underlines the intensity of her passions using two elements, one of philosophical origin and one of Christian origin. On the one hand, Sophia's inability to remain idle is a symptom of her unfitness for the state of divinity. As in Platonic and Aristotelian philosophical systems stillness was considered a divine quality,⁹⁸ Sophia's movement 'to and fro' suggests that she is unfit to be an ontologically divine being, for she is now in the realm of disorganized motion. On the other hand, her becoming dark fits perfectly the literary *topos* of the opposition between light and darkness typical of early Christian literature. Furthermore, the parallel with *Sos* I, 5, where the bride is said to be 'Dark I am, yet beautiful,' is particularly interesting. Just as in *Sos* the bride's darkness expresses metaphorically the sin which will be forgiven once she will be with the bridegroom,⁹⁹ thus Sophia's darkness represents her ambiguity of being both a prostitute (alias a sinner) and a redeemed being.¹⁰⁰ The opposition of prostitution and lawful wedlock is proper to *ApJohn*'s sexual imagery; indeed, Sophia's unrestrained passion, her acting without the consent of her consort and her being a single parent of an unformed offspring are described with the term 'adultery' (**NOEIK**).¹⁰¹ By using this word, the text is taking a clear stand regarding the appropriate status of Sophia: she functions perfectly only when she is united in syzygy with her male partner. Her refusal to act in accordance with her male counterpart makes her an adulterous woman; and only the restoration of the syzygy and the reunion with her rightful spouse would make her the perfect bride, as Barbelo.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ For instance, Plato, *Timaeus* 28c-29d; Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1071b 3-22.

⁹⁹ This exegesis of the bride's darkness was proper to several patristic commentaries on *Sos*, see Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs* II, 1, 1-57; Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs* II.

¹⁰⁰ For additional references to the use of *Sos* in Gnostic texts, see *infra* III.3.2.2.

¹⁰¹ *ApJohn* II, 28, 11-13: 'He [chief Archon] made a plan with his authorities, which are his powers, and they committed together adultery with Sophia, and bitter fate was begotten through them.' This terminology is similar in all accounts of Sophia's story, and more examples will be presented in the following sections of this chapter. King (2000), 92-94 highlights how this language is also employed to describe Yaldabaoth's power, which is a grotesque parody of the God of Genesis. Indeed, while the true God generates by means of verbal expressions, he generates by means of sexual reproduction.

¹⁰² The importance of the sexual language in reference to Sophia has been explored by Dahl (1981), who connected it to the apocalyptic fringe of Judaism. Although I agree with the idea that sexual language employed by Gnostics to describe Sophia is largely taken from Jewish apocalyptic texts, I do not think that it is sufficient to prove the Jewish origin of these Gnostic movements. Another attempt to explain the sexual language of *ApJohn* is made by King (2009), 125-127: 'the wise-fool Sophia is most arguably more completely the hero of the story than one might at first think. Her bold independence of thought and action could be read not as an act of ignorance but resistance, the same kind of resistance that the work affirms through

An additional confirmation of my theory according to which Sophia's sin consists primarily in the disruption of the Pleromatic syzygial order finds further confirmation in the way in which *ApJohn* describes Sophia's passions after the birth of her son Yaldabaoth:

And when she saw (the consequences of) her will (ἀπεσοῦσθε), it changed into a form of lion-faced serpent. And its eyes were like lightening fires which flash. She cast it away from her, outside that place, that no one of the immortal one might see it, for she had created it in ignorance (ἄτακτα μὴ οὐκ ὄντων ὁμοίαν). And she surrounded it with a luminous cloud, and she placed a throne in the middle of the cloud that no one might see it except the Holy Spirit who is called the Mother of the Living (ἀπὸ τῆς ἐκείνης ἐκπορεύεται ἡ ζωὴ τοῦ κόσμου). And she called his name Yaldabaoth.¹⁰³

In order to fully understand this description of Yaldabaoth's generation, a brief outline of the most popular ancient beliefs regarding conception might be helpful, especially concerning the form and the matter that originates the offspring. In the first centuries of Christianity, the two mainstream views on conception were still those propounded by Aristotle and Galen. Aristotle rigidly divided the spheres of competence between male and female: while the man provided the seed, which contained the form, the woman provided the substratum, that is, the material element. Galen meanwhile believed that both men and women produced seeds; however, the male seed was strong and hot, whereas the female one was weak and cold. According to Galen, the offspring resulted from the mingling of the two seeds such that both male and female elements provided matter for the foetus.¹⁰⁴ The wide circulation of these theories is also confirmed by its presence in the account of Hippolytus, which

Eve's opposition to the lower gods' illegitimate domination'. Such a feminist reading of *ApJohn*'s language is here rejected since I have shown how the language of the text responds to a clear philosophical and mythological necessity.

¹⁰³ *ApJohn* II, 10, 8-19. See also *ApJohn* II, 13, 13-27 and II, 13, 32 – 14, 16.

¹⁰⁴ For more details on ancient conception theories, see Preus (1977) and, especially, De Conick (2003), 321-324.

explicitly mentions it to explain Achamot's generation.¹⁰⁵ If these were the mainstream views about conception, *ApJohn*'s theory of generation resembles Galen's position more closely than that of Aristotle. In *ApJohn*, the female element is indeed able to conceive on her own, but her seed is weak and it does not produce a formed offspring. In this regard, the description of Sophia's reaction once she realizes what came forth from her is particularly indicative. Yaldabaoth is weak and deformed, and the primary cause of his infirmity is the absence of a father. Being fatherless, he is a monstrous creature who came forth from a weak seed. Yaldabaoth's dependence on his mother is so strong that King claims that Sophia should be considered accountable for Yaldabaoth's actions since he is the embodiment of her ignorance.¹⁰⁶ An alternative interpretation of this passage has been proposed by Fischer-Mueller,¹⁰⁷ who claims that the fallen feminine should be identified with Yaldabaoth, since he and Sophia share similar behaviors. But Yaldabaoth's faultiness is far better explained as the result of the violation of the syzygial rules, thus making him a distinct character from Sophia. It is indeed the fact that he was created outside of the syzygy to make him a monstrous product.

Once Sophia realizes what she brought forth, she requests the help of the Pleroma. The whole Pleroma sends downward a companion to help her, since it is indeed through the help of a male partner that she may rise from her wretched condition:

And the whole Pleroma (ΠΕΠΛΗΡΩΜΑ) heard the prayer of her repentance (ΝΗΤΕΣΜΕΤΑΝΟΙΑ) and they praised on her behalf the invisible, Virginal Spirit. (IV, 22, 5-7: And he consented; and when the Invisible Spirit had consented), the Holy Spirit poured over her from the whole Pleroma (ΑΦΠΩΖΤ` ΕΖΡΑΙ ΕΧΩΣ ΝΒΙ ΠΕΠΝΑ ΕΤΟΥΛΑΒ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΙΤΝ ΠΕΥΠΛΗΡΩΜΑ ΤΗΡΩ). For it was not her consort who came to her, but he came to her through the Pleroma in order that he might correct her deficiency (ΝΤΑΩΕΙ ΓΑΡ ΝΑΣ ΑΝ ΝΒΙ ΠΕΩΩΒΡ ΝΖΩΤΡ ΑΛΛΑ

¹⁰⁵ Hippolytus, *El* VI, 30, 6-9.

¹⁰⁶ King (2000), 98 and 232-233.

¹⁰⁷ Fischer-Mueller (1990). In truth, I could not find textual evidence to support Fischer-Mueller's identification of Yaldabaoth as having a "female principle".

<Ḳ>ΤΑϞ'ΕΙ ΝΑΣ ΕΞΡΑΙ ΖΙΤḲ ΠΠΑΗΡΩΜΑ ΧΕΚΑΑΣ ΕΦΝΑΣΩΖΕ
 ἸΠΕΣΩΤΑ). [lacuna] And she was taken up not to her own aeon but
 above her son, that she might be in the ninth until she has corrected her
 deficiency (ΨΑΝΤΕΣΣΩΖΕ ἸΠΕΣΩΤΑ).¹⁰⁸

Although *ApJohn* stresses Sophia's need for a partner, this passage reveals also a certain ambiguity in her character. As a matter of fact, it is not entirely clear from the text who is meant to correct Sophia's deficiency. On the one hand, she seems to receive the help of her male companion. On the other, she is raised above her son in order to correct her deficiency by herself. The last verse seems to suggest that some soteriological duties are not performed directly by her unnamed male partner, but rather by Sophia herself. In this regard, her involvement in the soteriological process is also confirmed by her role of truth-teller, since she is the messenger of God's wisdom. If Gnostics achieve salvation through gnosis, Sophia performs a soteriological role by bringing knowledge of the Pleroma to the pneumatic beings trapped into the lower creation. In *ApJohn*, this soteriological act is visible in the theophany above the waters, when Sophia instructs Yaldabaoth about the existence of the 'Man and the Son of Man'.¹⁰⁹ It is indeed the likeness of this luminous Man that appears to the archons into the waters below. When the archons see the likeness reflected in the waters,¹¹⁰ they do not understand it and they decide to grab it. Since the archons are ignorant of their own condition, they fail in the attempt to grab the likeness and therefore decide to fashion a body resembling it. In their ignorance, they create a psychic body, which is 'completely inactive and motionless'.¹¹¹ Having assisted to the archons' failure, Sophia decides to seize the moment and uses this opportunity to retrieve the power that Yaldabaoth stole from her at his birth. She tricks her son into blowing the stolen spiritual power into the motionless man, who finally arises and becomes luminous.¹¹² Hence, by transferring her power to human beings, Sophia achieves a twofold

¹⁰⁸ *ApJohn* II, 14, 1-13.

¹⁰⁹ *ApJohn* II, 14, 13-35.

¹¹⁰ As it has been highlighted in the previous section (*supra* II.2.3), Barbelo and Sophia are merely the executors of the revelation and not its object, as in the case of Incorruptibility in *HypArch*.

¹¹¹ *ApJohn* II, 19, 14-15.

¹¹² *ApJohn* II, 14, 13 – 19, 33.

success: she deprives Yaldabaoth of the power he stole from her and hides the spiritual nature in human bodies. As a result of this stratagem, humans gain πνᾱ, which makes them consubstantial with pleromatic being. Unlike in *HypArch*, she is not the object of the revelation – that is, the divine being revealed in the midst of light – but she is the one who instructs others about the existence of a superior ‘Man’. Sophia is therefore the divine agent who willingly gives life to humans, making them spiritual beings.¹¹³ In *ApJohn*, the soteriological role of Sophia consists in awakening the pneumatic human beings from their ignorance, revealing them the existence of the ‘Son of Man’.¹¹⁴ Although Sophia’s soteriological role is necessary for salvation, *ApJohn* stresses that her actions alone are not sufficient for salvation because they need to be fulfilled by a male saviour. However, the role of the pleromatic Saviour is not emphasized much in this treatise. At a closer look, the reader realises that the Saviour’s role is predominant only in the narrative frame of *ApJohn*,¹¹⁵ whereas it is almost entirely absent from the myth told by the Saviour himself. The Saviour appears briefly at the end of the book as the one who responds to the Pronoia’s call for help in *ApJohn* II, 31, 5-30. The absence is striking to such an extent that Turner understood the Saviour as the masculine ‘last manifestation’ of Pronoia-Sophia.¹¹⁶

To provide some concluding remarks, the analysis conducted thus far has shown how ambiguous the portrayal of the fallen feminine is in *ApJohn*. On the one hand, Sophia is the impulsive, unrestrained, fallen aeon who causes boundless evil in the cosmos when she generates without her consort. On the other hand, she is an essential instrument of salvation for pneumatic humans, since she reveals them the existence of the Pleroma. Moreover, the absence of

¹¹³ It is worth noting that this episode is also revealing of *ApJohn*’s attitude towards the God of the Hebrew Bible. By making Sophia the true agent behind the divine insufflation, *ApJohn* is both denigrating the actions of the inferior Jewish God and stating the veracity of the Genesis account. Hence, this treatise maintains an antinomian position without denying the validity of Genesis’ stories.

¹¹⁴ In this regard, I strongly disagree with the conclusion drawn by La Porta (1997), according to which Sophia’s myth sprouted from a dichotomic interpretation of Jewish Wisdom theology. According to him, Barbelo would encompass all the ‘positive Wisdom characteristics’, whilst Sophia would encompass the ‘negative Wisdom characteristics’. This neat separation between Barbelo and Sophia, as well as the rigid allocation of ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ attributes, does not do justice to the paradoxical complexity of Sophia’s character in *ApJohn*.

¹¹⁵ For more details on the narrative scheme of *ApJohn*, see Luttikhuisen (2006), 44-58.

¹¹⁶ Turner (2001), 754.

a detailed explanation concerning the role of the Saviour leaves to Sophia the role of main salvific agent in history. The story of Sophia in *ApJohn* is a theological paradox, in which a defective female figure acts as a soteriological agent to guide pneumatic humans to their destiny of salvation.¹¹⁷ It would almost appear that the text oscillates between two opposite poles: one where Sophia is a salvific figure and the other in which she is the fallen, helpless aeon. Despite this oscillation, it must be noted that *ApJohn* prefers one representation to the other. Even when Sophia is considered in her salvific role, her weaknesses are stressed more than her strengths, as proved by the insistence on the necessity of male intervention to fulfil her soteriological acts.¹¹⁸

II.3.2 Sophia Προύνεικος in Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* I, 29

The version of *ApJohn* found in Irenaeus also confirms what I have previously observed in regard to the Coptic *ApJohn*:

Next, Holy Spirit, whom they also call Sophia and *Prunicus*, was emitted from the first Angel who remains near to Only-Begotten. When she saw that all the others belonged to a conjugal couple and she did not, she went in search of someone she might wed. When she was not able to find anyone, she struggled and strained forward and looked in the lower regions, thinking she might find a consort there. When she found none, she leaped forward, but was seized with sudden sadness because she had made the leap without the Father's approval. After that, moved by simplicity and kindness, she generated a work in which there were ignorance and boldness. They claim that this work of her was the First-

¹¹⁷ In this regard, it is worth mentioning King's study on roles of gender in each single version of *ApJohn*; see King (2000a). By contrast with my research, King's main goal consists in using the gender image in order to understand the social customs of Gnostic groups. Nevertheless, regarding the use of gender imagery, she concludes that whereas in the BG version it is the male-female couple that represents perfection, in Codex II, masculine elements represent perfection and female elements represent error. Against her interpretation, my research underlines that, even in the narrative of Codex II, Sophia maintains a certain soteriological role.

¹¹⁸ This preference is also confirmed by a peculiarity in the narrative sequence: not only the feminine is not the object of the revelation of the theophany above the waters, but the episode is preceded by her request for help to the Pleroma and the consent of her companion to rescue her.

Ruler, the Maker of this creation. But they tell us that he took away a great Power from his Mother, departed from her to the lower regions, and he made the firmament of heavens, in which he also dwells.¹¹⁹

The striking element of this account is the identification of Sophia with the Holy Spirit. This association is remarkable mainly for two reasons. First, Irenaeus is separating the character of Sophia from that of the Mother of the Gnostic Trinity of *AdHaer* I, 29, thus relegating the Gnostic Holy Spirit to the status of defective divinity.¹²⁰ Secondly, it contrasts with Irenaeus' identification of the Spirit with the First Woman, *Ennoia*, in *AdHaer* I, 30, 1. Such discrepancies lead to two considerations. On the one hand, the heresiologist is claiming that Gnostics did not deem the Holy Spirit to be part of their Gnostic Trinity, for they interpreted the Holy Spirit as a liminal being between two realms. On the other hand, he is – once again! – smoothing over the characters of Sophia and the Mother to stress the fact that Gnostics were contaminating the divinity with a defective element. Although the Barbeloite account of Sophia's story is not reported fully by Irenaeus, the heresiologist found the way to convey the idea of Sophia's defectiveness by using a very explicative word: *Prunicus* (Gr. προύνεικος). The adjective, in this context, is followed by a remarkable strategy of stressing incontinence and lack of restraint, thus stressing Sophia's inability to control her passions. Pasquier conducted a study on the use of this word in previous literature and within Gnosticism, concluding that it was probably used by Gnostics to indicate the 'cosmic principle of separation', thus highlighting how this term expresses Sophia's involvement in the intra-divine rupture that destabilized the Pleroma.¹²¹ Whereas her study aims at identifying the use of this term within Gnostic circles, I am more interested in stressing that Irenaeus' text most likely

¹¹⁹ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 29, 4: *Deinde ex primo angelo qui adstat Monogeni emissum dicunt Spiritum sanctum, quem et Sophiam et Prunicum vocant. Hanc igitur videntem reliquia omnia coniugationem habentia, se autem sine coniugatione, quaesisse cui adunaretur, et cum non inveniret, adservebat et extendebatur et prospiciebat ad inferiores partes, putans hic invenire coniugem; et non inveniens, exsiliit, taediata quoque, quoniam sine bona voluntate Patris impetum fecerat. Post deinde simplicitate et benignitate acta, generavit opus in quo erat ignorantia et audacia: hoc autem opus eius esse Protoarchontem dicunt, Fabricatorem conditionis huius. Virtutem autem magna abstulisse eum a Matre narrant et abstitisse ab ea in inferiora et fecisse firmamentum caeli, in quo et habitare dicunt eum.*

¹²⁰ *Supra* II.2.1.

¹²¹ Pasquier (2000).

used this term with a negative connotation in order to denigrate Gnostic cosmological principle, and that this is further achieved by hinting at Sophia's inappropriate sexual conduct.

Overall, this passage seems an additional confirmation that Irenaeus understood the mechanism of *typological resemblance* and used it to argue polemically against Gnostic beliefs.

II.3.3 Sophia and Zoe in *The Hypostasis of Archons* (NHC II, 4)

In *HypArch*, Sophia's expulsion from the Pleroma is only briefly outlined since this treatise deals mostly with the events that take place in the inferior world after her fall. Nevertheless, this account is of utmost importance in order to understand the role of the feminine in the Gnostic economy of salvation.

When reading *HypArch*, the differences between *ApJohn*'s and *HypArch*'s portrayal of Sophia do not go unnoticed. The first difference consists in the fact that *HypArch* inserts the myth of Sophia into a narrative frame, in which the angel Eleleth is revealing the events of the world above to Norea, Eve's daughter.¹²²

Sophia, who is called Pistis, wanted to create something, alone, without her consort (ΤΣΟΦΙΑ ΤΑΕΙ ΕΤΟΥΜΟΥΤΕ ΕΡΟΣ ΧΕ ΤΠΙΣΤΙΣ ΑΣΟΥΩΨ` ΕΤΕΝΕ ΟΥΖΩΒ ΟΥΛΑΑΣ ΑΧΝ ΠΕΣΖΩΤΡ̄); and her product was a celestial thing (ΑΥΩ ΠΕΣΕΡΓΟΝ ΑΩΨΩΠΕ ΝΝΙΝΕ ΝΠΕ). A veil exists between the world above and the realms that are below; and shadow came into being beneath the veil; and that shadow became matter (ΑΥΩ ΑΘΑΕΙΒΕΣ ΕΤ̄ΜΑΥ ΨΩΠΕ ΝΖΥΛΗ); and that shadow was projected apart (ΑΥΩ ΘΑΕΙΒΕ ΕΤ̄ΜΑΥ ΑΥΝΟΧ̄ ΑΥΣΑ ΝΟΥΜΕΡΟΣ). And what she had created became a product in the matter, like an aborted fetus (ΑΥΩ ΠΕΣΜΟΥΟΥΓ` ΑΩΨΩΠΕ ΝΝΟΥΕΡΓΟΝ ΖΝ ΘΥΛΗ ΝΘΕ

¹²² Although is not present in all Gnostic myth, Norea is usually presented as the virgin whose blood will save humankind. For more information on her account, *infra* II.4.2.

ἦν οὐ γέγονε). And it assumed a plastic form molded out of shadow, and became an arrogant beast resembling a lion.¹²³

In this passage, *HypArch* stresses Sophia's subjection to passion less than does *ApJohn*. Rather than focusing on her inability to restrain herself, the author insists on the disruption of the cosmic order. Sophia is the "veil" that separates the realms of shadows from the one of light, but this veil was broken when she brought forth without the consent of her consort. She caused the intra-divine disruption and put at risk the separation of these two realms by disregarding the rules of pleromatic generation and by introducing spiritual substance into the inferior realm.¹²⁴ Thus, the second difference between *ApJohn* and *HypArch* consists in a less "pathological" representation of the feminine, for the author underlines more the cosmological effects of Sophia's acts than her proclivity to passion.¹²⁵ In this respect, I disagree with King, who sets *ApJohn* and *HypArch* in opposition to one another, claiming that the latter insists exclusively on the sexual nature of Sophia's sin and disregards the ontological disruption of the cosmos.¹²⁶ Indeed, the use of sexual language to describe Sophia's sin ought to be understood as a metaphor of the ontological rupture of the cosmological order. Since the sexual language used to describe it represents a metaphor for the disruption of the cosmological order, Sophia's sin remains both a passionate and ontological sin, although the two texts stress the passionate aspect to a different degree. The narrative element which brings *ApJohn* and *HypArch* closer is the birth of Yaldabaoth, since both texts describe Sophia's son with similar adjectives and use similar cultural paradigms about conception. Yaldabaoth – often called Samael (ΣΑΜΑΗΛ), the blind God, or Sakla (ΣΑΚΛΑ)¹²⁷ – is created in ignorance and therefore cast away into matter. Moreover, although he maintains a connection with his mother due to his 'celestial' nature, this can be seen as a sort of spiritual leftover and it does not indicate any affiliation to the pleromatic world. Furthermore, a consistent use

¹²³ *HypArch* II, 94, 5-18.

¹²⁴ *HypArch* II, 94, 27-33: 'And he (Yaldabaoth) said "If any other thing exists before me, let it become visible to me" And immediately Sophia stretched forth her finger and introduced light into matter; and she pursued it down to the region of chaos.'

¹²⁵ A further confirmation can be found in the scarce mentions of Sophia's regret, which is instead a main topic in *ApJohn*.

¹²⁶ King (2000), 90-91.

¹²⁷ See respectively *HypArch* II, 87, 3 and II, 25, 7.

of sexual language in reference to Sophia's actions leads to the definition of Yaldabaoth as an 'aborted foetus' (ἄνωγζογζε). Being generated by the mother alone, Yaldabaoth was a weak and blind product.¹²⁸

The most distinctive element of *HypArch* is, however, the attribution of some soteriological actions otherwise attributed to Sophia to her daughter, Zoe (ΖΩΗ).¹²⁹ This mythological character is attested in both *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*. In *HypArch*, she is not only the one who imprisons Yaldabaoth in the Tartaros, but also the one who instructs Sabaoth, Yaldabaoth's son, making him aware of the events of the realm above:¹³⁰

And Yaldabaoth said to his offspring, 'It is I who am the God of the Pleroma' (πνούτε ἡπτηρῶ). And Zoe, the daughter of Pistis Sophia, cried out and said to him, 'You are mistaken Sakla' (ἀγω ΖΩΗ τῷερε ἡπτικισ τσοφια ἀσαφκακ' ἐβολ πεχας ναρ' χε κῆπαλα σακλα) [...]. She breathed into his face, and her breath became a fiery angel for her, and that angel bound Yaldabaoth and cast him down into Tartaros below the abyss.

It is Zoe who belies the false God, thus showing Yaldabaoth's lies to his children. She is the Instructor who will save the spiritual humanity that Sophia created. Hence, she takes on many of the soteriological functions that are attributed to Sophia in *ApJohn*, since she acts as a divine instructor of the counterfeit God. The addition of one character to the traditional Sophia myth has two possible explanations: either it is another case in which Gnostics prove their tendency to multiply the aeons or, by introducing a Sophia-like character,¹³¹ the author of *HypArch* is hypostatizing the soteriological functions of Sophia in another character. According to this latter hypothesis, Zoe represents the nobler parts of Sophia, so much so that it is extremely difficult to distinguish the two figures in the narrative sequence. Hence, Zoe embodies the

¹²⁸ This topic has already been discussed *supra* II.3.1.

¹²⁹ The name Ζωή has two implicit references. On the one hand, Ζωή is the name of Eve in *Gen.* 3:20, according to the Septuagint; on the other hand, in the Valentinian traditions, Ζωή is one of the four female characters of the Pleromatic Ogdoad.

¹³⁰ *HypArch* II, 95, 13- 96, 3.

¹³¹ By the periphrasis 'Sophia-like characters', I mean every female character who bears a typological resemblance to Sophia.

soteriological Sophia, thus proving the extent to which the paradoxical nature of the fallen feminine was perceived by Gnostic writers.

Overall, the analysis of *HypArch*'s portrayal of the fallen feminine coincides with the findings about *ApJohn*'s feminine only to a certain extent, since this text shows the paradoxical nature of Sophia up to the point of hypostatizing her defective and soteriological functions in two different characters. By splitting Sophia into two intra-pleromatic characters – one with mostly pejorative connotations and the other with salvific connotations – *HypArch* is acknowledging and hypostatizing the ambiguity of the character of Sophia, thus giving prominence to Sophia's duplicity.

II.3.4 A Soteriological Sophia: *On the Origin of the World* (NHC II, 5)

In the previous section on *OrigWorld*,¹³² it has been highlighted that this treatise does not provide information regarding the highest female divinity but only about its lower manifestations. As a matter of fact, although Sophia appears here in many guises,¹³³ it is still possible to draw an overall portrait of the fallen feminine.

In *OrigWorld*, Sophia is presented as more independent from her male counterpart than in the other texts analysed so far. Here, she is free to exercise her own volition and resembles the Primeval Light.¹³⁴ Furthermore, while *ApJohn* and *HypArch* envision Sophia trapped in the inferior world because of her sin, *OrigWorld* considers Sophia as a liminal being who is free to move around between the two realms, in spite of her sin. Hence, her leaping out of the Pleroma does not seem to result in a permanent condition; it is rather a momentary lack of control that does not prevent her from accessing the Pleroma after the fall.¹³⁵ In addition, many salvific events attributed to her are described at length. For instance, just as in *HypArch* the theophany above the

¹³² *Supra* II.2.4.

¹³³ In *OrigWorld* II, 101, 34 – 102, 1 and II, 102, 25-26, the name of Sophia is also used to indicate one of Yaldabaoth's daughters, who seems to have a special place among his children for she is in charge of the sixth heaven.

¹³⁴ *OrigWorld* II, 98, 14-16.

¹³⁵ *OrigWorld* II, 100, 26-28; 103, 30-32.

waters reveals the female likeness of Incorruptibility, so in *OrigWorld* Sophia appears to the archons in the waters:

And having seen the likeness of Pistis in the waters (ΑΠΙΝΕ ΝΤΠΙΣΤΙC ΖΝ ΝΗΜΟΟΥ), the prime parent grieved very much, especially when he heard her voice, like the voice that had called to him out of the waters.¹³⁶

However, unlike *HypArch*, there is a second theophanic event after this first one: the appearance and descent of ‘Adam of Light’.¹³⁷ The two events seem subsequent. At first, Sophia reveals her image into the waters, but fails to make her son Yaldabaoth believe in the existence of a superior God. Then, upon Yaldabaoth’s request, the ‘Immortal Man of Light’ reveals his existence.¹³⁸ Sophia’s response to the appearance of this luminous man is extremely significant for the understanding of the fallen feminine imagery:

Then when Pronoia (Sophia) saw the emissary, she became enamored of him. But he hated her because she was in the darkness (ΝΤΟQ ΔΕ ΝΕQ ΜΟCΤΕ ΝΗΜΟC ΧΕ ΝΕCΖΙ ΠΚΑΚΕ). But she desired to embrace him, and she was not able to (ΜΠΕCΘΗ ΒΟΜ). When she was unable to assuage her love, she poured out her light upon the earth (ΑCΠΩΖΤ ΝΠΕCΟΥΕΙΝ ΕΧΗ ΠΚΑΖ). Since that day, that emissary has been called “Adam of Light” (ΧΙΜ ΦΟΟΥ ΕΤΗΜΑΥ ΑΥΜΟΥΤΕ ΑΠΑΓΓΕΛΟC ΕΤΗΜΑΧ ΧΕ ΑΔΑΜ ΟΥΟΕΙΝ), whose rendering is “the luminous man of blood”, and the earth spread over him, holy Adaman, whose rendering is “the Holy Land of Adamantine”. Since that day, all the authorities have honored the blood of the virgin. And the earth was purified on account of the blood of the virgin (ΠΚΑΖ ΔΕ ΑΥΤΟΥΒΟ ΕΤΒΕ ΠCΝΟC ΝΤΠΑΤΘΕΝΟC). But most of all, the water was purified through the likeness of Pistis Sophia, who had appeared to the prime parent in the waters (ΝΖΟΥΟ ΔΕ ΝΖΟΥΟ ΑΠΜΟΟΥ ΤΟΥΒΟ ΖΙΤΗ ΠΕΙΝΕ

¹³⁶ *OrigWorld* II, 107, 18-22. This episode occurs also in *OrigWorld* II, 103, 15-32. Here, although she failed to instruct her child, the truth was received and accepted by Sabaoth – Yaldabaoth’s son – who started a war with his father, flanked by Zoe, Sophia’s daughter. This is an additional correspondence between *OrigWorld* and *HypArch*.

¹³⁷ *OrigWorld* II, 107, 35 – 109, 1.

¹³⁸ *OrigWorld* II, 107, 26.

ἡΤΠΙCΤΙC ΤCΟΦΙΑ ΤΑΕΙ ἡΤΑΖΟΥΩΝΖ ΕΒΟΛ` ἡΠΑΡΧΙΓΕΝΕΤΩΡ`
 ΖΗἡἡΜΟΥ). Justly, then, it has been said: “through the water.” The holy
 water, since it vivifies the all, purifies it (ΠΜΟΥ ΕΤΟΥΑΑΒ ΕΠΕΙ
 ΚΤἡΖΟ ἡΠΤΗΡΚ` ΚΤΟΥΒΟ ἡΜΟΥ).¹³⁹

The exceptional ambiguity and obscurity of this text have often struck its interpreters. First of all, this is the only instance among Gnostic texts in which Sophia is rejected – even if only at first – by the Saviour, who is here identified with Adam of Light.¹⁴⁰ Despite this rejection, *OrigWorld* acknowledges Sophia as the rightful companion of the Saviour, as it is explicitly stated in *OrigWorld* II, 106, 5-6, thus generating an apparent contradiction. In the first instance, the Saviour could not remain with Sophia because she was covered in darkness and, therefore, unworthy as a bride. Once again, the theme of the “dark bride” – already found in *ApJohn* II, 13, 13-17 – as an unworthy bride is present in a Gnostic text. In other words, the opposition between lawful and unlawful bride is reiterated once again, since Sophia needs to correct her deficiency in order to be reunited with her companion. Hence, this passage highlights fully the ambiguity of the fallen feminine. On the one hand, it proves that Sophia needs the intervention of her companion to become a soteriological agent, since the overflow of light is considered to be the result of the Saviour’s rejection of her love. On the other hand, the passage directly attributes to the ‘blood of the virgin’ (ΠCΝΟC ἡΤΠΑΤΘΕΝΟC) – that is, the overflow of light – a redemptive and purifying power, which is described through a clear baptismal imagery. Pronoia’s blood has purified the waters and, in turn, the waters vivify

¹³⁹ *OrigWorld* II, 108, 14 – 109, 1.

¹⁴⁰ In this regard, it ought to be noted that most Gnostics identified “Adam of Light” with the Saviour. The identification of Christ or the Saviour with a luminous man is not only very common, but also a distinctive feature of Gnostic texts, even when the association is implicit as it is in this case. The association between Adam and Christ is rooted in the Gnostic exegesis of the Pauline text of *1Cor* 15:45-49: ‘The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit. The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of heaven. As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the heavenly man, so also are those who are of heaven. And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man.’ Furthermore, the allegorical interpretation of Adam as Christ the Saviour is strengthened by means of the Johannine imagery of light, which Gnostics always used to indicate pleromatic beings. The identification of Christ with the “Adam of Light” is not exclusive of *OrigWorld*, but it can also be found in *GosTh* 83, 47:19 – 47:24, where Jesus is identified with the ‘image of the Father light’. For more information, see Tardieu (1974), 85-99 and Pagels (1999), 483-487.

humankind. This overflowing of blood is indeed the second peculiarity of *OrigWorld*'s description of the fallen feminine, since it reveals an unusual pattern in the sexual behaviour of Sophia. As noted by Tardieu,¹⁴¹ the pouring of her light – metaphorically represented by her blood – over the earth has the same reproductive function of the male seed, thus attributing to her an active procreative role that usually belongs to male characters. Therefore, this passage represents an extremely significant exception to the sexual language used in all the other texts, since it attributes vivifying power to female blood rather than to male seed. In this regard, Sophia is not only the adulterer who begets an abortion, but she is also an active generative force who releases her vivifying spirit over the earth.

An alternative interpretation of these theophanies above the waters is given by Stroumsa.¹⁴² He considers Sophia's failed attempt to unite with the Saviour equal to the archon's failed attempt to grab the spiritual Eve. According to him, both episodes prove the archontic desire to possess the loved one. However, I believe that two episodes cannot be equated because of their extremely different outcome. While the unsuccessful archontic attempt to seduce the spiritual Eve resulted in the creation of a carnal Eve and in the perpetration of the archontic dominion, the unrealised union between Sophia and the Adam of Light resulted in the pouring of 'salvific blood' for the redemption of humankind. Although the failed attempt may associate the two events, the results could not be more different. While the archons create a material and fleeting being, Sophia's blood aids humans to achieve redemption. Moreover, *OrigWorld* seems to associate Sophia's blood with the blood of the Saviour, as is also confirmed by the rendering of the Saviour's name with 'the luminous Man of blood'. Stroumsa understands Sophia's blood as menstrual blood, a miscarriage due to Sophia's will to generate on her own. Yet, he fails to mention the fact that Pronoia's blood is the blood that will 'purify the earth'. Therefore, it seems more likely to me that, far from proposing only a pejorative and archontic representation of Sophia, *OrigWorld* is here using a

¹⁴¹ Tardieu (1974), 141-174. Tardieu connects Sophia with the character of Eros in *OrigWorld*, thus interpreting this character as a perfect example of Gnostic syncretism.

¹⁴² Stroumsa (1984), 64.

Christological image – the blood of the Saviour – to affirm the soteriological role of Sophia.¹⁴³

It would appear that, among the texts considered in this research, *OrigWorld* stresses the soteriological role of the fallen feminine the most. Consequently, it is also the work in which the character of Sophia is most ambiguous, so much so that the reader can find it extremely difficult to discern the single episodes. Nonetheless, a confused narrative does not diminish the contribution that this text provides to give a comprehensive representation of the feminine in Ophite, Barbeloite and Sethian movements.

II.3.5 The Defective Sophia according to Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* I, 30

Compared to *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*, *AdHaer* I, 30 takes a slightly different stand concerning the feminine. In the previous section,¹⁴⁴ it has been highlighted that Irenaeus has retro-projected Sophia's features on Ennoia, thus making her a "primordial Sophia", so to speak. According to Irenaeus, just as Yaldabaoth is the result of Sophia's sinful action, so Sophia is the result of Ennoia's inability to handle the power of the Father and the Son. Therefore, Sophia is already the result of the Mother's inability to restrain herself, thus rooting the "original sin" in the highest female divine being. Although Irenaeus conceives the error to be internal to the Trinity, he feels the need to maintain a certain distance between pleromatic beings and the actual sinner, Sophia. Hence, he inserts into the Ophite mythology an element that is typical of Valentinian speculations and alien to the previous texts here considered: the separation of Sophia into two different characters.¹⁴⁵ According to the heresiological account, this is the Ophite version of Sophia's story:

The power, on the other hand, which overflowed from the Woman, since it was endowed with moisture of light, fell downwards from her

¹⁴³ In the following Part III, I will show how Sophia's passions are interpreted as the Saviour's Passion in Valentinianism, thus establishing an interesting link between the two traditions.

¹⁴⁴ *Supra* II.2.5.

¹⁴⁵ In the Valentinian tradition, these characters take the name of Sophia Echmot and Sophia Achamot, see *infra* III.3. Some scholars believe that this split happens also in *ApJohn*, see MacRae (1970), 89. I have proven this is not the case in *supra* II.3.1.

Progenitors, they teach, though she of her own will retain the moisture of light, which they call Left-handed, Prounikos, Sophia and Androgynous. She simply descended into the waters which were in the state of calm and set them in motion by recklessly agitating them to their depths. From them, she took a body for herself. [...] she made an attempt to escape from the waters and ascend to her Mother. She could not accomplish this because of the weight of the body which surrounded her. She felt very bad and she schemed to hide the light she had from above, fearing lest it too should suffer from the lower elements as she had. But when she had received power from her moisture of light, she leaped back and was lifted up on high. [...] But when she was seized by a longing for the higher light [...] she put off the body and was freed from it. Now this body that she is said to have put off they style a female from a female.¹⁴⁶

Irenaeus has a double purpose here. On the one hand, he openly classifies maleness and femaleness as philosophical categories, thus identifying the feminine with the material part of Sophia, the body. On the other hand, he re-elaborates the story in order to distance the properly pleromatic Sophia (the power overflowed from the First Woman, the right handed)¹⁴⁷ from the inferior and material one (Sophia *Prounikos*, the left handed), thus avoiding a twist to the Gnostic myth up to the point of making it unrecognisable by his readers. This material Sophia, which he calls the *foemina a foemina*, needs to be expelled to free the divine from its feminine material part that is considered intrinsically faulty. In this respect, Irenaeus is borrowing a Valentinian solution

¹⁴⁶ Irenaeus' *AdHaer* I, 30, 3-4: *Virtutem autem quae superebulliit ex foeminam, habentem humectationem luminis, a patribus decidisse deorsum docet, sua autem voluntate habentem humectationem luminis: quam et Sinistram et Prunicon et Sophiam et Masculo-foemina vocant. Et descendente simpliciter in aquas, cum essent immobiles, et movisse quoque eas, petulanter agentem usque ad abyssos, et assumpsisse ex eis corpus. [...] conatam esse fugere aqua et ascendere matrem, non potuisse [eam] autem propter gravedinem circumpositi corporis. Valde autem male se habentem machinatam esse abscondere illud quod erat desuper lumen, timentem ne et ipsum laederetur ab inferioris elementis, quomodo et ipsa. Et cum virtutem accepisset ab humectatione eius quod erat secundum ea lumen, resiliit et in sublimitatem elata est [...] Cum accepisset concupiscentiam superioris luminis et virtutem sumpsisset, per omnia deposuisse corpus et liberatam ab eo. Corpus autem hoc exuisse dicunt eam, foeminam a foemina nominant.*

¹⁴⁷ The identification of the First Woman with a right-handed being relies on the abovementioned passage of Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 30, 2: 'When she was not capable of enduring or receiving the greatness of the lights, they say that she was completely filled and then overflowed on the left side. Thus, their own son, Christ, as of the right side and elevated to the upper region, was immediately caught up with the Mother into the incorruptible aeon.' In this case, the connection with the Valentinian version of Sophia's myth is even more explicit because of the Sophia-Christ duplicity. This topic will be discussed later, *infra* III.3.

and applying it to the Ophite theologoumena. However, as I will show in the next section, the Valentinians applied this solution in order to meet a philosophical need – that is, a Platonic reading of the Gnostic myth – whilst Irenaeus is using it for a polemical and anti-heresiological purpose.¹⁴⁸

Overall, Irenaeus does not deny the soteriological role of Sophia,¹⁴⁹ but he insists on the fact that all her actions need to be fulfilled by a male character, namely, Christ. As happened in the case of his mother Ennoia, Sophia becomes the lawful bride only when she gains her role of companion of Christ: ‘They say that when he descended into this world, he first clothed himself with his sister, Sophia. Both were exultant resting against each other. These, they hold, are the bridegroom and the bride.’¹⁵⁰ Hence, Irenaeus seems to have understood the innovative and revolutionary strand of this Gnostic mythology; however, he re-interpreted it to meet his heresiological goal.

II.3.6 Concluding Remarks on the Divine Duplicity

The analysis conducted in this section has shown how the paradoxical nature of the feminine in Gnostic texts is deep-rooted in *ApJohn*, *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*. Each of the works analysed here stresses this paradoxical nature of the feminine to a different degree, thus giving precious information concerning the Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite evaluation of feminine imagery.

Having stressed the transcendence of Barbelo and her positive role in the divine production, *ApJohn* prefers to discuss only briefly Sophia’s soteriological functions in order to mark the opposition between the two female pneumatic beings. In this treatise, which works within a predominantly Barbeloite framework, Sophia is described mainly as a defective aeon, whilst her soteriological role of instructor is mentioned only briefly, albeit not entirely overlooked. In contrast, *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*, which show predominantly

¹⁴⁸ *Infra* III.3.

¹⁴⁹ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 30, 6 and 11-12.

¹⁵⁰ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 30, 11: [*Dicunt*] *descendentem Christum in hunc mundum, induisse primum sororem suam Sophiam, et exultasse utrosque refrigerantes super invicem: et hoc esse sponsum et sponsa definiunt.*

Ophite and Sethite mythologoumena, present a more ambiguous portrayal of the fallen feminine. Although both texts envision Sophia as the defective aeon who originates the inferior world, they also recognise Sophia's soteriological role in the Gnostic economy of salvation. More specifically, *HypArch* acknowledges Sophia's ambiguity so much so that it hypostatizes her two functions (defective aeon and soteriological aeon) in two different characters, respectively Sophia and her daughter Zoe. Likewise, *OrigWorld* insists greatly on the soteriological role of Pronoia, making her blood the one which will 'purify the earth'. In the case of the representation of the fallen feminine, Irenaeus' accounts are deeply biased, but faithful nonetheless. Having understood the typological mechanism of resemblance that governs Gnostic texts, he exploits this in order to condemn the feminine *tout court*, thus denying the differences between the various aspects of the Gnostic feminine.

In conclusion, while *HypArch* and *OrigWorld* stress the soteriological role of Sophia, *ApJohn* insists on her defectivity and mentions briefly her soteriological role. Notwithstanding this difference, it is worth analysing these texts together for they show three ways of understanding Sophia's soteriological role: from the simple participation of Sophia in the creation of spiritual humans in *ApJohn* to the salvific blood of *OrigWorld*.

II.4 Spiritual and Carnal Eve: the Incarnated Feminine

The previous chapters have shown the ambiguity of the intra-pleromatic and the fallen feminine. This section will show that the contrasting combination of soteriological features and defectiveness is also proper to the incarnated feminine.

In Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite mythologies, Eve is a pivotal character who often plays an essential role in the economy of salvation. In the case of the incarnated feminine, the ambiguity of female characters shown thus far is personified in two separate and polar characters: the pleromatic and spiritual Eve and the carnal and hylic Eve. In order to explain the separation of the two Eves, I will need to tackle the issue of the Gnostic understanding of human creation and anthropology, for the distinction in three natures – that is, the pneumatic, psychic and hylic nature – is pivotal if we are to understand the differences between the two Eves. Hence, this section will explore in detail the accounts of human creation in order to determine the various roles and functions of Eve.

II.4.1 Spiritual and Carnal Eve in *The Apocryphon of John* (NHC II, 1)

In *ApJohn*, Adam is fashioned by the evil archons according to the image of the Man that is reflected in the waters below. All of these archons take part in the creation of the body and each one of them contribute by creating a specific part of his body.¹⁵¹ However, such a body is ‘completely inactive and

¹⁵¹ *ApJohn* II, 15, 2 – 19, 34: ‘And he said to the authorities that attended him, “Come, let us create a man according to the image of God and according to our likeness, that his image may become a light for us.” And they created by means of their respective powers in correspondence with the characteristics which were given. And each authority supplied a characteristic in the form of the image which he had seen in its (natural form). He created a being according to the likeness of the first, perfect Man. And they said, “Let us calling him Adam, that his name may become a power of light for us” [...] And when the mother wanted to retrieve the power which she had given to the chief archon, she petitioned the Mother-Father of the All who is most merciful. [...] And they said to Yaldabaoth “Blow into his face something of your spirit and his body will arise.” And he blew into his face the spirit which is the power of his mother; he did not know (this), for he exists in ignorance. And the power of the mother went out of Yaldabaoth into the natural body which they had fashioned after the image of the one who exists from the beginning. The body moved and gained strength, and it was luminous.’

motionless',¹⁵² for it is merely a psychic (soul endowed) body, a faded and inferior copy of the true Man who appears to them in the theophany above the waters. Nonetheless, 'the body moved and gained strength, and it was luminous'¹⁵³ when Sophia tricks the Demiurge into blowing her power into this carnal Adam. This narrative sequence shows that Adam is created first as a merely psychic creature and that he gains the spirit only at later time.¹⁵⁴ Hence, the first creation (psychic Adam) is inferior and consubstantial with the archons, whereas the second creation (pneumatic Adam) is superior even to the Chief Archon, for he is made consubstantial with the Pleroma by Sophia's breath of life. Hence, in *ApJohn*, Adam possesses both a pneumatic element – Sophia's spirit – and a psychic element – that is, the body fashioned by the archons. By representing human creation as a two steps process, *ApJohn* is resorting to the theory of a *double creation*, albeit in an inverse order compared to "orthodox" exegetes.¹⁵⁵ Commonly, it is called a doctrine of double creation every interpretation that envisions the creation of humankind in two different stages: first, God creates perfect intellectual and spiritual beings, often described as androgynous, and only later does he create physical men and women.¹⁵⁶

Once Adam's luminosity was noticed by Yaldabaoth, the Chief Archon casts him in the lower regions of his kingdom out of jealousy, for he realises that his creature has become greater than him. Nonetheless, Sophia takes pity on the man she has breathed into and petitions the Pleroma to send him a helper:

¹⁵² *ApJohn* II, 19, 14.

¹⁵³ *ApJohn* II, 19, 32-33.

¹⁵⁴ An alternative interpretation of the creation of humankind in *ApJohn* is offered by Luttikhuisen. In Luttikhuisen (2000a), he underlines how this creation – that is, the psychic creation – is conceived as the creation 'in the image of God', namely the luminous archetype. Furthermore, in Luttikhuisen (2006), 62-71 he interprets the 'light-power' from the Mother as an Aristotelic δυνάμεις, since this would solve the contradiction between the fact that all humans need to possess this spirit (otherwise they could not stand) and the fact that *ApJohn* states that only those who possess the spirit will be saved.

¹⁵⁵ The idea of a double creation is certainly not alien to Christian theologians of the third and fourth century, since both Origen and Gregory of Nyssa resort to it in their works; see Simonetti (2004a) and Ludlow (2007), 166-181.

¹⁵⁶ This theory of a double creation leaves the problem of the creation of a hylic body unsolved. In this regard, I am inclined to agree with King (2009), 103 and 118-119 who believes that Adam gained a hylic body only at a later time after the expulsion from Eden.

But the blessed One, the Mother-Father, the beneficent and merciful One, had mercy on the power of the Mother which had been brought forth out of the chief archon, for they (the archons) might gain power over the natural and perceptible body (ΑΓΩ ΟΝ ΧΕ ΣΕΝΑΘΗΘΟΜ' ΕΖΡΑΙ ΕΧΜ ΠΣΩΜΑ ΜΦΥΧΙΚΟΝ ΑΓΩ ΠΕΣΘΗΤΟΝ). And he sent, through his beneficent Spirit and his great mercy, a helper to Adam (ΒΟΗΘΟΣ ΝΑΔΑΜ), luminous Epinoia which comes out of him, who is called Life (ΟΥΕΠΙΝΟΙΑ ΝΟΥΘΕΙΝ ΤΑΙ ΟΥ ΕΒΟΛ ΝΖΗΤΩ ΤΕ ΕΛΥΜΟΥΤΕ ΕΡΟΣ ΧΕ ΖΩΗ). And she assists the whole creature, by toiling with him and by restoring him to his fullness (Pleroma) and by teaching him about the descent of his seed (and) by teaching him about the way of the ascent, (which is) the way he came down (ΤΑΙ ΔΕ ΕΣΡΖΥΠΟΥΡΓΕΙ ΝΤΚΤΙΣΙΣ ΤΗΡΣ ΕΣΩΕΠ ΖΙΣΕ ΝΗΜΑΩ' ΑΓΩ ΕΣΣΩΖΕ ΜΜΑΩ' ΕΖΟΥΝ ΑΠΕΡΠΛΗΡΟΜΑ ΑΓΩ ΕΣΤΣΕΒΟ ΜΜΑΩ' ΑΤΕΦΘΙΝΕΙ ΑΠΙΤΗ ΜΠΣΠΕΡΜΑ ΕΣΤΣΑΒΟ ΜΜΟΩ' ΕΠΜΑΙΤ ΕΒΩΚ ΕΖΡΑΙ ΠΜΑΙΤ' ΕΝΤΑΩ'ΕΙ ΕΖΡΑΙ ΜΜΑΥ). And the luminous Epinoia was hidden in Adam (ΑΓΩ ΤΕΠΙΝΟΙΑ ΝΟΥΘΕΙΝ ΕΣΖΗΤ' ΖΝ ΑΔΑΜ), in order that the archons might not know her, but that the Epinoia might be a correction of the deficiency of the Mother (ΑΛΛΑ ΝΣΩΩΠΕ ΝΒΙ ΤΕΠΙΝΟΙΑ ΝΟΥΣΩΖΕ ΜΠΩΤΑ ΝΤΜΜΑΥ).¹⁵⁷

Although the name of Eve is not mentioned explicitly in this passage, the identification of Epinoia with Eve is confirmed by the Genesis language used in *ApJohn*. As God in *Gen.* 2 decides to give a βοηθόν – a ‘helper’ – to Adam so the Virginal Spirit sends Epinoia as a helper to Adam (ΒΟΗΘΟΣ ΝΑΔΑΜ).¹⁵⁸ Likewise, Epinoia is described as coming out of him (ΤΑΙ ΟΥ ΕΒΟΛ ΝΖΗΤΩ), just as Eve is taken from Adam’s rib.¹⁵⁹ In truth, even the fact that she is not yet explicitly named Eve confirms that she is the woman created to help Adam in *Gen.* 2:21, for – according to Genesis – the name ‘Eve’ has been attributed to her only after the expulsion from Eden in *Gen.* 3:20: καὶ ἐκάλεσεν Ἀδὰμ τὸ ὄνομα τῆς γυναικὸς αὐτοῦ Ζωή ὅτι αὕτη μήτηρ πάντων τῶν ζώντων.¹⁶⁰ In

¹⁵⁷ *ApJohn* II, 20, 9-28,

¹⁵⁸ For further observations on Sophia’s role as a helper, see Luttikhuisen (2006), 53-55 and (2000a), 151-155.

¹⁵⁹ See *Gen.* 2:21: ὕπνωσεν καὶ ἔλαβεν μίαν τῶν πλευρῶν αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀνεπλήρωσεν σάρκα ἀντ’ αὐτῆς. In the Coptic text, it is not entirely clear if the pronoun is referred to the Virginal Spirit or to Adam. Be as it may, the very fact that Epinoia ‘comes out’ from a male being suggests her identification with Eve.

¹⁶⁰ *Gen.* 3:20: ‘The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living.’

addition, when observing the Greek text, the connection between Epinoia of Life (ΤΕΠΙΝΟΙΑ ΝΟΥΘΕΙΝ) and Eve becomes even more evident, for the Hebrew name נָחָשׁ (from the verb ‘to be’ in biblical Hebrew) has been translated in Greek as Ζωή, Life (ΖΩΗ). Lastly, the fact that Epinoia of Life is hidden in Adam, thus originating an androgynous human being, is consistent with the anthropology of *Gen. 1:27*: καὶ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν ἄνθρωπον κατ’ εἰκόνα θεοῦ ἐποίησεν αὐτόν ἄρσεν καὶ θήλυ ἐποίησεν αὐτούς.¹⁶¹ Furthermore, the fact that Epinoia of Light has been hidden in Adam confirms the typological mechanism that governs Gnostic myth. Epinoia and Adam constitute a mixed syzygy, thus imperfectly reproducing on earth the pleromatic syzygial order of the aeons. Therefore, this myth confirms both the importance of the unity of the syzygy for Gnostic mythologies and the typological resemblance according to which the cosmos is organised. Epinoia is created with the purpose of restoring the pneumatic Adam to his rightful place, thus correcting the ‘deficiencies of the Mother (Sophia)’ (ΜΠΩΤΑ ΝΤΜΜΑΥ).¹⁶² Hence, as well as Sophia, Adam needs a companion to be re-introduced in the Pleroma.

From an anthropological perspective, the myth is therefore suggesting that the unity of the spiritual Adam and Eve is the lawful status of humankind. Consequently, it is not surprising that the division of humankind into two different sexes is interpreted as the ignorant act of an ignorant Archon:

Then the Epinoia of the Light hid herself in him (Adam) (ΤΟΤΕ ΤΕΠΙΝΟΙΑ ΜΠΟΥΕΙΝ ΑΣΖΩΠ` ΝΖΗΤΩ). And the chief archon wanted to bring her out of his rib (ΑΓΩ ΑΦΟΥΩΘΕ ΝΒΙ ΠΡΩΤΑΡΧΩΝ ΛΕΙΝΕ ΜΜΟΣ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΗ ΠΕΦΩΠΡ). But the Epinoia of the Light cannot be grasped. Although darkness pursued her, it did not catch her. And he (the Chief Archon) brought a part of his power out of him (Adam). And he (the Chief Archon) made another creature in the form of a woman according to the likeness of the Epinoia which had appeared to him (ΑΓΩ ΑΦΤΑΜΙΟ ΝΚΕΠΛΑCΙC ΖΗ ΟΥΜΟΡΦΗ ΝCΖΙΜΕ ΚΑΤΑ ΠΙΝΕ ΝΤΕΠΙΝΟΙΑ ΕΤΑΖΟΥΩΝΖ

¹⁶¹ *Gen. 1:27*: ‘So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.’

¹⁶² In this respect, I agree with Buckley (1986), 54-56 and Luttikhuisen (2006), 70-71, who consider both Adam and Eve to be pneumatic in *ApJohn*’s account, rather than considering Eve as fully pneumatic and Adam as merely a psychic being.

ΝΑQ` ΕΒΟΛ). And he brought the part which he had taken from the power of the man into the female creature.

And the Chief Archon saw the virgin who stood by Adam, and that the luminous Epinoia had appeared in her (ΑΥΩ ΑQ`ΝΑΥ ΝΒΙ ΠΡΩΤΑΡΧΩΝ ΕΠΠΑΡΘΕΝΟC ΕΤΑ ΖΕ ΕΡΑΤC ΜΝ ΑΔΑΜ` ΑΥΩ ΧΕ ΑCΟΥΩΝΖ ΕΒΟΛ ΝΖΗΤC ΝΒΙ ΤΕΠΙΝΟΙΑ ΝΟΥΘΕΙΝ ΝΩΝΖ). And Yaldabaoth was full of ignorance. And when the Pronoia of the All noticed (it), she sent some and they snatched Life out of Eve (ΑCΓΝΗΝΟΟΥ ΝΝΖΘΕΙΝΕ ΑΥΩ ΑΥΤΩΡΠ` ΝΖΩΗ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΝ ΕΥΖΑ).¹⁶³

Once again, *ApJohn* describes Eve's creation as a double creation. First, the pleromatic Eve is created, whilst the material Eve is created only at a later stage. However, there is a striking difference between Adam's and Eve's creations. Whilst Adam is created originally as a material being who receives the Mother's spirit only at a later time, the Epinoia of Light is created first as a spiritual being and then trapped into a psychic and material body. In this regard, the narrative of Eve's creation is diametrically opposite to that of Adam. She is primarily a pneumatic being, and only accidentally a psychic one. However, *ApJohn* postulates a separate ontological status for the spiritual Eve and the carnal Eve by personifying them in two separate characters. Such a neat ontological separation between the spiritual and psychic human is exclusive of the incarnated feminine, since Adam remains always a whole, albeit composed of different parts.

The contrast between the two Eves could not be more marked. While the pneumatic Eve is 'luminous', the psychic Eve is pursued by 'darkness'. Similarly, whilst the psychic Eve is subdued entirely to the will of the Chief Archon – for she is his creature – the pneumatic Eve cannot be grasped by him – for she outdoes the Archon's nature. Most importantly, while the psychic Eve is the origin of evil, the Epinoia of Light is one of the main soteriological agents of the story.¹⁶⁴ As a matter of fact, the spiritual Eve assumes almost

¹⁶³ *ApJohn* II, 22, 29 – 23, 3 and 24, 8-15.

¹⁶⁴ Alternative interpretations of Eve's creation have been proposed by Buckley (1986), 54-56. Expanding on Orbe (1974) and Wilson (1973), she proposes a fourfold exegesis of Eve: Spirit,

Christological functions in the abovementioned passage. Thus, she is the one who awakes Adam's self-awareness:

And he (Adam) saw the woman besides him. And in that moment the luminous Epinoia (ΤΕΠΙΝΟΙΑ ΝΟΥΟΕΙΝ) appeared, and she lifted the veil (ΝΗΠΚΑΛΥΜΜΑ) which lay over his mind. And he became sober from the drunkenness of darkness. And he recognised his counter-image (ΑΥΘΑΥΤΟΥΝ ΤΕΦΕΙΝΕ), and he said, "This is indeed bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh".¹⁶⁵

This passage highlights clearly the importance of Epinoia of Light, for her incarnation – that is, the incarnation of a spiritual and divine being – makes Adam acknowledge his consubstantiality with the divine.¹⁶⁶

It appears, therefore, that *ApJohn* postulates two soteriological events, assigned respectively to Epinoia and the Saviour. The difference between the two is that while the Saviour is *an eschatological soteriological agent*, Epinoia is the *protological soteriological agent*. Epinoia of Light is a soteriological agent insofar as she functions as protological instructor of humankind, as also confirmed by her identification with the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.¹⁶⁷ Hence, Epinoia's revelation is a protological action, the memory of which will be partially destroyed by the 'bond of forgetfulness' cast by Yaldabaoth.¹⁶⁸ Insofar as the spiritual Eve acts as an instructor, *ApJohn* stresses the similarities between her and Sophia. In the the episode of the appearance of a female soteriological character in the form of an eagle, the characters of Sophia and Epinoia are almost indistinguishable one from the other.¹⁶⁹ Hence, both Epinoia and Sophia have the power to save humankind by revealing to the

Sophia, the Epinoia of Light and Eve. Although Buckley's interpretation has the merit of highlighting the connections between the different female characters of *ApJohn*'s, her classification flattens the characters one on the other, without giving the due attention to the differences between Sophia and the Spiritual Eve.

¹⁶⁵ *ApJohn* II, 23, 4-10. This is also confirmed by *ApJohn* II, 21, 15-16.

¹⁶⁶ This is also noted by Luttikhuisen (2000a), 155 and King (2009), 128-129.

¹⁶⁷ *ApJohn* II, 22, 3-9.

¹⁶⁸ *ApJohn* II, 21, 12.

¹⁶⁹ *ApJohn* II, 23, 20-35. Contrarily to texts with marked Ophite mythologoumena, neither Sophia nor Epinoia are identified with the Serpent in *ApJohn*. Nevertheless, the beast has a positive function for it is an instrument of revelation for Adam and Eve, see *ApJohn* II, 22, 9-20.

pneumatic seed its true origin. Nonetheless, the two female characters should not be confused with each other since their work differs slightly. As I have pointed out several times, the spiritual Eve is a protological agent of salvation: she reveals to humankind its true nature at the time of creation, whereas Sophia acts as soteriological agent throughout history, acting to contrast Yaldabaoth's actions.¹⁷⁰ Although the feminine plays a major soteriological role, it must be noted that the sole efforts of Sophia and the spiritual Eve are not sufficient in *ApJohn* to guarantee humanity's salvation, for their soteriological actions need to be fulfilled by the intervention of a male Saviour.

ApJohn's portrayal of the carnal Eve is opposite to that of the Epinoia of Light, since the carnal Eve is an archontic product *tout court*, used to serve the scope of Yaldabaoth and his archons.¹⁷¹ The passage reported previously highlights the typological mechanism that governs Gnostic mythology, presenting the Chief Archon's creation of the psychic Eve as a pale copy of the pneumatic creation of the true Eve. Regarding the relationship between Eve and Yaldabaoth, the abovementioned passage of *ApJohn* clarifies Yaldabaoth's inability to create anything more than an empty shell resembling the Epinoia of Light. To a certain extent, Yaldabaoth is here perpetrating the same mistake of his mother, for he is disrupting the syzygial order by breaking the unity of Adam and Eve:

And the Chief Archon defiled her (ΛΥΩ ΛΟΧΩΣΜΕ ΝΗΜΟΣ ΝΗΙ ΠΡΩΤΑΡΧΩΝ) and he begot in her two sons (ΛΥΩ ΛΟΧΠΟ ΕΒΟΛ ΝΖΗΤΕ ΝΩΗΡΕ ΣΝΑΥ) [...] And these he called with the name of Cain and Abel with a view to deceive. Now up to the present day sexual intercourse continued due to the Chief Archon (ΨΑΖΟΥΝ ΟΕ ΑΠΟΟΥ ΝΖΟΟΥ ΑΣΘΩ ΝΗΙ ΤΣΥΝΟΥΣΙΑ). And he planted sexual desire (ΝΟΥΣΠΟΡΑ ΝΕΠΙΘΥΜΙΑ) in her who belongs to Adam. And he produced through intercourse the copies of the bodies, and he inspired them with his counterfeit spirit

¹⁷⁰ For instance, the episode of the flood or the assistance to the seed of Seth, see *ApJohn* II, 28, 32-15 and II, 24, 32 – 25, 16.

¹⁷¹ It is worth noting that, once more, the narrative of *ApJohn* is faithful to the Genesis' narrative, according to which Eve is fashioned from Adam's rib.

(ΑΦΤΟΥΝΟΥΣ ΔΕ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΗΤΗ ΤΣΥΝΟΥΣΙΑ ΗΠΛΗΠΟ ΗΠΕΙΝΕ ΗΝΣΩΜΑ
 ΑΥΘ ΑΡΧΩΡΗΓΕΙ ΝΑΥ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΗ ΠΕΦΠΗΝΑ ΕΤΩΒΒΙΑΕΙΤ).¹⁷²

Here, Yaldabaoth manages to separate Adam from the Epinoia of Light hidden in him, thus creating a separate vessel for Epinoia, the carnal Eve, who becomes the primary mean of perpetuation of his power. This passage gives a representation of the carnal Eve as utterly powerless; she is a means to an end.¹⁷³ Similarly, the human beings who do not possess the spirit are merely objects in the hands of the counterfeit God who created them. This race of human beings that are the result of the union between the carnal Eve and Yaldabaoth are destined to be destroyed. On the contrary, the legitimate union between Adam and Eve, which typologically reproduces the intra-syzygial union, originates the true spiritual seed in Seth, the elected child.¹⁷⁴

Just as the carnal Eve is subject to Yaldabaoth's power, so are carnal women subdued to the archon's will. The role played by women in perpetrating the counterfeit spirit is also confirmed by the episode of the union between the daughters of men and the evil archons. Here the daughters of men are tricked into generating children to the archons, thus causing the 'whole creation to be enslaved forever'.¹⁷⁵ This story also testifies to the influence of apocalyptic Judaism on Gnostic mythologies.¹⁷⁶ According to Stroumsa, *ApJohn* would be

¹⁷² *ApJohn* II, 24, 15-31.

¹⁷³ Interestingly King (2009), 127 noticed that the removal of Epinoia of Light from Eve before she is raped is a deliberate effort to distance the divine from sexual intercourse, which is considered a demiurgic act.

¹⁷⁴ For a different interpretation of Eve's seduction, see Stroumsa (1984), 38-42. For more information on Eve's children in *ApJohn*, see Luttikhuisen (2006), 83-91.

¹⁷⁵ *ApJohn* II, 29, 16 – 30, 11: 'And he made a plan with his powers. He sent his angels to the daughters of men, that they might take some of them for themselves and raise offspring for their enjoyment. And at first they did not succeed. When they had no success, they gathered together again and they made a plan together. They created a counterfeit spirit, who resembles the Spirit who had descended, so as to pollute the souls through it. And the angels changed themselves in their likeness into the likeness of their mates (the daughters of men), filling them with the spirit of darkness, which they had mixed for them, and with evil. They brought gold and silver and a gift and copper and iron and metal and all kinds of things. And they steered the people who had followed them into great troubles, by leading them astray with many deceptions. They (the people) became old without having enjoyment. They died, not having found truth and without knowing the God of truth. And thus the whole creation became enslaved forever, from the foundation of the world until now. And they took women and begot children out of the darkness according to the likeness of their spirit. And they closed their hearts, and they hardened themselves through the hardness of the counterfeit spirit until now.'

¹⁷⁶ For an interesting study on the influence of Enochism on Gnosticism, see Reed () and Berno (2018).

here inheriting – and confusing – two different Jewish traditions, one from the *TReub* and the other from *EnI*, in particular the so-called *Book of Watchers*. These two Jewish apocalyptic texts tell the story of the angels and the daughters of men, but they identify two different causes for the women's cooperation with the archons. While *TReub* deems it impossible for the angels to sin, therefore it blames the women's lust for the illicit union, *EnI* portrays the women as victims of the angels' will. In Stroumsa's opinion, the account of *ApJohn* inherits mostly from *TReub*. However, concerning women's lust in *ApJohn*, Stroumsa's conclusions seem unsubstantiated, for there is not any direct responsibility of the illicit union to the women's will. The account found in *ApJohn* seems instead to suggest that the daughters of men are passive victims of the archons' crime, which would also fit within Gnostic hierarchy of nature, according to which the psychic nature of the archons is superior to the hylic nature of the women.¹⁷⁷ By functioning as a child-bearer for the archons' seed, carnal women are carrying on the archons' plan, that is, the generation of beings consubstantial to them and on whom they have power. The passivity of women has attracted the attention of few Gnostic scholars who tried to "liberate" women from the accusation of being the "devil's gateway".¹⁷⁸ In particular, Pagels have claimed that such a poor consideration of the carnal women would clear Eve from the accusation of being an evil temptress, since the "fault" would be entirely attributed to Yaldabaoth.¹⁷⁹ However, a close analysis of *ApJohn*'s passage confirms the idea that these carnal women were involved in the archons' evil plans since they played, albeit unwillingly, an important part in the perpetration of the counterfeit Spirit's power.

In conclusion, the revolutionary representation of feminine imagery in *ApJohn* lies in the attribution of a soteriological role to the incarnated feminine in its spiritual form. Furthermore, in the case of humankind, the spiritual Eve represents the protological soteriological agent, while Adam is instead

¹⁷⁷ Stroumsa (1984), 36-38. For an alternative interpretation of the myth in *ApJohn*, see Perkins (2014).

¹⁷⁸ For an alternative reading of this section of *ApJohn* as a monastic text, see Bull (2017).

¹⁷⁹ *ApJohn* II, 24, 26-31. Against Pagels (1979), see Hoffman (1994), 35-36 who sees in Eve the origin of sexual desire. A social interpretation is instead proposed by King (2009), 106-107, who believes this passage – together with the demiurgic command on the subordination of woman to man – to be the 'strongest overt critique of the patriarchy in all ancient literature'.

represented as a helpless being in need of redemption. Thus, gender roles would be utterly overturned, so much so that the male being – albeit possessing a spiritual element – is in need of female spiritual aid to achieve true gnosis. Nevertheless, even more than in previous instances, the incarnated feminine is composed of opposite polarities, instantiated in the spiritual Eve and in the carnal Eve. Just as the spiritual Eve is the incarnated divine spirit, the carnal Eve is the origin of all evils. In her, the generative power that is proper to the feminine – as established by our analysis of the character of Barbelo – is perverted by Yaldabaoth in order to perpetrate the counterfeit spirit. As King’s most recent work on *ApJohn* has proved, Yaldabaoth’s power and realm should be considered as a parody of those that exist above him. Consequently, the role played by the carnal Eve should be understood as an overturning of the power of the pleromatic feminine.¹⁸⁰ Interestingly, such a negative portrayal functions as litmus paper for the positivity of the spiritual Eve. In other words, the more the negativity of the carnal Eve is stressed, the more striking the comparison with the spiritual Eve becomes.

To summarise, the portrayal of the incarnated feminine breaks the pattern observed in previous aspects of the feminine in *ApJohn*. On the one hand, this treatise stresses the subordination of Barbelo and Sophia to a male character; on the other hand, it highlights the soteriological features of spiritual Eve in the inferior world.¹⁸¹

II.4.2 Eve and Norea in *The Hypostasis of Archons* (NHC II, 4)

In the previous section,¹⁸² I have proved that *HypArch* interprets the theophany above the waters as a revelation of a female image, Incorruptibility. Although

¹⁸⁰ The role of the spiritual Eve cannot be interpreted in the same way because she is a pleromatic being and, consequently, she is not subject to the rule of the psychic world of Yaldabaoth.

¹⁸¹ According to Rasimus, this discrepancy in the representation of the feminine can be explained through the use of different paradigms, see Rasimus (2009), 148-151. While *ApJohn* presents a Barbeloite representation of the intra-pleromatic and fallen feminine, it has a predominantly Ophite portrayal of the incarnated feminine. For a detailed discussion of this topic, see *supra* II.5. Unfortunately, it is impossible here to establish a comparison with Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 29, because the heresiological account ends with Sophia’s Fall.

¹⁸² *Supra* II.3.3.

the archons use a female image as archetype for the creation of humankind, they do not fashion a female body. Rather, they fashion a male body resembling Incorruptibility's partner in order to lure her into the inferior regions. This man fashioned by the archons is, however, a 'soul-endowed man';¹⁸³ and he becomes a 'living soul' only when the spirit comes down from above and descends over him.¹⁸⁴ It is indeed when he becomes a living being that he also acquires the name of Adam and he is put in charge of the earth by Incorruptibility. Nonetheless, Yaldabaoth is still lord over Adam:

The ruler took counsel with one another and said "Come, let us cause a deep sleep to fall upon Adam". And he slept. – Now the deep sleep that "they caused to fall upon him, and he slept" is Ignorance. They opened his side like a living woman (ΑΥΟΥΕΝ ΗΠΕΡΣΠΙΡ' ΝΘΕ ΗΝΟΥΣΖΙΜΕ ΕCΟΝΖ). And they built up his side with some flesh in place of her (ΑΥΩ ΑΥΚΩΤ' ΗΠΕΡ'ΣΠΙΡ ΗΝΟΥCΑΡΖ ΕΠΕCΜΑ), and Adam came to be endowed only with soul (ΑΥΩ ΑΔΑΜ' ΩΩΠΕ ΗΨΥΧΙΚΟC ΤΗΡΩ). And the spirit-endowed woman (ΤCΖΙΜΕ ΗΠΝΕΥΜΑΤΙΚΗ) came to him and spoke with him, saying, "Arise, Adam." And when he saw her, he said "It is you who have given me life; you will be called Mother of the Living" (ΗΤΟ ΠΕΝΤ'ΑΖ† ΝΑΕΙ ΗΠΩΝΖ CΕΝΑΝΟΥΤΕ ΕΡΟ ΧΕ ΤΜΜΑΥ ΗΝΕΤΟΝΖ). For it is she who is my mother (ΧΕ ΗΤΟC ΠΕ ΤΑΜΜΑΥ). It is she who is my physician, and the woman, and she who has given birth (ΗΤΟC ΤΕΤCΟΕΙΝ' ΑΥΩ ΤΑΝΤΑΖΗΜΕ)."¹⁸⁵

Like *ApJohn*, *HypArch* understands the perfect human as an androgynous being, since it acknowledges that the union between a man and a woman is the typological reproduction of the pleromatic syzygies. Moreover, the female element of the syzygy personifies the spiritual nature, whereas the male element personifies the psychic nature. This view is indeed consistent with *HypArch*'s theophany above the waters, since the image revealed into the water is the image of Incorruptibility. Thus, when Yaldabaoth removes Eve from Adam's side, he eliminates completely the part of Adam that makes him into a

¹⁸³ *HypArch* II, 88, 12.

¹⁸⁴ *HypArch* II, 88, 15.

¹⁸⁵ *HypArch* II, 89, 4-10.

‘living soul’, making him merely a psychic man.¹⁸⁶ As in *ApJohn*, the anthropological paradigm proposed by *HypArch* represents an overturning of pleromatic syzygial dynamics since the feminine becomes superior to the male element. Furthermore, Eve assumes the role of instructor, inhabiting the snake and suggesting the carnal Adam and Eve to eat from the Tree.¹⁸⁷ In this Ophite treatise, the eating from the tree is understood to be a positive and salvific action that frees humans from the enslavement of Yaldabaoth. Moreover, Eve is the one who gifts Adam with the spirit which he needs to arise from the ground and recognise her true nature.¹⁸⁸ Therefore, this spiritual Eve causes the awakening of Adam by giving him the possibility to acknowledge her as a spiritual instructor. In this regard, Adam’s words when he recognises Eve as a pneumatic being are an explicit acknowledgement of the overlapping of female characters due to the typological resemblance.¹⁸⁹ By describing the pneumatic Eve as his mother, Adam is explicitly recognising her as Sophia, the ‘Mother of all Living’. Thus, the characteristics of Incorruptibility, Sophia and the spiritual Eve are all incarnated in the salvific character of the Instructor. The concentration of all female attributes in a single character is particularly significant in the case of the incarnated feminine because it implies that Eve is not only revealing to Adam the existence of a superior nature, but she is also revealing the mysteries of the spiritual feminine. If so, the feminine has risen to such an essential role that the revelation of the spirit *is* the revelation of the feminine. It is worth remembering that such an identification would contravene the predominant cultural and philosophical assumptions concerning genders. It has been noted before that both Platonists and Aristotelians identified maleness with the spiritual/superior element and femaleness with the inferior/material element. By making Eve the spirit-endowed part of the united protological man represented by the androgynous Adam of the first creation, *HypArch* is

¹⁸⁶ Consequently, the sleep of ignorance that fell upon Adam is the metaphorical representation of the status that awaits him if he will be deprived of his spiritual part and restored to previous psychic condition. It is also worth mentioning that this conclusion is in contrast with what it has been observed in *ApJohn*, where Adam seems to maintain some sort of pneumatic spark also after the separation from Eve, see Buckley (1986), 54 and Orbe (1996), 326.

¹⁸⁷ The Tree is considered another manifestation of Sophia, see *HypArch* II, 89, 30 – 90, 12.

¹⁸⁸ The awakening of Adam is understood as the donation of the spiritual spark also by Orbe (1996), 326.

¹⁸⁹ They are very similar to the words used in the Pronoia hymn in *ApJohn* (*ApJohn* II, 30, 11 – 31, 31) and in Eve’s hymn in *OrigWorld* (*OrigWorld*. II, 114, 8 – 17).

overturning this mainstream structure in order to affirm a revolutionary standpoint.

Although *HypArch*'s portrayal of the incarnated feminine is quite revolutionary, it does not reject completely the mainstream association between female gender and materiality, since the spiritual Eve has an equivalent carnal Eve:

Then the authorities came up to their Adam. And when they saw his female counterpart speaking with him, they became agitated with great agitation; and they became enamoured of her. They said to one another, "Come, let us sow our seed in her" and they pursued her. And she laughed at them for their witlessness and their blindness (ΑΥΘ ΑCΘΒΕ ΝCΩΟΥ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΝ ΤΟΥΜΝΤΑΤ' ΘΗΤ' ΜΝ ΤΟΥΜΝΤΕΛΛΕ); and their clutches she became a tree (ΑΥΘ ΑCΡ ΟΥΨΗ(Ν) ΝΤΟΟΤΟΥ), and left before them her shadowy reflection resembling herself (ΑCΚΩ ΝΤΕCΖΑΙΒΕC Ε[C]ΕΙΝΕ ΜΜΟC ΖΑΤΟΟΤΟΥ); and they defiled it foully (ΑΥΘ ΑΥΧΟΖΜ[ΕC] ΖΝ ΟΥCΩQ).¹⁹⁰

The spiritual Eve cannot be grasped by the archons because she is ontologically superior to them and they are unable to imprison her. On the contrary, they can defile the carnal Eve – that is, Eve's 'shadowy reflection' (ΝΤΕCΖΑΙΒΕC Ε[C]ΕΙΝΕ) – for she is their equal. In this regard, the only difference with *ApJohn* consists in the fact that the carnal Eve is not an archontic production, but rather a decoy created by the spiritual Eve to escape capture. Notwithstanding, *HypArch* confirms the conclusions reached in the analysis of *ApJohn* concerning Eve's double creation: the text interprets the Genesis creations not as subsequent moments in time, but rather as two distinct creations. Moreover, the narrative of the creation of Adam and Eve is opposite: while Adam appears primarily as a soul-endowed being, Eve's true essence is pneumatic. Borrowing improperly some Aristotelian terminology, one could say that while in Adam the spirit is merely an accident – one that can be easily removed – Eve's true substance is the spirit and it cannot be removed from her.

¹⁹⁰ *HypArch* II, 89, 17-28.

This hypothesis would also explain why Yaldabaoth and his archons seem to have power over Adam but not over the spiritual Eve, who always escapes their attempts to grab her.

The very coming into existence of Eve gives precious insights about what the goal of life should be for Gnostics. When Yaldabaoth expelled Adam and Eve from Eden, he intended to distract them with a life of toil so that ‘they might not have the opportunity of being devoted to the Holy Spirit’ (ἐπιπῆλᾱ ετοϋλλᾱ).¹⁹¹ This sentence well summarises the importance of the feminine within Gnostic circles, since it implies that reaching true knowledge of the Spirit means reaching salvation.¹⁹² It would therefore appear that *HypArch* considers the re-appropriation of the spirit as an epistemological journey, a progressive acquisition of knowledge that is mediated by the historical intervention of Sophia. Not surprisingly, the first character to acquire such knowledge of the superior world is again a woman: Norea. She is the last daughter of Adam and Eve, and she is generated after Seth. Granting that *HypArch* conceives the transmission of *gnosis* as an acquired possession and not the inheritance of a specific race (the Sethian one),¹⁹³ the importance attributed to her rather than to Seth should not surprise us:

Again Eve became pregnant, and she bore [Norea]. And she said: “He has begotten on [me a] virgin as an assistance [for] many generations of mankind” (ἀγῶ πεχας χε ἀρχιπωνα[ει ἡοὔπαρθε]νος ἡβοηθῆια [ἡῶ] ἡγενεα ἡγενεα ἡῶρῶμε).¹⁹⁴

Besides identifying her as the virgin who will help humankind throughout history, this passage also acknowledges her as an instructor-character, like Sophia and the spiritual Eve. A first indication of such identification is given by the name of ‘helper’ (ἡβοηθῆια), which is a typical name for Eve:

¹⁹¹ *HypArch* II, 91, 3 – 11.

¹⁹² This will be expanded more in detail in the following section, *infra* III.3.

¹⁹³ This particular Sethian mythologoumenon is thus absent from *HypArch*.

¹⁹⁴ *HypArch* II, 91, 34 – 92, 2. For an investigation of the character of Norea, see Luttikhuisen (2006), 94-95; McGuire (2000) and Pearson (2000).

The archons went to meet her intending to lead her astray. Their supreme Chief said to her, “Your mother Eve came to us.” But Norea turned to them and said to them, “It is you who are rulers of the darkness; you are accursed. And you did not know my mother; instead it was your female counterpart that you knew (ΟΥΤΕ ΗΠΕΤΝ̄COΥΩΝ ΤΑΜΑΛΥ ΑΛΛΑ Ν̄ΤΑΤΕΤΝ̄COΥΩΝ ΤΕΤΝ̄ΩΡΕΙΝΕ). For I am not your descendant; rather it is from the world above that I am come”. [...] Norea turned, with the might of [*lacuna*]; and in a loud voice [she] cried out [up to] the holy one, the God of the Pleroma, “Rescue me from the archons of the unrighteousness and save me from their clutches.”¹⁹⁵

The archons’ inability to force Norea’s proves that she is somehow superior to them and that she therefore possesses spirit. Her spiritual status is further confirmed by her crying out to receive help from the world above, thus mirroring the actions of Sophia. It should be noted that, despite her importance as helper of humankind, Norea does not perform directly any salvific action, rather, she appears to remind humans of their possibility to rise above the psychic and hylic condition by means of knowledge. In this respect, the text is drawing a subtle but decisive line between the incarnated women and the utterly spiritual one, such as Eve.

To sum up, the portrayal of the incarnated feminine in *HypArch* is quite revolutionary and unique within a Gnostic framework. It is worth observing first that, as in the case of the fallen feminine, *HypArch* splits the incarnated feminine into mother and daughter characters, thus underlining an awareness of feminine ambiguity. The case of the incarnated feminine confirms that the text desperately tries to solve such ambiguity by personifying and hypostatizing the different roles attributed to Eve – that is, the spiritual Eve and the carnal Eve. Although the spiritual Eve is unable to grant humans eschatological redemption by herself, she performs here a vital protological soteriological role by making Adam aware of his condition and showing him the way of knowledge. She is the instructor and her interventions in the history of salvation make humans aware of the existence of something greater and lead

¹⁹⁵ *HypArch* II, 92, 18 – 93, 2.

them towards the true gnosis.¹⁹⁶ In this respect, the importance attributed to Norea is a further indication of the importance that female characters have in these Gnostic mythologies.

II.4.3 The Luminous Woman in *On the Origin of the World* (NHC II, 5)

The longest account about the creation of humankind is found in *OrigWorld*. As in *ApJohn* and *HypArch*, the creation of Adam and Eve is distinct. The woman possesses spiritual features and only later a psychic body, whereas Adam has only a material existence. Nevertheless, *OrigWorld* adds further particulars, since the creation of Adam and Eve is here performed by different entities: while Adam is fashioned by the archons,¹⁹⁷ Eve is created by Zoe, Sophia's daughter.¹⁹⁸ As previously explained,¹⁹⁹ the characters of Zoe and Eve are often confused:

After the day of rest Sophia sent her daughter Zoe (ΜΗΝΕΑ ΠΖΟΥ ΝΤΑΝΑΠΥΣΙC ΑΤCΟΦΙΑ ΧΟΟΥ ΝΖΩΗ ΤΕCΨΕΕΡΕ), being called Eve (ΕΥΜΟΥΤΕ ΕΡΟC ΧΕ ΕΥΖΑ), as an instructor (ΖΩC ΡΕCΨΑΜΟ) in order that she might make Adam, who had no soul (ΑΤΡΕCΤΟΥΝΟC ΑΔΑΜΨΑΕΙ ΕΜΝΨΥΧΗ ΝΖΗΤΨ), arise so that those whom he should engender might become containers of light (ΝΑΓΓΕΛΕΙΟΝ ΗΠΟΥΟ[ΕΙΝ]). When Eve saw her male counterpart prostrate she had pity upon him, and she said, "Adam! Become alive! Arise upon the earth" (ΑΔΑΜΨΩΝΖ ΤΨΟΥΝ ΖΙΧΜΨΚΑΖ). Immediately her word became accomplished fact. For Adam, having arisen suddenly opened his eyes. When he saw her he said, "You shall be called Mother of the Living. For it is you who have given me

¹⁹⁶ The positivity of the character of Eve-Epinoia has also been noted by Bak Halvgaard (2017). Contrarily to my analysis, she gives a non-Christian interpretation to the character.

¹⁹⁷ *OrigWorld* II, 112, 25 – 113, 21.

¹⁹⁸ *OrigWorld* II, 113, 21-34: 'Now the production of the instructor (Sophia Zoe) came about as follows. When Sophia let fall a droplet of light, it flowed onto the water, and immediately a human being appeared, being androgynous. That droplet she molded first as a female body. Afterwards, using the body she molded it in the likeness of the mother which had appeared. And he finished in twelve months. And androgynous human being was produced, whom the Greek call Hermaphrodites, and whose mother the Hebrew call Eve of Life (Eve of Zoe), namely, the female instructor of life. Her offspring is the creature that is lord.'

¹⁹⁹ *Supra* II.3.3.

life” (Ἰταρεφναγ ερος πεχαδ χε ἵτο εὔναμοῦτε ερο χε τιμαγ
ἵνετονζ χε ἵτο πεταζ† ναει ἡπωνζ).²⁰⁰

The overlapping of female characters is striking in this narrative, so much so that one could easily suppose – incorrectly – that Zoe and Eve are the same character, especially considering that they are a single character in Genesis.²⁰¹ Since the name “Eve” is also used as Sophia’s apposition, Eve can be referred to as both the mother and the daughter. However, since the text refers to Zoe as the pre-existent daughter of Sophia, it would be incorrect to consider them one and the same. In addition, this passage openly identifies Adam as Eve’s counterpart, thus marking a significant difference between the two female beings. While Zoe is an intra-pleromatic being who only occasionally dwells in the inferior world, Eve is an utterly extra-pleromatic being who will eventually return to the pleromatic light. In any case, the similarities between the two are striking and need to be underlined.

Overall, the characteristics of Eve in *OrigWorld* do not differ greatly from the previous representations in *HypArch* and *ApJohn*. She is identified with the instructor who awakes Adam, making him acknowledge his psychic status.²⁰² Since the archons were afraid of this Luminous Woman (namely, the spiritual Eve) whom they saw standing next to Adam, they tried unsuccessfully to grab her. Laughing at their attempt, the spiritual Eve created a material reflection which they defiled.²⁰³ Furthermore, the text narrates that while the Luminous Woman was escaping from the archons, she entered the ‘Tree of Acquaintance’,²⁰⁴ thus confirming a significant Ophite influence on this treatise. Similarly, Ophite mythologoumena are traceable in *OrigWorld*’s interpretation of the original sin, since the serpent – called also ‘Beast’ and ‘the

²⁰⁰ *OrigWorld* II, 115, 30 – 116, 8.

²⁰¹ Eve is indeed called Zoe in *Gen.* 3:20.

²⁰² In this regard, I disagree with Dunning (2009), 77-78 who believes that Adam’s psychic body results from Sophia’s insufflation.

²⁰³ *OrigWorld* II, 116, 33 – 117, 4: ‘Afterwards, when they had recovered from the daze, they came to Adam; and seeing the likeness of this woman with him, they were greatly disturbed, thinking it was she that was the true Eve. And they acted rashly; they came up to her and seized her and cast their seed upon her.’

²⁰⁴ *OrigWorld* II, 115, 25-33.

wisest of creatures' – is identified with the instructor.²⁰⁵ By rebelling against the archontic rules and eating from the Tree of Acquaintance (namely, the spiritual Eve), Adam and Eve discovered that they were naked of knowledge and clothed in shame.²⁰⁶ It is therefore thanks to this discovery and the mediation of the Luminous Eve that Adam and the carnal Eve became part of the divine plan of salvation.

However, being more focused on the destinies of human beings, *OrigWorld* is far more detailed than previous accounts regarding Eve's offspring:

First she was pregnant with Abel, by the first ruler. And it was by the seven authorities and their angels that she bore the other offspring. And all this came to pass according to the Pronoia of the prime parent (ΠΑΕΙ ΔΕ ΤΗΡΕ' ΑΦΩΠΕ ΚΑΤΑ ΤΠΡΟΝΟΙΑ ἩΠΑΡΧΙΓΕΝΕΤΩΡ), so that the first mother might bear within her every seed, being mixed and being fitted to the fate of the universe and its configurations, and to Justice (ΧΕΚΑΑΣ ΤΩΟΡΠ' ἩΜΑΥ ΕΣΑΧΠΟ ΖΡΑΙ ΝΖΗΤΕ ΝΣΠΕΡΜΑ ΝΙΜ ΕΦΤΗΖ ΕΦΡΖΑΡΜΟCE ΕΖΟΥΝ' ΕΧΙΜΑΡΜΕΝΗ ἩΠΟΚΟCΜΟC ἩΝ ΝΕCСХΗΜΑ ΑΥΩ ΤΑΙΚΑΙΟCΥΝΗ). A prearranged plan came into effect regarding Eve, so that the modelled forms of the authorities might become enclosures of the light (ΑΥΟΙΚΟΝΟΜΙΑ ΩΠΕ ΕΤΒΕ ΕΥΖΑ ΧΕΚΑΑΣ ἩΠΛΑCΜΑ ΝΕΖΟΥCΙΑ ΕΥΝΑΩΠΕ ΝΧΟΛΧ᾽ ἩΠΟΥΟΕΙΝ), whereupon it would condemn them through their modelled forms.²⁰⁷

In contrast to the previous accounts, even the carnal Eve becomes part of the soteriological plan of the Luminous Eve, albeit not voluntarily. The material surrogate of the true Eve begets not only psychic and material children, but also the pure and spiritual seed through the intercession of Pronoia. Furthermore, *OrigWorld* confirms openly the metaphysical necessity of a cosmic order, since the destinies of human souls are 'prearranged' and thus predetermined.²⁰⁸ Consequently, *OrigWorld* discusses openly the destiny of

²⁰⁵ *OrigWorld* II, 118, 24 – 119, 18.

²⁰⁶ For additional information about the anthropology of *OrigWorld*, see Dunning (2009), 78-82.

²⁰⁷ *OrigWorld* II, 117, 15-28.

²⁰⁸ The debate concerning determinism of Ophites, Sethian and Barbeloite theologies, is still very much open and some scholars have strongly spoken against it, such as Löhr (1992).

three different races of humans: pneumatic race (πνευματικός), psychic race (ψυχικός) and material race (χοϊκός).²⁰⁹ It would also appear that only the pneumatic humans, aided by the spiritual Eve, will reach salvation.

Overall, *OrigWorld* seems to underline Eve's soteriological actions more than both *ApJohn* and *HypArch*.

II.4.4 The Psychic Eve according to Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* I, 30

Irenaeus' account of human creation in Ophite mythology is quite dissimilar to that observed thus far, since he presents a different anthropological model.

Describing Yaldabaoth's breathing into Adam, he underlines that: 'When, then, he breathed the spirit of life into man, he was secretly deprived of that power. On the other hand, man from then on had intelligence and intention; and these are the parts that are saved.'²¹⁰ This passage implies that Yaldabaoth breathes two elements – instead of one – into Adam: *nun* and *enthymesin*. Interestingly, the Latin terminology shows that the translator is well aware that these were considered technical terms by Gnostics. On the one hand, the term *nun*, which is the transliteration of the Greek accusative νοῦν, could indicate the spiritual and intellectual part of humans.²¹¹ On the other hand, the Latin transliteration *enthymesin* comes from the Greek ἐνθύμησις, which means literally 'conception', but also shares the root of θῦμός, literally 'a strong and irresistible passion'. Irenaeus is here presenting a tripartite anthropology. Hence, Adam is tripartite insofar as he possesses νοῦς (spiritual element), θῦμός (psychic element), and a χοϊκός σῶμα (hylic body). Among these elements, the first two are that which will be saved in the eschatological times, whilst the latter will be destroyed. This tripartite anthropology fits better the

However, *OrigWorld* seems quite explicit in affirming the fixity of the eschatological destinies reserved for each Gnostic nature (pneumatic, psychic and hylic).

²⁰⁹ *OrigWorld* II, 117, 28 – 118 6.

²¹⁰ *AdHaer* I, 30, 6: *Illo autem insufflante in homine spiritum vitae, letenter evacuatum eum a virtute dicunt: hominem autem inde habuisse nun et enthymesin; et haec esse quae salvantur.*

²¹¹ In Valentinianism, this is the part of human beings that has the same nature as the Pleromatic Nous, see *AdHaer* I, 1, 1.

narrative of *ApJohn*, rather than the more openly Ophite *OrigWorld*, thus showing that Irenaeus is aware of the Gnostic terminology and its use.

This tripartite anthropology has significant consequences when it comes to Eve's creation from Adam:

Thereupon, Yaldabaoth was jealous and wanted to devise a way by which to deprive man [of power] by means of a woman. So he brought forth a woman from his Thought (Adam's), but *Prunicos* took her to herself and invisibly deprived her of power. But the rest came and admired her beauty and called her Eve. They were filled with desire towards her and begot sons from her, who they claim are also angels. Their Mother, however, tried to mislead Adam and Eve through the serpent to transgress the precept of Yaldabaoth. Eve, thinking she was hearing from the Son of God, easily believed and persuaded Adam to eat of the tree of which God had commanded them not to eat. But when they had eaten, they received knowledge of that Power which is above all things and forsook those who made them. Now, when Prunikos saw that they were overcome by their own creature, she greatly rejoiced and again cried out that, since there was already the Incorruptible Father, he [Yaldabaoth] told a lie when he once called himself Father, and that, given that the First Man and the first Woman once existed, she committed adultery.²¹²

Irenaeus' description of Eve is quite dissimilar from that of *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*. First, the separation between the two Eves is misrepresented by the heresiologist, since there is a psychic Eve and a carnal Eve. Indeed, Eve is produced by Adam's *enthymesis*, namely his psychic part. This description does not match previous accounts, according to which Eve is created out of

²¹² Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 30, 7: *Zelantem autem Ialdabaoth voluisse excogitare evacuare hominem per foeminam, et de sua enthymesi eduxisse foeminam, quam illa Prunicos suscipiens invisibiliter evacuavit a virtute. Reliquos autem venientes et mirantes formositatem eius, vocasse eam Evam, et concupiscentes hanc, generasse ex ea filios, quos et angelos esse dicunt. Mater autem ipsorum argumentata est per serpentem seducer Evam et Adam, supergredi praeceptum Ialdabaoth; Eva autem quasi a Filio Dei hoc audiens, facile credidit, et Adam suasit manducare de arbore, de qua dixerat Deus non manducare. Manducantes autem eos, cognovisse eam quae est super omnia virtutem dicunt, et abscesisse ab his qui fecerant eos. Prunicum autem videntem quoniam et per suum plasma victi sunt, valde gratulatam et rursum exclamasse quoniam, cum esset Pater incorruptibilis, olim hic semetipsum vocans Patrem, mentitus est: et cum Homo olim esset et Prima Foemina, et haec adulterans peccavit.*

Adam's spiritual part.²¹³ Moreover, the separation between the Eve who was taken out of Adam's *enthymesis* and the carnal Eve – that is, the shell of flesh which is seduced by the serpent – is operated by *Prunicos* rather than by Eve herself. In this regard, Eve is deprived of any active role in the story besides that of being persuaded by the serpent.

Once again, it would appear that Irenaeus is confusing different aspects of the feminine imagery and, as a result, the importance of female characters is diminished. First of all, Irenaeus' account denies that the superior Eve – namely, she who is taken out of Adam's psychic element – is consubstantial with the Pleroma. Secondly, by making *Prunicos* responsible for the separation between the two Eves, he denies Eve's soteriological role. Thirdly, by making Eve come from Adam's *enthymesis*, Irenaeus is rejecting the Ophite mythologoumenon according to which she is the instructor and has a main soteriological function. Therefore, I have concluded that Irenaeus exploits the typological resemblance between female characters – especially that between Sophia and the spiritual Eve – to misrepresent the soteriological functions proper to Ophite female characters.

II.4.5 Concluding Remarks on the Spiritual and Carnal Eve

The portrayal of the incarnated feminine in these texts is remarkable, for the ambiguity that is proper to the feminine is now personified into two characters: the spiritual Eve and the carnal Eve.

ApJohn opposes the spiritual Eve, who detains key soteriological functions, to the carnal Eve, who is instrumental for the perpetration of the counterfeit spirit. Concerning the incarnated feminine imagery in *ApJohn*, it is worth noting that while the male gender represents the spiritual element in the pleromatic world, the female gender represents the spiritual element in the extra-pleromatic world. This inversion in the use of gender imagery at an extra-pleromatic level

²¹³ This is indeed the interpretation of Simonetti, who interpreted this *enthymesis* as the 'material sensibility given by Yaldabaoth to Adam', see Simonetti (1999), 426.

is a consequence of *ApJohn*'s cosmological principle according to which the material world is fashioned by Yaldabaoth as a purposeful reversal of the pleromatic world. Regardless, my analysis has confirmed that feminine imagery has been used by *ApJohn* in an ambiguous and paradoxical manner.

HypArch presents two main innovations in the case of the incarnated feminine. First, it stresses the Gnostic typological resemblance by equating the union between Adam and Eve with the one of Sophia and the Saviour. In this regard, gender imagery is similar to *ApJohn*, since the feminine represents the spirit whereas the maleness is taken as the weaker and psychic element. Nonetheless, the reasons that explain this reversal of gender imagery between the pleromatic and the material worlds are distinct from those of *ApJohn*. Given that Incorruptibility is the likeness revealed in the theophany above the waters, the spiritual Eve becomes the revealed part of the Godhead. She is the instructor of knowledge, the protological soteriological agent who gives life to Adam and his lineage. In addition, *HypArch* introduces the character of Norea, the daughter of Eve, who possesses true *gnosis*, thus becoming the prototype of the perfect Gnostic. Hence, the feminine is here both the instructor – in the characters of Sophia and the spiritual Eve – as well as the instructed – in the person of Norea.

The portrayal of the incarnated feminine in the *OrigWorld* coincides to a great extent with that of the *HypArch*. As in the case of the fallen feminine, *OrigWorld* shows a typological resemblance between the three aspects of the feminine, testifying once more to the overlap between female characters. The Luminous Woman, Sophia, Zoe and Eve are often interchangeable, thus generating much of confusion on the part of the reader. Notwithstanding, I have tried to clarify the role of each female character. For instance, I hope to have proved that Zoe and Eve are two separate entities, since one is a pleromatic being and the other is a spiritual woman. Although the contrast between the spiritual and carnal Eve is often underlined, it is easy to detect a neat prevalence of episodes concerning the soteriological aspects of the incarnated feminine.

The soteriological aspects that are proper to the spiritual Eve in *ApJohn*, *HypArch* and *OrigWorld* do not find any correspondence in Irenaeus *AdHaer* I, 30. On the contrary, the portrayal offered by Irenaeus is interesting because it shows that heresiological literature tends to minimise the revolutionary soteriological feminine imagery by giving more prominence to the events surrounding the carnal Eve, and by associating the spiritual Eve of the Nag Hammadi treatises to a psychic and non-soteriological Eve.

II.5 Conclusion

Part II of this work aims at contributing to recent scholarly debate with the following observations.

First, the analysis conducted on *ApJohn*, *HypArch*, *OrigWorld* and Irenaeus' *AdHaer* I, 29 and I, 30 suggests that ambiguity and paradox should be considered pivotal and essential characteristics of the Gnostic feminine imagery. In particular, the ambiguity consists in envisioning female characters as both defective entities and soteriological agents. At an intra-pleromatic level, the wills of Barbelo and Incorruptibility are subordinated to the one of their male syzygial counterparts. Notwithstanding, they both have an active role in the generation of the Pleroma, since they put in actions their partners' will. In addition, Incorruptibility plays a fundamental role in the Gnostic economy of Salvation. Being the divine likeness that appears into the waters to the archons, she reveals the existence of a superior God to the inferior world. Likewise, the ambiguity of the Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite feminine imagery is visible in the case of the fallen feminine. Sophia is not only ambiguous in comparison to the highest pleromatic female being, but also within herself, for she is both the cause of the intra-divine rupture and the soteriological agent who reveals the truth about the Pleroma. Her paradoxical nature is often expressed through sexual imagery; thus, she is portrayed both as the wandering prostitute who commits adultery and the perfect bride who will marry the Saviour. Finally, in the case of the incarnated feminine, the paradoxical aspect of feminine imagery becomes more evident than ever. The soteriological and defective aspects of Gnostic feminine imagery are personified in two Eves, a spiritual and a carnal one. In these texts, Eve is both the spirit who awakens Adam and the primary means of perpetration of the counterfeit Spirit.

Secondly, the textual analysis shows that the typological resemblance between different levels of the Gnostic cosmos affects greatly the Gnostic feminine imagery. In particular, it is worth focusing on two consequences of this Gnostic

cosmological mechanism. On the one hand, the typological resemblance between the three aspects of the feminine generates confusion among the different female characters. This is indeed the case of both *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*. On the other hand, since the typological resemblance implies a progressive loss of perfection from the highest level to the lowest, it helps explaining the interpretation of the lower aspects of the feminine as a reversal of its highest aspects. In other words, only the mechanism of typological resemblance explains the extent to which Sophia is an imperfect copy of Barbelo and in what ways the carnal Eve is opposed to the spiritual Eve. In addition, the typological resemblance was exploited by Irenaeus to diminish and refute the importance of feminine imagery in Gnostic mythologies. As a matter of fact, Irenaeus' most powerful heresiological argument against these Gnostic mythologies is based on the projection of the sins committed by the lower female characters onto the female characters in the Godhead. It is mainly because of the typological resemblance among different aspects of the feminine that Irenaeus can "corrupt" the highest feminine pleromatic being, thus incorporating error and sin into the highest level of the divine Godhead.

Hence, the paradoxical nature of feminine imagery in Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite mythologies finds its confirmation in the portrayals of female characters who are both defective beings and soteriological agents. Each text underlines this ambiguity to a different extent, but they underline it nonetheless. Among the texts analysed, I would say that *ApJohn* is the text which stresses this element the least and *OrigWord* the one which stresses it the most. In this regard, my findings represent a further step into contemporary researches on such matter. In his monograph on Ophite, Barbeloite and Sethian texts, Rasimus concluded that female characters are portrayed as marginal figures needing male supervision in texts who show Barbeloite and Sethian mythologoumena and theologoumena, whilst they are central characters in those texts that show predominantly Ophite features.²¹⁴ According to him, the

²¹⁴ Rasimus (2009), 129-158. As Ophite works, he listed *Eugnostos*, *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, *Hypostasis of Archons* and *On the Origin of the World*. As Barbeloite and Sethian works, he listed *Zostrianos*, *Marsanes*, *Allogenes* and the *Three Steles of Seth*. He has then classified *ApJohn* has a mixture of Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite mythologoumena. In particular, *ApJohn* owes its peculiarity to the combination of two opposite paradigms: it has a Sethian and

relationship between Barbeloite and Ophite features is inversely proportional: the more one work is influenced by a Barbeloite framework, the less relevant Ophite features becomes and vice versa. My analysis of *ApJohn*, *HypArch* and *OrigWorld* confirms his findings only partially. On the one hand, Rasimus is right when he affirms that Barbeloite mythologoumena, such as the intra-pleromatic feminine in *ApJohn*, overlook the soteriological functions of the feminine. On the other hand, his findings do not account for the typological resemblance proper to these female characters. I believe that the identification of a typological link between the various aspects of the feminine in all three Gnostic movements makes it impossible to isolate clear differences between their feminine imagery. Therefore, while it remains true that *ApJohn* stresses more than other texts the defectiveness and dependence upon male characters of the intra-pleromatic female characters, it would be an overestimation to consider its paradigm as entirely opposite to the ones of *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*. Moreover, I am convinced that episodes such as the theophany above waters in *OrigWorld* contrasts with Rasimus' conclusion that the Ophite feminine is not in need of male redemption. In this case, Pronoia needs the intervention of a Saviour, regardless of the fact that her blood has salvific power. In other words, it seems to me that the distance between the three aspects of the Gnostic feminine can be stressed only to a certain extent, since they remain always interconnected through a typological mechanism. In conclusion, the peculiarity of these Gnostic texts lies in the ability of harmonising conflicting aspects of the feminine into a single narrative.

It is now time to turn the attention to Valentinian texts to see how they dealt with the radical ambiguity of Gnostic feminine imagery.

Barbeloite portrayal of the feminine in II, 4, 29 – 10, 28 (that I have called intra-pleromatic and fallen feminine) and an Ophite rewriting of Genesis stories in II, 11, 15 – 30, 11 (that I have called incarnated feminine).

III. The Valentinian Feminine Imagery

In the previous section, I have shown that most female characters in Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite Gnostic mythologies play a soteriological role. In *ApJohn*, *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*, female characters are involved in the soteriological process of knowing-revealing to different extents. I have also shown that all female characters are linked to one another by a mechanism of typological resemblance, according to which each female character reproduces imperfectly the characteristics of a superior female character. Furthermore, I have argued that the heresiological accounts of Irenaeus confirm the revolutionary stance of these movements, since he uses the typological resemblance between female characters to his advantage. Therefore, I have concluded that the most significant features of Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite feminine imagery are both the salvific roles attributed to female characters and the typological link established between them. When one looks at the Valentinian feminine imagery, the theological and mythological role of the feminine changes significantly. In particular, female characters lose most of the soteriological functions detectable in Sethian, Ophite and Barbeloite works. Furthermore, the connection between the three aspects of the feminine is less marked than in other Gnostic mythologies, since greater importance is granted to the fallen feminine. In Valentinian texts, the soteriological and revealing functions of the feminine – although detectable at times – are reduced to a minimum, whilst the aspects of their defectiveness and dependence upon a male redeemer are stressed and highlighted. Such a dependence is marked by the emergence of a more structured and organised syzygy, that is, a male/female pleromatic spousal couple. Besides its importance at theological and mythological levels, the syzygy also represents the underlying principle of the so-called sacrament of the bridal chamber, a Valentinian ritual practice which most likely aimed at the reconstitution of the original undivided and syzygial status of pneumatic beings.

Once again, due to the complexity and length of the topic at hand, this second part of my work has been organised into four chapters, preceded by an overview of the primary sources and the selection criteria employed in this study (II.1). The second chapter will discuss the role of feminine imagery in Valentinian pleromatologies (II.2).¹ The third chapter will consider the role, functions and doubling of Sophia (II.3). Lastly, the fourth chapter enquires into the status of carnal women in Valentinian systems (II.4). To help the reader, each one of the three chapters has its own brief introduction and conclusion, thus making each chapter a logical unit that stands on its own but finds its proper position within the wider interpretation of Valentinianism.

¹ The word “pleromatology” indicates the doctrines and myths connected with the Valentinian Pleroma; see Thomassen (2006), 193-195.

III.1 Valentinian Primary Sources and Selection Criteria

Having already highlighted the complexities of defining the Valentinian School in the first chapter,² I move on to illustrate the primary sources that I have selected as representative of the Valentinian feminine and the criteria employed to select such texts. In this regard, it must be highlighted that the sources regarding Valentinian feminine imagery are mainly constituted by heresiological accounts. This is primarily due to the fact that Valentinianism was the form of Gnosticism that was better known among other Christians, especially in the West; consequently, it was also the Gnostic movement that was considered most “dangerous” from a heresiological perspective.

In Irenaeus’ *AdHaer*, it is possible to detect three accounts of Valentinian theology:

- a) *AdHaer* I, 1-8 (*Grand Notice*) and *AdHaer* I, 12, 1-4: these passages illustrate the doctrines of Ptolemy and his followers;
- b) *AdHaer* I, 11, 1-5: this section discusses the teachings of the founder of the movement, Valentinus;
- c) *AdHaer* I, 14-20: these paragraphs discuss the doctrines and practices of the Valentinian teacher, Marcus the Magician.

In addition to Irenaeus’ work, here is a list of the more exhaustive heresiological accounts on Valentinianism:

- a) Hippolytus, *El* VI, 29-36;
- b) Epiphanius, *Pan* I, 31, 5-6 (*Dogmatic Letter of the Valentinians*);³
- c) Tertullian, *Adversus Valentinianos*.⁴

² See *supra* I.3. The dating of the Valentinian texts is still highly debated among scholars. For the texts analyzed in the following chapters, I will provide an estimated date of composition in the dedicated section; whilst for the others, I will briefly discuss them in the footnote.

³ At the present stage of research, it has not yet been identified a possible date of composition for this text. For more information, see Thomassen (2006), 218-231.

⁴ For the edition and translation of the text, see Kroymann (1954).

Given the primary ritual and sacramental focus of the account on Marcus, I will primarily reference to the accounts of Valentinus and Ptolemy. Similarly, the accounts of Epiphanius *Pan* I, 31, 5-6 (that is, the so-called *Dogmatic Letter*) and Tertullian's *AdVal* will always be used as a valuable comparison to verify or integrate Irenaeus' information, albeit they will not always be analysed in depth.⁵

The original Gnostic sources available for the Valentinian feminine are:

- a) the *Gospel of Philip*;⁶
- b) *A Valentinian Exposition*;⁷
- c) the *Excerpta ex Theodoto*;⁸
- d) Ptolemy, *Letter to Flora*: an original writing of Ptolemy bequeathed to us by Epiphanius, *Pan* I, 33, 3-7.
- e) *Gospel of Truth*;⁹
- f) *Tripartite Tractate*.¹⁰

Concerning *GosPhil* and *ExVal*, it is necessary to point out that while the codex of the *GosPhil* has been found in good material condition, the surviving manuscript of *ExVal* is severely damaged, making the text quite difficult to read. Nonetheless, I found both works essential for a deeper understanding of

⁵ This list is not obviously exhaustive of all heresiological accounts about Valentinianism, but it lists those who are more relevant for the feminine. For a discussion of the polemic nature of heresiological sources, *supra* I.3.

⁶ For the edition and translation of the text, see Isenberg (1996). I have made occasional changes to the translation. It ought to be mentioned that the identification of *GosPhil* as a Valentinian text has not been straightforward. Schenke (1960) concluded that this gospel had been contaminated with non-Valentinian material during its numerous redactions and following scholars seemed to have mainly agreed with him. Nonetheless, Schenke's conclusion has been challenged by Thomassen (1997), who has successfully proved that the theology of *GosPhil* is coherent with eastern Valentinianism. In this research, I will expand on Thomassen's conclusion and consider the *GosPhil* a properly Valentinian text.

⁷ For the edition of the Coptic text and the translation, see Turner (1990) and Ménard (1985). Occasional amendments will be made to the translation.

⁸ For the edition of the Greek text and the translation, see Sagnard (1948) and Casey (1934). Occasional amendments will be made to the translation.

⁹ *GosTruth* is considered one of the oldest Valentinian documents, but scholars do not offer an exact date of composition. See Attridge – MacRae (1985), 76-81. For a comprehensive analysis on this debate, see Marksches (1992), 339-356.

¹⁰ Most scholars deem this treatise to be an early Valentinian work written between third and fourth century CE. See, Attridge – Pagels (1985), 178.

Valentinian feminine imagery, for they are complementary: while *ExVal* discusses Valentinian pleromatology, *GosPhil* focuses primarily on Valentinian eschatological and the sacramental theology.

Similarly, *ExTheod* bears its own series of textual and exegetical problems. Being a collection of quotations from the writing of Theodotus in Clement's works, *ExTheod* remains an unsystematic source for Valentinian doctrines.¹¹ For the sake of clarity, scholars have decided to divide *ExTheod* into four sections: (A) 1-28; (B) 29-42; (C) 43-65; (D) 66-86.¹² Section C is usually considered independent from the other ones, for its doctrines conflict with those of sections A-B-D, presenting instead many similarities with the *GN* of Irenaeus. Most scholars would agree that parts A (1-28), B (29-42) and D (66-85) offer a good representation of the teachings of the eastern Valentinian school. Contrariwise, part C is generally considered as independent from the other three parts, for it represents the doctrines of the western Valentinian school.¹³ This internal discrepancy between parts A-B-D and C is further complicated by the necessity of resorting to other accounts of Valentinian doctrines in order to interpret some obscure passages of *ExTheod*. In most instances, a valid term of comparison has been found in Irenaeus' *GN*, which has occasionally generated biased interpretations, as recently pointed out by Dubois.¹⁴ Although I would not go as far as Dubois in affirming that *ExTheod* sections A, B and D possess an internal coherency that makes it understandable in its own right, I do welcome his suggestion to interpret *ExTheod*'s parts A-B-D as a coherent and unitary work, resorting also to eastern Valentinian Nag Hammadi treatises as means of comparison.¹⁵ Regarding the identity of the author, the most reliable study on his character has been conducted by Thomassen, who has observed that only five quotations (frag. 22, 7; 26, 1; 30,

¹¹ Thomassen (2006), 28-29 speculates that Theodotus was a representative of eastern Valentinianism who lived about a generation before Clement of Alexandria (ca 150-215).

¹² This particular classification has been taken from Sagnard (1947), but the idea of dividing the texts in four sections goes back to Heinrici (1871). Thomassen (2006) presents a different separation of section B (29-43,1) and C (43,2-65).

¹³ This had already been noted by Sagnard (1947) and it is accepted widely, see Pagels (1974), Simonetti (1999), Thomassen (2006).

¹⁴ Dubois (2013) fiercely opposes any interpretation of *ExTheod* based on Irenaeus' works.

¹⁵ Since *ExTheod* A-B-D belongs to the eastern Valentinian School, I will mostly resort to *GosPhil*, one of the few other Eastern Valentinian School documents.

1; 32, 2; 35, 1) can be surely attributed to the Valentinian teacher Theodotus.¹⁶ Contrariwise, Ptolemy's *EpFl* is certainly a less problematic source, for it has been transmitted in its entirety and it does not seem to have been corrupted.

In addition to the abovementioned sources, it is worth devoting a few words to two additional Valentinian treatises preserved in the Nag Hammadi library, namely, the *GosTruth* and the *TriTrac*. As far as this research is concerned, they represent peculiar case-studies, for these Valentinian books have been expunged of most references to female characters. Here, the role of the fallen feminine has been taken up by the Logos itself and they constitute therefore a particular case.¹⁷ Due to complexity of these works, it is here impossible to analyse them in detail, but their study represents a valuable opportunity for future researches on Valentinianism.

¹⁶ See Thomassen (2006), 29.

¹⁷ It would be particularly interesting to develop further the concept of the "masculinization of the Mother", which has been put forth by Turner (2017).

III.2 The Feminine in the Godhead: the Original Syzygy

Studying the Valentinian Pleroma, particularly its syzygial organisation, means primarily dealing with the fundamental philosophical problem of the passage from unity to plurality. In Gnostic mythologies, the Father is generally conceived as the primordial divine being from whom other aeons originated. However, as in the case of *ApJohn*,¹⁸ the generation of the Pleroma – that is, the passage from individuality to plurality – is an open problem that most Gnostic texts either do not address directly or address in an unsatisfactory way. This latent and unsolved tension between singularity and plurality becomes evident in Valentinian mythologies, producing two alternative narratives about the formation of the Pleroma: on the one hand, the Father is represented as a Monad; on the other, he is conceived as the male element of a syzygy.

In an attempt to make sense of these multiform materials, Thomassen grouped the Valentinian accounts into two main categories, which he called ‘Pleromatology Type A’ and ‘Pleromatology Type B’.¹⁹ Within the Pleromatology of Type A, he listed all of those Valentinian texts or accounts that ‘stress the idea of a generative exteriorisation of the aeons from within the Father’ and, therefore, do not specify the names or numbers of aeons which are present in the Pleroma. In Thomassen’s opinion, the main representatives of this category are the *TriTrac* and *GosTruth*. By contrast, the Pleromatology of Type B groups all those accounts that describe the internal composition of the Pleroma, specifying names and numbers of the aeons, showing the Pleroma as a production of an original syzygy. Under this classification, he listed all of the heresiological accounts mentioned in the previous section and *ExVal*, although the latter treatise is somewhat an exception.²⁰ In 2011, Marksches objected to Thomassen’s classification, accusing him of having fallen into the trap skilfully orchestrated by the heresiologists, who wanted to sell Valentinianism as a

¹⁸ *Supra* II.1.1.

¹⁹ Thomassen (2006), 193-195.

²⁰ As Thomassen highlighted rightly, the pleromatologies of type B should not be considered as a homogenous group sprouting from a single source. For this reason, most of these texts have different sources; consequently, each one represents a different version of the pleromatic myth.

religion of ‘polytheistic individualities’.²¹ Against Thomassen, Marksches attempted to prove that all Valentinian texts incorporated the henotic platonic tendency towards a ‘de-individualisation’, a reduction of plurality to unity. In other words, he understood the different aeons as manifestations of the Father’s being. In his opinion, the two types of pleromatology are not an ontological characteristic of Valentinian mythologies, rather a mere literary device. In this thesis, I disagree with Marksches’ conclusion that the Valentinian organization of the Pleroma in aeons is a mere rhetorical artifice and I am instead expanding on Thomassen’s suggestion of a twofold classification of Valentinian pleromatologies in types A and B. However, I believe it is necessary to clarify further two issues. On the one hand, I believe it is necessary to admit that the aeons maintain such a strict connection to the Father that their powers ought to be considered dependent upon the ones of the Father, even if they remain real ontological entities. On the other hand, I will soften Thomassen’s neat separation between the two types of pleromatologies by acknowledging the existence of a henotic afflatus²² – that is, the tension of reducing the differences to one – in both types of pleromatologies. Concerning this henotic afflatus, I would even take a step further and state that since all Gnostic pleromatologies show an irreducible tension between unity and plurality, this tension should be considered a distinctive feature of Gnostic mythologies. As the investigation conducted in the previous chapters has shown, the henotic afflatus and the consequent tension between unity and plurality were implicit also in Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite texts. The constant interchangeability of feminine characters in Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite myths suggests a certain tendency to consider them as one. It would appear to me that such tensions culminate in Valentinian theology, assuming the form of two alternative versions of the protological myth. Giving my own line of interpretation, I think that Thomassen tends to stress excessively the differences between the two Valentinian pleromatologies, denying the henotic tension that underlies not only the pleromatologies of type A, but also the ones classified as Type B. In this respect, I am convinced that his own detailed and

²¹ Marksches (2011), 427.

²² I am voluntarily using the term ‘afflatus’ since I presently lack a better terminology that could render the nature of such Gnostic tendency.

correct analysis of *ExVal*, in which the two types mingled and coexisted, ends up contradicting his neat division between the two types.²³ On the other hand, Marksches' proposal of reducing a mythological and theological tension to a mere literary device does not do justice to the complexities of the Valentinian speculation. In addition, although Marksches carefully avoided using a controversial term such as 'modes' to describe the relation between the aeons and the Father, his theory of the de-individualisation of the Pleroma seems to lead to that conclusion. Considering the aeons as 'modes' of the Father and reducing the pleromatic plurality to a mere rhetorical artifice would depotentiate and misrepresent the innovative nature of Valentinian protology, thus denying its ground-breaking value within Gnosticism.

Concerning the role of the feminine, the two types of pleromatology reveal different roles and functions proper to female characters. While the feminine plays almost no role in type A pleromatologies and its soteriological functions are usually taken on by the Son, in the type B pleromatologies its roles and functions vary from text to text, since none of the accounts of type B perfectly match one another. It is clear that, due to the focus on feminine imagery, this work will deal mainly with pleromatologies of type B, for here the pleromatic feminine is explicated as the female counterpart of the abyssal Father. In order to understand the role of the feminine in pleromatologies of type B, I will compare the role of the highest female pleromatic being in *ExVal* and *GN*, thus comparing an original Gnostic source and a heresiological account.

III.2.1 Monadic Father? The Syzygy in the *Valentinian Exposition* (NHC XI, 2)

ExVal is one of the four Valentinian treatises found in the Nag Hammadi library, but it is also one of the least studied.²⁴ As for all Nag Hammadi treatises, the date and circumstances of its composition and transcription are

²³ Thomassen (2006), 231-241.

²⁴ To my knowledge, the only comprehensive studies on this treatise are Turner (1990); Thomassen (1989); and Ménard (1985).

quite obscure; so much so that the recent edition of Turner does not even speculate over the date of composition.²⁵

Notwithstanding the poor conservation of the codex, *ExVal* represents an invaluable source for the study of Valentinianism, especially since the protological myth of *ExVal* presents many similarities with the heresiological accounts of Irenaeus and Hippolytus.²⁶ *ExVal* is particularly interesting for its two different accounts about the origin and composition of the Pleroma:

Moreover, it is these [who have known him who] is, the Father, that [is, the Root] of the All, the [Ineffable One who] dwells in the Monad (ΠΩΤ ΕΤΕ [ΠΕΙ ΠΕ ΤΝΟΥΝ]Ε ΜΠΤΗΡQ ΠΙΑΤ [ΨΕΧΕ ΑΡΑQ ΕΤ]ΨΟΟΠ ΖΝ ΤΜΟΝΑΣ). [He dwells alone] in silence ([ΕQΨΟΟΠ ΟΥΑΕΕΤ]Q ΖΝ ΠΚΑΠΩQ), [and silence is] tranquility since, after all, [he was] a Monad (ΠΚΑ [ΡΩQ ΝΔΕ Π]Ε ΠCΘΡΑΖΤ ΕΠΕΙ ΟΥΝ [ΝΕQΨΟΟ]Π ΜΟΝΑΣ) and no one [was] before him (ΑΥΩ ΝΕΜΝ [ΛΑΓΕ ΨΟ]ΟΠ ΖΑΤΕQΕΖΗ). He dwells [in the Dyad] and in the Pair, and his Pair is Silence (ΕQΨΟΟΠ [ΖΝ ΤΔ]ΥΑΣ ΑΥΩ ΖΝ ΠCΑΕΙΨ ΠΕQ [C]ΑΕΙΨ ΝΔΕ ΠΕ ΤCΙΓΗ). And he possessed the All dwelling within him.²⁷

Now this [is the] Root [of the All] and Monad without any [one] before him. Now the second [spring] exists in Silence (ΤΜΑΖCΝ[Τ]Ε ΝΔΕ [ΝΠΗΓΗ] ΕQΨΟΟΠ ΖΝ ΤCΙΓΗ) and speaks with him alone [...] He [is] a [spring]. He is [one] who appears [in Silence] (ΤCΙΓΗ), and [he is] Mind of the All dwelling secondarily with [Life].²⁸

It is possible to make two interesting observations about these two pleromatic accounts: firstly, they appear to be a unique example of the combination of pleromatologies A and B; secondly, they confirm Irenaeus' and Hippolytus'

²⁵ Turner (1990). On the contrary, Ménard hypothesized that it was composed around the end of the second century even if he dated the Coptic text sometimes in the third century, see Ménard (1985), 2.

²⁶ For a discussion of the similarities, see Pagels (1990) and Thomassen (2006), 231-241.

²⁷ *ExVal* XI, 22, 18-28.

²⁸ *ExVal* XI, 23, 19-22 and 24, 18-22. Thomassen (2006), 236-237 translated '[from Silence]' in XI, 24, 20 and read Bythos (ΠΩΙΚQ) instead of Life (ΠΩΝQ) in XI, 24, 22. Against his reconstruction, I am here following Turner (1990), 109 and Ménard (1985), 25 in reading the passage as if Mind-Life were a dyad.

testimonies about an ongoing Valentinian debate regarding the monadic or syzygial nature of the Father.²⁹ Concerning the presence of pleromatologies of type A and B, one ought to notice that while the second passage (*ExVal* XI, 23, 19-22 and 24, 18-22) discusses the individual aeons and their organization in Dyads and a Tetrad external to the Father,³⁰ as one would expect in pleromatologies of type B, the first passage (*ExVal* XI, 22, 18-28) presents a type A pleromatology. Hence, *ExVal* combines the two Valentinian pleromatologies by stating the paradoxical existence of a Monad who has within itself 360 aeons. As I have shown in the previous paragraph, some heresiological accounts of Valentinianism admit the presence of a syzygial companion within the Father,³¹ but none of them envisions the indwelling of the entire Pleroma in the abyssal Father. Therefore, this feature is proper to *ExVal*, representing a *unicum* within the Valentinian school.³² Thomassen has hypothesized that this internal discrepancy is the result of the author's resort to two different sources: one of type A for *ExVal* XI, 22 and one of type B for *ExVal* 23-24-29-30.³³ If Thomassen's hypothesis were correct, the representation of the feminine in *ExVal* would be of great importance, since it would be a testimony of the intent of an unknown Valentinian teacher to combine the two different pleromatologies in a single narrative, thus representing an important step in the development of Valentinian theology. If so, the place of *ExVal* within the history of Valentinianism would be utterly different from the one envisioned by Ménard and its date of composition would

²⁹ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 2, 4 and I, 11, 1; Hippolytus, *El* VI, 29, 2-3. It is worth noting that Hippolytus explained the origin of the Pleroma as if the Father was without a companion.

³⁰ For a detailed account of the Tetrad see *ExVal* XI, 29-30.

³¹ For instance, Tertullian, *AdVal.* 7 and Epiphanius, *Pan* I, 31, 5, 3-4.

³² The closest account would be the one of *Pan* I, 31, 5, 3-5: 'When, in the beginning, the Self-Progenitor himself encompassed all things within himself, though they were within him in ignorance – he whom some call ageless Aeon, ever renewed, both male and female, who encompasses all and is yet unencompassed – then the Ennoia within him (softened the Majesty). Her some have called Ennoia, others, Grace, but properly – since she has furnished treasures of the Majesty to those who are of the Majesty – those who have spoken the truth have termed her Silence, since the Majesty has accomplished all things by reflection without speech. Wishing to break eternal bonds, the imperishable <Ennoia>, as I said, softened the Majesty to a desire for his repose. And by coupling with him she showed forth the Father of Truth whom the perfect have properly termed Man, since he was the antitype of the Ingenerate who was before him.' Although the pleromatology of this anonymous Valentinian document displays some features similar to *ExVal*, too many uncertainties remain regarding its date of composition and place within the Valentinian literature to be discussed appropriately in this chapter. For a study on this text, see Chiapparini (2015).

³³ Thomassen (2006), 233-241.

probably be moved to the third or fourth century, that is, after Valentinus and Ptolemy's systematizations.³⁴

Regarding the characteristics attributed to the syzygy in *ExVal*, scholars have not reached an agreement. On the one hand, Pagels does not deem the Father and Silence to be a syzygy, since she intended **ⲡⲕⲁⲡⲱⲗ̅** as the tranquility in which the Father dwells.³⁵ On the other hand, both Thomassen and Ménard have concluded that Silence is indeed the female companion of the Father.³⁶ Although I agree with the latter position, I deem it necessary to note that the use of the Coptic **ⲡⲕⲁⲡⲱⲗ̅** rather than the transliterated Greek **ⲧⲥⲓⲛⲏ** (Gr. Σιγή) would suggest, as Pagels claims, that the author meant the status of tranquility rather than an individual being in *ExVal* XI, 22, 18. Nonetheless, the choice of using **ⲧⲥⲓⲛⲏ** in the following sentences suggests that, while **ⲡⲕⲁⲡⲱⲗ̅** might be translated simply as 'tranquillity', **ⲧⲥⲓⲛⲏ** ought to be referred to something else. Indeed, the choice of using the Greek word rather than the Coptic one, although very frequent in Nag Hammadi treatises, might suggest that the author is using it as a proper name, namely Silence, the companion of the Father. Within the Valentinian writings, there are many words that work as technical terms for pleromatic realities: the Greek term Σιγή is certainly one of them.³⁷ Furthermore, the similarity between Irenaeus' *GN* and this passage is absolutely striking, since the heresiologist wrote that the Father 'was in solitude and tranquility (ἡσυχία) in the infinite times'.³⁸ Therefore, it is likely that while the author used **ⲡⲕⲁⲡⲱⲗ̅** to translate 'ἡσυχία', 'tranquility of the Father', the term **ⲧⲥⲓⲛⲏ** indicates the syzygial unbegotten partner of the Father.³⁹ Besides the philological evidence, it ought to be noted that the

³⁴ Ménard (1985), 2 hypothesized that *ExVal* should have been composed before the systematization of Valentinian doctrines, that is around the end of second century. Unfortunately, discussing the place of *ExVal* within the Valentinian production falls beyond the scope of this research for it would require an extensive investigation. Moreover, as far as I know, no studies have been conducted regarding the place of *ExVal* within Valentinianism except that of Thomassen. Therefore, this represents an interesting angle for expanding further the researches on the Valentinian school.

³⁵ Pagels (1990), 97-98 and Turner (1990), 154.

³⁶ Thomassen (2006) and Ménard (1985), 66-67.

³⁷ On the use of technical terminology in the Valentinian school, see Lettieri (2011).

³⁸ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 1, 1.

³⁹ Regarding the unbegotten nature of Silence, see *ExVal* XI, 22, 31.

hypothesis of an original pleromatic syzygy fits very well within the overall theology of *ExVal*, which attributes the utmost importance to the syzygy:

For this is the will of the Father: not to allow anything to happen in the Pleroma apart from a syzygy (ΠΕΕΙ Ν ΓΑΡ ΠΕ ΠΟΥΩΦΕ ΜΠΩΤ Α ΤΗΤΡΕΛΛΥΕ ΦΩΠΕ ΞΝ ΠΠΑΗΡΩΜΑ ΟΥΦΝ ΣΥΖΥΓΟΣ). Again, the will of the Father is: always produce and bear fruit (ΠΟΥΩΦΕ ΣΕ ΜΠΩΤ ΠΕ ΤΕΥΩ ΑΒΑΛ ΝΟΥΛΕΙ[Ν]Ψ ΝΙΜ ΛΥΩ † ΚΑΡΠΟΣ) [...] The syzygy is the [perfect one].⁴⁰

From this brief passage, it seems that the syzygy represents the core unit of the Pleroma, since being part of the Pleroma means being one half of a syzygy; indeed, there is nothing in the Pleroma but syzygies. The perfection of the syzygy is a very recurrent theme in Valentinian writings and it is intimately connected with nuptial imagery,⁴¹ as confirmed by many passages from *ExTheod*,⁴² *GosPhil*⁴³ and the Marcosian account.⁴⁴ Hence, the entire Pleroma is organized in 180 syzygies, which are produced hierarchically starting from the Father and Silence, who produced Mind and Life.⁴⁵

Although *ExVal* describes at length the composition of the Pleroma, the roles and functions of the highest feminine pleromatic being are quite difficult to discern, especially given the *lacunae* in the manuscript. Nonetheless, the available passages reveal that the core law of the Pleroma is to ‘produce and bear fruit (ΝΟΥΛΕΙ[Ν]Ψ ΝΙΜ ΛΥΩ † ΚΑΡΠΟΣ)’, thus suggesting that the primary function of the pleromatic feminine is such generation. From a mythological and literary perspective, one might even speculate that the two partners of a syzygy can be considered one for they act as one, thus explaining how the

⁴⁰ *ExVal* XI, 36, 28-34 and XI, 39, 13.

⁴¹ This connection will be explored in *infra* III.4.

⁴² In particular, *ExTheod* 32, 1: ‘Since there is unity in the Pleroma, each aeon has its own plenitude in the syzygy. They say that everything that comes from the syzygy has plenitude, while what comes from the individuality is image.’

⁴³ *GosPhil* II, 76, 6-17.

⁴⁴ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 21, 3.

⁴⁵ *ExVal* XI, 24, 18-22.

Father is a monad and a dyad at the same time.⁴⁶ Although the syzygy is composed by two elements, they cannot act as separate beings for they are made for the very purpose of bearing fruit. From a philosophical perspective, however, this ambiguity between unity and duality in *ExVal* remains unsolved and inexplicable. Nonetheless, as the text reiterates, it is impossible to be in the Pleroma and not to have a partner. Hence, while the textual evidence states clearly the paradoxical existence of the Father who is simultaneously one and two, the philosophical structure that should support this claim fails to provide a coherent explanation of its existence.

In conclusion, the analysis conducted on *ExVal*'s pleromatology suggests that Silence exists in order to produce all the other pleromatic syzygies with the Father and the only reason for her existence is to be the female being within this syzygial partnership who helps to generate the rest of the Pleroma.

III.2.2 Silence in the *Grand Notice* of Irenaeus

The *GN* of Irenaeus – *AdHaer* I, 1-8 – represents probably the most complete account about the origin and composition of the Valentinian Pleroma. As mentioned previously, its doctrines are usually attributed to the Valentinian teacher Ptolemy, who was probably one of the direct disciples of Valentinus. Although some scholars have raised doubts regarding this attribution,⁴⁷ I will assume that Irenaeus' account discusses the theology of Ptolemy and his followers, as information deducible from Irenaeus' chapters seems compatible with the information deducible from Ptolemy's *EpFl*.⁴⁸ Furthermore, since *AdHaer* was redacted around the middle of the second century, the information contained in this account can reasonably be seen as representative of Valentinianism of the time.

⁴⁶ On the consideration of the syzygy as one, see Simonetti (1999), 456.

⁴⁷ Concerning the identity of Ptolemy and the attribution of Irenaeus' account to him or his disciples, the scholarship is quite divided. Some scholars, such as Simonetti (1999) and Thomassen (2006), 17-22, have acknowledged the trustworthiness of Irenaeus' account concerning the attribution of the system described to Ptolemy. On the contrary, Marksches has expressed several doubts regarding the attribution of the *GN* to Ptolemy, see Marksches (2011) and (2000).

⁴⁸ For a study of these correspondences, see Lettieri (2015).

The *GN* offers good insights about the role and functions of Silence:

Along with him (the Abyss/Father), there existed Ennoia, whom they also name Grace and Silence. At one time, the Abyss decided to emit from himself the Beginning of All things. This emission would be as a ‘seed’ which he decided to emit and deposit as it were in the womb of Silence, who coexisted with him. After she had received this ‘seed’ and had become pregnant, she gave birth to Mind.⁴⁹

Overall, *AdHaer* I, 1, 1 seems to confirm the general information deducible from *ExVal*’s passages. As the author of the Nag Hammadi treatise, Ptolemy conceives the highest pleromatic female being as an unbegotten aeon which exists *with* and *in* the Father. Through the use of the verb συνυπάρχω, Irenaeus’ text specifies twice that Silence coexisted with the Father, thus confirming Ptolemy’s belief in the existence of a protological and original syzygy composed of Abyss and Silence. Furthermore, as in *ExVal*, Silence maintains a primarily generative role in Ptolemy’s system. In *AdHaer* I, 1, 1-2, Silence is said to have generated the Pleroma in syzygy with the Father, originating thirty more aeons. However, this account of Ptolemy’s teachings goes even further in describing Silence’s dependence upon the Father, as explicated by Silence’s attributes of Ἐννοια (Ennoia) and μήτρα (womb). These appellatives have been used in other Gnostic texts, such as *ApJohn* II, 4, 26 – 5, 11, and they indicate the active involvement of the female highest being in the generative process.⁵⁰ There is, however, a major difference between *ApJohn* and *GN*. In *ApJohn*, Barbelo/Ennoia is considered the active force of the Virginal Spirit, who is hindered by his transcendence in being involved in the generation of the Pleroma. She therefore plays an active role in the generation of the Pleroma, realising the will of the Virginal Spirit. In particular,

⁴⁹ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 1, 1: Συνυπάρχειν δ’ αὐτῷ καὶ Ἐννοίαν, ἣν δὴ καὶ Χάριν, καὶ Σιγὴν ὀνομάζουσι· καὶ ἐννοηθῆναι ποτε ἅφ’ ἑαυτοῦ προβαλέσθαι τὸν Βυθὸν τοῦτον, ἀρχὴν τῶν πάντων καὶ καθάπερ σπέρμα, τὴν προβολὴν ταύτην, ἣν προβαλέσθαι ἐνενοήθη, καὶ καθέσθαι ὥς ἐν μήτρᾳ τῇ συνυπαρχούσῃ ἑαυτῷ Σιγῇ· ταύτην δὲ ὑποδεξαμένην τὸ σπέρμα τοῦτο καὶ ἐγκύμονα γενομένην, ἀποκυῖσαι Νοῦν.

⁵⁰ *Supra* II.1.2.

the appellative Ennoia in *ApJohn* suggests that the highest pleromatic female being functions as one of the media through which the incomprehensible Father generates the Pleroma and is intellectually known by it.⁵¹ Contrariwise, in *GN*, the association between Silence and a womb is taken literally, making Silence a mere generative matrix and a passive container.⁵² Although Silence is considered the “Thought” of the Father, she does not possess any intellectual function either in the generation or in the disclosure of the Father’s will to the Pleroma. It is indeed the Abyss who produces the σπέρμα from which the Pleroma was generated, and Silence plays no part in this emission. Irenaeus’ narrative is corroborated by Tertullian’s account, which narrates the episodes with similar terminology.⁵³ In this regard, it is worth noting that while *ApJohn* employs Galen’s theory of conception, *GN* seems to share Aristotle’s theory of conception. According to Aristotle, as we saw earlier,⁵⁴ the man provides the seed, which contains the form, whereas the woman provides the substratum, that is, the material element.⁵⁵ In this regard, I disagree with De Conick who claims that the Valentinian mythology seems to presuppose the existence of a male strong seed and a female weak one.⁵⁶ In Valentinianism, the female element is conceived as mere provider of the “material” substratum of the offspring, whilst the male one produces the seed (σπέρμα) to be sown in the female womb (μήτρα).⁵⁷ Moreover, it is worth mentioning that, although the pleromatic generation is always described as an intellectual act of intercourse, the language adopted in heresiological accounts is more sexual than that used in other pleromatic accounts, thus functioning as an anti-heretical device.⁵⁸

⁵¹ The Father/Abyss is described in Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 1, 1 as: ‘a perfect aeon that was before all, the First-Father and the Abyss. He is invisible and incomprehensible. And since he is incomprehensible and invisible, eternal and ingenerated, he existed in deep quiet and stillness through countless ages.’

⁵² So much so that Simonetti 1999, 285 preferred to translate μήτρα with ‘matrice’ (matrix) rather than ‘utero’ (womb).

⁵³ Tertullian, *AdVal* 7.

⁵⁴ *Supra* II.3.1.

⁵⁵ Moreover, this theory of conception is explicitly applied to Ahamot’s generation in Hippolytus, *El* VI, 30, 6-9.

⁵⁶ De Conick (2003), 321-324. Although her explanation of Sophia’s generation might appear correct, it does not fit within the overall pleromatic generative process of the 30 aeons.

⁵⁷ A significative parallel can be found in *ExTheod* 2, 1-2.

⁵⁸ On this regard, see De Conick (2003), 318-320.

Another interesting element of Irenaeus' account is the separation between Holy Spirit and Silence/Ennoia. As we have observed in the previous chapter, it is not unusual for other Gnostic texts to link the Holy Spirit with the highest female pleromatic being. Once again, the most striking example would be *ApJohn* II, 4, 26 – 5, 11.⁵⁹ This does not seem to be the case with Ptolemy's account, where the Holy Spirit (Πνεῦμα ἅγιον) is envisioned as an independent aeon, who is united in syzygy with a male aeon named Christ (Χριστός). Therefore, although the Holy Spirit is still presented as a female being and one of the pleromatic aeons, it does not have any connection with the highest female aeon, but it is rather relegated to the inferior ranks of the pleromatic hierarchy.⁶⁰ From a theological perspective, by separating the Holy Spirit from Silence, Valentinian Gnostics are re-shaping the Trinity conceived as Father-Mother-Son proper to the Sethian, Ophite and Barbeloite theologies, in which the role of Mother and Holy Spirit coincides. If the Trinitarian person of the Mother and the Holy Spirit are no longer the same, Silence loses most of its importance as the acting force of the Father's will. Furthermore, by relegating the Holy Spirit to the lowest Pleromatic ranks, Valentinian Gnostics were not only affirming its liminality, but also diminishing its divinity.⁶¹ In Ptolemy's version of the Valentinian myth, the Holy Spirit works with Christ to disclose the knowledge of the Father to the rest of the Pleroma, but it does not have any special generative role as in other Gnostic mythologies. Indeed, the most interesting connection between the Holy Spirit and the feminine is due to its role of strengthening and stabilizing the Pleroma following Sophia's restoration in the Pleroma, which will be discussed in the next section.⁶² At this

⁵⁹ See also Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 29, 1. *Supra* II.2.

⁶⁰ Interestingly, in Ptolemy's system, the syzygy Christ/Holy Spirit is generated by Monogenes after the generation of the thirty aeons (thus, generating the contradictory number of thirty-two aeons in the Pleroma) to avoid that what had happened to Sophia could happen to other aeons.

⁶¹ It is worth anticipating that, although Ptolemy deprives Silence of her Trinitarian role of "Mother" of the Son (Μονογενής) and Holy Spirit, he partially recuperates the Trinitarian function of the "Mother" by attributing some revealing functions of the Holy Spirit to Sophia, thus making Sophia "Mother". For the role of the Holy Spirit and Christ as disclosers of the Father's knowledge to the rest of the Pleroma and for Sophia's role of "Mother", *infra* III.3.2.2.

⁶² Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 2, 5: εἰς πᾶσιν καὶ στηριγμὸν τοῦ Πληρώματος. For an insightful investigation of the syzygy Christ/Holy Spirit, see Orbe (1977), 10-13. Therefore, the Holy Spirit does bear some connection with the fallen feminine, but this will be discussed in the following section, *infra* III.3.2.2.

stage in my research, it is possible to conclude that Ptolemy's system, as described by Irenaeus, could be seen as a Gnostic attempt to normalize previous doctrines in order to make them more similar to mainstream Christian Trinitarian beliefs. If Irenaeus' account is trustworthy, Ptolemy would have achieved this by expunging the scandalous female element of the "Mother" of the Son (Μοῦνη) from the Trinity and attributing the role of mediator between the world and God to the Holy Spirit.⁶³

In summary, the *GN* confirms and integrates the information about Silence found in the *ExVal*, where the feminine is important insofar as it functions as a generative power within the boundaries of the syzygy. Furthermore, the *GN* provides two additional pieces of information about the evaluation of the feminine in Valentinianism, particularly according to Ptolemy's system. First, the subordination of female characters to male characters is acknowledged as the subordination of materiality/femininity to the spirituality/masculinity. The analysis of the metaphorical use of the generation language to explain the coming into existence of the Pleroma has proved that Ptolemy assimilates the feminine with a matrix, that is, the divine "material" substratum onto which a male element imprints form and spirit. Secondly, an overview of Ptolemy's understanding of the Holy Spirit as the syzygial mate of Christ has shown a significant shift in the Trinitarian role attributed to this female aeon in Valentinianism. Whereas other Gnostic movements conceive the Holy Spirit as one of the names of the highest pleromatic female being, Ptolemy denies to it the role of "Mother" of the Son (Μοῦνη).

III.2.3 Concluding Remarks on the Feminine in the Godhead

In spite of the many Valentinian texts, the information regarding the pleromatic feminine are quite scarce, especially if compared with what has previously been found in Ophite, Barbeloite and Sethian accounts.

⁶³ See Quispel (2008a).

Both in the *ExVal* and the *GN*, the highest female pleromatic being is named Silence. She is not conceived as emanating from the Father, but rather as coexistent in syzygy with the Father Abyss. They are the protological syzygy that generates the entire Pleroma. Given their syzygial union, they act in unity but they do not partake equally in the generative process. A thorough investigation of the metaphorical language of generation employed to describe the unfolding of the Pleroma has shown that the male element has an active procreative function, giving form to the offspring by means of his seed, whereas the female element is relegated to the passive role of matrix. Hence, at a pleromatic level, the dichotomy between masculine and feminine becomes indicative of a rigid division of roles and functions: maleness corresponds to activity and femaleness corresponds to passivity. Whereas the pleromatic feminine held an active generative role in the Ophite, Barbeloite and Sethian traditions, such a quality is not present in Valentinian pleromatologies. Furthermore, both *ExVal* and *GN* prove that Holy Spirit is not used by Valentinian Gnostics as an appellative of the highest female aeon, for they interpret the Holy Spirit as production of Monogenes and the σύζυγος of Christ. Although it maintains a female nature, its femaleness is restrained by Christ, to whom all main soteriological functions are indeed attributed. Hence, by limiting the generative role of the feminine to the provision of a substratum and by distancing the Holy Spirit from Silence/Ennoia, these accounts prove that the pleromatic feminine becomes a synonym of inactivity and of container of male power. Furthermore, it must be noted that the rules of the syzygy imply a certain subordination of the feminine to the masculine, for only the latter contains the true generative power.

III.3 The Fallen Feminine: Sophia in the “Myth of Separation”

The doctrine of an intra-divine fracture is the core of all Gnostic mythologies. The representation of the myth of the fall bears mythological and theological implications that are revealing of soteriological and eschatological doctrines distinctive of individual Gnostic groups. Within Valentinianism, the fallen feminine myth becomes, if possible, even more central, for I believe it reveals the deeply Christian identity of the Valentinian movement. As in other Gnostic myths, the fallen feminine is personified in the character of Sophia, who is generally considered as the youngest among the aeons of the Pleroma, and the one who causes the intra-divine breach that disrupts the Pleroma’s rest. Before turning our attention to the differences between Valentinian accounts, it is worth highlighting an element that is common to all Valentinian versions of the fall and which does not appear in other Gnostic accounts: the so-called ‘myth of separation’.⁶⁴ The myth is named after the separation that takes place between Sophia’s untainted part and that part of her which is dominated by unlawful desires, eventually severing the fallen Sophia from her better self. Hence, the Valentinian Sophia is separated into two selves: the part that remains in the Pleroma represents her better self, whilst that which dwells outside coincides with her defectiveness. This section aims at understanding and explaining the theological doctrines behind the ‘myth of separation’, focusing on how the different Valentinian teachers portrayed the character of Sophia.

While the myth of separation is common to all Valentinian accounts, each Valentinian teacher restructures the myth in an original way. A first distinction ought to be made between those Valentinian Gnostics who identify the fallen aeon with Sophia and those who do not. By contrast with most Valentinian accounts, *TriTrac* and *GosTruth* attribute different names to the aeon

⁶⁴ This definition has been borrowed from Thomassen (2006), 248. In one of his previous articles, Thomassen had already highlighted how this myth was influenced by philosophical traditions, particularly Pythagorean ones. For more information regarding the philosophical and cultural background of the Valentinian myth of Sophia, see Stead (1969); Painchaud – Thomassen (1989), 337.

responsible for the intra-divine rupture. As previously mentioned, *TriTrac* does not present any relevant female character and, consequently, the fall is attributed to a male aeon named Logos.⁶⁵ Similarly, the *GosTruth* does not provide a description of the intra-divine rupture, but it mentions that ‘Error (ΤΠΛΑΝΗ) became powerful and it worked its own matter foolishly not having known the truth’, without providing additional information about Error.⁶⁶ Hence, these two treatises represent the Valentinian exception to the identification of the fallen aeon with Sophia and they will therefore not be included in the following analysis. A second distinction between Valentinian accounts concerns the identity and ontological status of Sophia’s severed part. Some accounts – such as *GN* and *GosPhil* – report that Sophia splits into two different selves, usually named Sophia Echamot and Sophia Echmot/Achamot. Others identify her son, Christ, with Sophia’s better self; among them, it is worth mentioning *AdHaer* I, 11, 1, *ExVal* and *ExTheod* A and B. Contemporary scholarship has adopted the standard definitions of ‘two Sophias systems’ and ‘one Sophia systems’ to distinguish the two schemes. Although I will conform to this use, I would like to stress that in the one Sophia systems, the figure of Christ can rightfully be considered Sophia’s better self, for he is generated by his mother’s spiritual power. This is indeed an important element, for it shows how the soteriological agency of Sophia is being transferred to a male being. It is clear that this internal Valentinian distinction will be a primary concern for my investigation, since the differences in interpreting the separation of the fallen aeon are revealing of Trinitarian, soteriological and eschatological doctrines.⁶⁷ Before analysing the two schemes, I would like to clarify one last point. To a certain extent, the topic discussed in this section might appear similar to the separation of Sophia’s character that occurs in *HypArch*. In this treatise, Sophia’s functions are hypostatized into two different characters, namely Sophia and Zoe, with the latter taking on most soteriological functions of Sophia and thus becoming her better self.

⁶⁵ *TriTrac* I, 77, 11 – 85, 15.

⁶⁶ *GosTruth* I, 17, 14-20. It is interesting that the Greek word chosen to indicate “Error” bears also the meaning of “wandering”, a theme which is often associated with Sophia.

⁶⁷ This difference between Valentinian accounts has been discussed by scholarship mainly by Stead (1969), Simonetti (1999), 486 and Thomassen (2006), 248-262. I will explore the scholarly debate in more detail in the course of this section.

Nonetheless, the case of *HypArch* differs from Valentinian ‘separation’ in both mythological dynamics and theological meaning. First of all, in *HypArch*, Sophia and Zoe are two fully pneumatic beings who operate both inside and outside the Pleroma. On the contrary, when the Valentinian Sophia is separated, her lower self is tainted by the darkness into which it fell, thus losing her pleromatic status. Secondly, the roles of Sophia and Zoe are so strictly intertwined that it is often very difficult to separate one from the other. Contrariwise, the pleromatic Sophia – especially in the person of Christ – and the inferior Sophia become two utterly opposing beings. Lastly, by separating Sophia’s two hypostases, *HypArch* attempted to cope with the paradoxical role of Sophia as both defective and soteriological being at the same time. Although this element is present also in the Valentinian tradition, it results here in the partial removing of the soteriological agency from Sophia.

This chapter is divided into two parts: the first analyses the one Sophia systems, whereas the second part discusses the two Sophia systems.

III.3.1 Sophia and Christ

The choice to discuss first this version of the Valentinian separation myth depends on the fact that this version of the myth is probably anterior to that of the two Sophias.⁶⁸ This is, however, only an educated hypothesis, based on two elements: a) the Gnostic trend to evolve from less complex mythologies to more complex mythologies; b) the inference based on Irenaeus’ description of Valentinus’ and Ptolemy’s systems, according to which the introduction of two Sophias was an innovation of Ptolemy, since Valentinus’ system had only one Sophia.

III.3.1.1 Sophia in the *Valentinian Exposition* (NHC XI, 2)

Considering the poor status of conservation of the codex, understanding the role of the fallen feminine in *ExVal* is quite similar to reconstructing a puzzle.

⁶⁸ This claim is supported by Stead (1969), 88 and Thomassen (2006), 266-268.

One of the main focuses of *ExVal* is the description of Sophia's repentance and correction:

[...] She repented ($\alpha\varsigma\rho\eta\epsilon\tau\alpha\nu\omicron\epsilon\iota$) [and she] besought the Father of the [truth], saying: “Granted that I have [renounced] my consort ($\bar{\nu}\kappa\omega\epsilon\iota \bar{\mu}\pi\alpha\varsigma\chi\upsilon\gamma\omicron\varsigma$). Therefore [I am] beyond confirmation as well ($\epsilon\tau\beta\epsilon [\pi\epsilon\epsilon\iota \dagger]\bar{\mu} \bar{\pi}\beta\alpha\lambda \bar{\nu}\pi\kappa\epsilon\tau\alpha\chi\rho\omicron$). I deserve the things (i.e., passions) I suffer ($\dagger\bar{\mu}\pi\omega\alpha \text{ } \bar{n}\bar{n}\epsilon\epsilon\iota \epsilon\dagger\omega\pi\iota \bar{\mu}\mu\alpha\gamma \bar{n}\epsilon \epsilon\iota\omega\sigma\omicron\theta\iota$). I used to dwell in the Pleroma putting forth the Aeons and bearing fruit ($\kappa\alpha\rho\pi\omicron\varsigma$) with my consort.” And she knew what she was and what had become of her. So they both suffered; they said she laughs ($\bar{\epsilon}\bar{\epsilon}\omega\beta\epsilon$) since she remained alone and imitated the Uncontainable One, while he said she [laughs] since she cut herself off from her consort ($\pi\alpha\chi\epsilon\bar{\alpha} \bar{\epsilon}[\bar{\epsilon}\omega\beta]\epsilon \bar{\nu}\Delta\epsilon \epsilon\pi\epsilon\iota \alpha\varsigma\omega\alpha\alpha\bar{\tau}\bar{\epsilon} \Delta\beta\alpha\lambda [\bar{?}\bar{\mu} \pi]\epsilon\varsigma\chi\upsilon\gamma[\omicron\varsigma]$).⁶⁹

The topic of Sophia's repentance – that is, when she confesses her guilt and begs the Father to bring her back to Pleroma – is extremely common among Valentinian and non-Valentinian texts alike.⁷⁰ Within this narrative, Sophia's repentance results from her inability to save herself, for she is now 'beyond confirmation' because of her misdeed. In this regard, the text is very specific: by cutting herself off from her consort, Sophia rejects the pleromatic law of 'bringing forth' in couples and falls outside of the divine plenitude.⁷¹ It would thus seem correct to assume that Sophia's guilt consists in her desire to bring forth by herself, without the help of her consort. If so, *ExVal* would be in line with Hippolytus' account of Valentinian system, rather than the *GN* or *ExTheod*, confirming Sophia's desire to act like the Father.⁷² In this regard, it is worth highlighting the intriguing and mysterious element of Sophia's laugh. There are several instances in which Gnostic texts present a female character laughing. In *HypArch* II, 90, 17-28, the spiritual Eve's laugh erupts to mock the vain attempt of the psychic archons to grab a spiritual and luminous woman.⁷³

⁶⁹ *ExVal* XI, 34, 33-34.

⁷⁰ See the *GN* (Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 4, 2) and *ApJohn* II, 14, 1-13.

⁷¹ For the importance of the ‘law of the syzygy’ in *ExVal*, see *supra* III.2.1.

⁷² Hippolytus, *El* VI, 30, 6–9. It is worth reminding that this version of the myth has already been observed also in *ApJohn* II, 9, 25 – 10, 5.

⁷³ *Supra* II.4.2.

In the description of Sophia's passions in the *GN*, Sophia's laugh causes the luminous substance to come into being – that is, the substance of which the pneumatic humans are made.⁷⁴ Similarly, in *GosPhil* II, 74, 25 – 75, 2, the unknown author affirms that those who enter the Kingdom of Heaven will do so 'laughing'. In an interesting study on laughter, Stroumsa claimed that the laugh of these female figures is an imitation of Christ's laugh, which is also a popular theme in Gnostic imagery.⁷⁵ His hypothesis would indeed corroborate the idea that soteriological features proper to the Saviour were attributed to these pneumatic female characters. Nevertheless, *ExVal*'s case represents an exception. Contrarily to the abovementioned instances, Sophia's laugh seems here related to her inability to contain her passions, since her laugh metaphorically reiterates the nature of her 'sin', the incontinence that caused her expulsion from the Pleroma. If so, this would mean that there has been a significant shift in the roles and functions attributed to the fallen feminine, which is no longer represented as a soteriological character.

The other focus of *ExVal* consists in the relation between Sophia and Christ: *ExVal* provides indeed precious evidence about Christ's roles as Sophia's son and her syzygial companion. Concerning the role of Christ as Sophia's son, the information about his separation from Sophia is given in a very synthetic way: 'And these things (i.e. passions) Sophia suffered after her son ascended from her (Ν<Ε>ΕΙ ΝΔΕ ΑΖΑΤΟQΙΑ ΨΑΠΟΥ ΝΤΑΡΕQΠΩΤ ΑΤΠΕ ΑΒΑΛ Ν ΖΗΤ̄C ΝΘ[Ι] ΠΕCΨΗΡΕ)'.⁷⁶ This brief sentence suggests that Sophia brought forth Christ after she had suffered passions and, probably, had already been expelled from the Pleroma, since the text asserts that Christ ΝΤΑΡΕQΠΩΤ ΑΤΠΕ (lit. '(he) run to the heaven'). The details of this separation are not available to us because of a consistent lacuna in the page. Nevertheless, more insights about the Sophia-Christ relationship is given by their syzygial bond. As often happens in Valentinian texts, the roles of the son and that of the syzygial companion correspond to such an extent that Christ's main role consists in correcting his mother's deficiency: 'Her correction will not occur through

⁷⁴ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 4, 4. This topic will be deepened in the following chapter, *infra* III.4.2.2.

⁷⁵ Stroumsa (2004).

⁷⁶ *ExVal* XI, 33, 35-36.

anyone except her own son (ἐπει[Δ]η τεσαυρωσις να ὤπη εν ζιτῆ λαγε εἰμητι ζιτῆ πῶρηε).⁷⁷ In this regard, I disagree with Thomassen, who claims that Limit is Sophia's partner based on his different translation of this passage: 'For the correction could not come about by means of his own son'.⁷⁸ Although Thomassen's translation is also possible, it is worth noting that the attribution of the role of Sophia's partner to Limit is usually proper to two-Sophias systems. Given the difficulty in retrieving the text of the significant *lacuna* in that section, I would be inclined to dismiss the claim that Limit is Sophia's eschatological partner, thus attributing this role to Christ.⁷⁹

To further understand Sophia's role, it would also be helpful to discover the "identity" of the Christ generated by Sophia. Indeed, Valentinian texts have usually a three-fold Christology, which envisions a spiritual Saviour who takes on a visible and an invisible psychic body.⁸⁰ In his commentary and French translation of *ExVal*, Ménard interpreted Sophia's son as the psychic Christ.⁸¹ Nevertheless, I believe that the identification of Sophia's son with the psychic Christ makes little sense within the Sophia/Christ paradigm, in which Christ represents Sophia's spiritual part, whilst it fits well within the two Sophias paradigm, where Christ derives from the lower Sophia. In *ExVal*, Christ is the

⁷⁷ *ExVal* XI, 33, 28-30.

⁷⁸ Thomassen (2006), 238-240. In truth, Thomassen (2006), 255-256 himself admits that the identification of Sophia's partner with Limits is quite peculiar.

⁷⁹ Deconick (2003) gives for granted the couple Sophia/Jesus as a spousal couple.

⁸⁰ Valentinian Christology is a very complex issue, especially since there are internal differences between different trends of the Valentinian schools, see Hippolytus, *El* VI, 35, 5-7. For a complete survey of Gnostic Christology, see Orbe (1977) and Orbe (1995), 100-122; Thomassen (2006), 39-45. Concerning the body of the Saviour, most scholars would agree that Valentinian Gnostics have a docetic Christology, according to which Christ has a spiritual body and two psychic bodies (one invisible and one visible), see Thomassen (2006) and Simonetti (1999). Recently, Dubois (2017) has argued that the alleged Docetism of the Valentinian schools derives from a biased reading of Valentinianism through the lens of heresiological accounts. Although Dubois has rightly pointed out the necessity of investigating further the Christology of the Nag Hammadi treatises, I disagree with his conclusion that assimilates the 'chair sensible du corps psychique' with a carnal body in its own right, for the passions of Christ's psychic body do not imply the redemption of the material substance, but merely of the psychic nature. At most, one could argue that, since Gnostic Docetism does not work on a binary distinction (spiritual vs material) but in a threefold ontology (spiritual, psychic and material), it is incorrect to use the word "Docetism" to describe the Gnostic doctrine. Nonetheless, the peculiarity of Gnostic Docetism is well documented in the scholarship, thus allowing the use of such terminology without the risk of misunderstanding. Such differences are, however, tangential for this research and they will be discussed only when necessary.

⁸¹ See Ménard (1985), 73-74.

fullness of divinity (ΠΛΗΡΩΜΑ ΝΤΗΝΤΝΟΥΤΕ), he who is ‘a perfect form [that should] ascend into [the Pleroma], he did not [at all] want to consent to the suffering, [but he was detained] [*lacuna*] him by Limit’.⁸² Hence, I would rather identify Sophia’s son with the pneumatic Christ. If my hypothesis is correct, Sophia gains the role of Mother of the Saviour which is usually held by the higher pleromatic female character in Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite texts.⁸³ Thus, even if the author of *ExVal* had dismissed the Trinitarian role of Silence as ‘Mother’, this element is now retrieved and attributed to Sophia. Unlike Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite accounts, Sophia is not only ‘mother’ of the spiritual substance in the world, but she is the Mother of the Redeemer. If the defective Sophia is the Mother of the Redeemer, then the divine defectiveness has reached the core of the Valentinian Godhead. Since Sophia is both the Mother of the pleromatic Christ and in need of salvation herself, the paradoxical stand of the fallen feminine is even more marked within Valentinian theology than in any other Gnostic system, resulting in a divinity that is tainted by this intra-divine sin to its very core. Hence, *ExVal* is the perfect testimony of the dramatic Valentinian tension between two opposite poles: the philosophical need to preserve the divine transcendence and the need to give a protological and pleromatic dignity to the biblical story of the original sin.

Although Sophia is the Mother of the Saviour, no soteriological functions have been attributed to her. On the contrary, Jesus is the only salvific figure:

The seeds [of] Sophia are incomplete [and] formless (ΟΥΝ ΝΣΠΕΡΜΑ [ΝΤ]ΣΟΦΙΑ ΣΕΟΕ[Ι] ΝΑΤΧΩΚ ΑΒΑ[Χ ΑΥ]Ω ΝΑΜΟΡΦΟC), Jesus [contrived] a creature of this sort and made it of the seeds while Sophia worked with him (ΑΙΗ[Σ Ρ]ΕΠΙΝ[ΟΕΙ Ν]ΟΥΚΤΙCΙC Ν[Τ]ΜΙΝΕ ΑΙCΩΩ[ΩΝΤ] ΜΜΑΥ ΝΝΣΠΕΡΜΑ ΕΡ[ΕΤC]ΟΦΙΑ ΡΖΩΪ ΝΜΜΕC). For since they are seeds and [without form], he descended [and brought] forth that Pleroma [of aeons]

⁸² *ExVal* XI, 33, 21-26. For a similar interpretation of this passage, see Thomassen (1989), 232 and Thomassen (2006), 255-256.

⁸³ *Supra* II.2.1.

which are in that place, [since even the uncreated ones of] those [aeons are of] the pattern of the [Pleroma] and the [uncontainable] Father.⁸⁴

Moreover, this Jesus created the creature, and he worked from the passions surrounding the seeds (Ϟοοπ πεει θε η̅ι̅ς α̅ρ̅cωω̅η̅τ̅ η̅τ̅κ̅τ̅ι̅c̅ι̅c̅η̅ α̅γ̅ω α̅ρ̅η̅η̅ι̅ο̅γ̅ρ̅γ̅ει α̅β̅αλ ζ̅η̅ η̅πα̅θ̅ο̅ς ε̅τ̅η̅ π̅κ̅ω̅τ̅ε η̅η̅ς̅π̅ε̅ρ̅μ̅α). And he separated them from one another and the better passions he introduced into the spirit and the worse ones into the carnal (α̅γ̅ω α̅ρ̅π̅ω̅ρ̅χ̅ η̅μ̅α̅γ̅ α̅β̅αλ η̅η̅ο̅γ̅ε̅ρ̅η̅γ̅ α̅χ̅ω η̅πα̅θ̅ο̅ς ε̅τ̅c̅α̅τ̅η̅ α̅ζ̅ο̅γ̅η̅ α̅π̅π̅ι̅ν̅ε̅μ̅α η̅ε̅θ̅α̅γ̅ η̅δ̅ε α̅ζ̅[ο̅]γ̅η̅ η̅α̅ν̅c̅α̅ρ̅κ̅ι̅κ̅ο̅ν).⁸⁵

Here, *ExVal* is identifying the redeeming figure with Jesus, thus posing the additional question of whether the pleromatic Christ and the Saviour Jesus correspond. Given that these passages suggest that this Jesus is the syzygial partner of Sophia – for his actions conform to what one would expect from the male element of a syzygy, according to my discoveries concerning *ExVal* pleromatology⁸⁶ – I am inclined to identify “Jesus” with Christ, thus assuming that the author of *ExVal* is using the name **ἸΗΣΟΥΣ** when referring to the extra-pleromatic existence of Christ. In an historical perspective, Jesus is both the one who makes the spiritual seed and the one who gives form to Sophia’s passions, separating the spiritual from the carnal ones. Hence, while Sophia and Jesus work together in the world, from an eschatological perspective, Sophia will be united to her own son, Christ, as stated in *ExVal* XI, 33, 28-30. Notwithstanding the Christological complexities, this text confirms once more that the female part of the syzygy has a passive and ancillary role, whereas the male element of the syzygy carries out the active and performative role. It would therefore appear that the author of *ExVal* is here employing the same metaphorical and linguistic register which is used usually to describe the syzygy Valentinian pleromatologies.

Overall, *ExVal* provides relevant information about the fallen feminine in spite of its numerous *lacunae*. First, it confirms once more that Valentinian Gnostics

⁸⁴ *ExVal* XI, 35, 12-23.

⁸⁵ *ExVal* XI, 35, 30-37.

⁸⁶ *Supra* III.2.1.

used feminine imagery to indicate the inferior and passive levels of divinity, whereas they used masculine imagery to indicate its active and superior levels. Secondly, *ExVal* identifies the defective Sophia with the Mother of the Saviour, thus envisioning a defective being in the very core of the Godhead. Unlike Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite works, Sophia does not perform any soteriological actions, which are carried forth by her Son.

Although *ExVal* provides a sufficiently clear picture of the protological and eschatological status of Sophia, as well as her centrality in the Valentinian system, it does not illustrate in detail the separation between Christ and Sophia, which will be therefore clarified in the following section regarding *ExTheod*.

III.3.1.2 The Fallen Feminine in Eastern Valentinianism (*Excerpta ex Theodoto*, frag. 1-42)

ExTheod is a very fragmentary work and, as I have already underlined, there have been some concerns regarding the internal coherence and identity of the author of the collection of fragments.⁸⁷ Due to these methodological uncertainties, I have resolved to consider the figure of the fallen feminine as represented in sections A, B and D, thus illustrating how Sophia is conceived in eastern Valentinianism, without attributing my findings specifically to Theodotus. As far as section C is concerned, I will discuss it in the following section on the doctrines of Ptolemy and his disciples, for it constitutes a valid parallel to the *GN*.

One of the most relevant fragments of *ExTheod* about Sophia and Christ affirms:

Indeed Christ became an adopted son as he became elect among the pleromatic beings and First-Born of the realities there. [...] They say that when Christ fled that which was foreign to him and was drawn back into the Pleroma, after he had been begotten from his mother's thought, the

⁸⁷ *Supra* III.1.

Mother again produced an Archon of the economy as a type of Him who had deserted her, according to her desire for him, who was better, since he was a type of the Father of All.⁸⁸

From a narrative perspective, this fragment mostly confirms what has already been observed in *ExVal*. After being born from the Mother's better parts (namely, her *ἐννοία*), Christ ascended into the Pleroma, abandoning his mother below. As a consequence, the fragment describes the birth of a second child, the Demiurge. Once Christ had left Sophia, she had another child, an Archon, whom she generated in ignorance as an inferior copy of her firstborn.⁸⁹ From a theological perspective, this fragment confirms the existence of a typological mechanism in *ExTheod*, according to which the inferior world and its events are merely a faded copy of the divine realities and events. As a matter of fact, the author specifies that the Archon is molded as a type ('τύπος') of Christ who, for his part, is type of the Father of All. Moreover, being the Demiurge or creator of the inferior world, it follows that also the inferior world is τύπος of pleromatic realities, just as is its ruler.⁹⁰

However, the most striking element of *ExTheod* lies in the Christology and in the theological implications that it has for the fallen feminine. The fragment I have quoted presents a Christology of adoption, since it affirms that Sophia's son Christ has merely been adopted by the Pleroma (υἱόθετος), rather than being considered as a full-fledged member of it. By marking his extra-pleromatic birth, *ExTheod* presents a different Christology from *ExVal* since Christ seems to be in need of redemption too, as confirmed by the following fragment:⁹¹

⁸⁸ *ExTheod* 33, 1-3: Υἱόθετος μέντοι γέγονεν ὁ Χριστός, ὡς πρὸς τὰ πληρώματα «Ἐκλεκτός» γενόμενος καὶ «Πρωτότοκος» τῶν ἐνθάδε πραγμάτων. [...] Χριστοῦ, φασί, τὸ ἀνοίκειον φυγόντος <καὶ> συσταλέντος εἰς τὸ Πλήρωμα, ἐκ τῆς μητρώας γενομένου ἐννοίας, ἡ Μήτηρ αὖθις τὸν τῆς οἰκονομίας προηγάγετο Ἄρχοντα, εἰς τύπον τοῦ φυγόντος αὐτήν, κατ'ἐπιπόθησιν αὐτοῦ, κρείττονος ὑπάρχοντος, ὃς ἦν τύπος τοῦ Πατρὸς τῶν ὅλων. Similarly, see *ExTheod* 32, 1.

⁸⁹ The generation of the Demiurge is further expanded in *ExTheod* 39, where it is said that the Mother was unable to generate something 'whole' after Christ.

⁹⁰ This is particularly clear in *ExTheod* 7,5.

⁹¹ On Theodotus' Christology and soteriology, I therefore agree with Thomassen (2006), 28-38. He calls Theodotus' soteriological model one of 'mutual participation', for Christ never assumes a psychic body but only a spiritual one. It is indeed this spiritual body that needs to be

“Father,” he says, “I deposit into thy hands my spirit.” Sophia, he says, put forth a receptacle of flesh for the Logos, the spiritual seed; clad in it the Saviour descended. Hence, at the Passion, he deposited Sophia with the Father, in order that he might receive her from the Father and not be held back here by those who have the power to unclad him. Thus, by the word already spoken of, he deposits the whole spiritual seed, the elect ones.⁹²

Within this Christology of adoption, the fallen feminine plays an essential role for it becomes a ‘receptacle of flesh’, Christ’s σαρκίον. Henceforth, Sophia is here identified with the material and visible part of the Logos – that is, the divine matter which is assumed by the Saviour in his descent and that suffers during the Saviour’s Passion. In other words, Sophia *is type* of the body of Christ. In this context, the Saviour’s body ought not to be envisioned as a material or fleshy one, rather as a divine body made out of the spiritual seed (τὸ πνευματικὸν σπέρμα).⁹³ This identification of the fallen feminine with the body of Christ gives an utterly new perspective about the role and functions of feminine imagery within Valentinianism. Although the superiority of the male aeon is maintained, since Christ is superior to Sophia, the feminine assumes the function of *sub-stratum* in the Latin sense of the word, that is, ‘what acts as a support’.⁹⁴ Thus, Sophia’s role can only be understood as inextricably intertwined with that of Christ, since her power works only insofar as Christ operates through her: ‘The visible part of Jesus was Sophia and the Church of the superior seeds and he put it on through the flesh, as Theodotus says; but the

redeemed, thus presenting paradoxically a Saviour who is in need of Salvation himself, whence the ‘mutual participation’. On the contrary, Pagels (1974), 43, seems to envision a Christology in which Christ assumes a psychic body.

⁹² *ExTheod* 1, 1-2: «Πάτερ», φησί, «παρατίθεμαί σοι εἰς χεῖρας τὸ Πνεῦμά μου.» Ὁ προέβαλε, φησί, σαρκίον τῷ Λόγῳ ἢ Σοφία, τὸ πνευματικὸν σπέρμα, τοῦτο στολίσάμενος κατήλθεν ὁ Σωτήρ. Ὅθεν ἐν τῷ πάθει τὴν Σοφίαν παρατίθεται τῷ Πατρί, ἵνα αὐτὴν ἀπολάβῃ παρὰ τοῦ Πατρός, καὶ μὴ κατασχεθῇ ἐνταῦθα ὑπὸ τῶν στερίσκειν δυναμένων. Οὕτως πᾶν πνευματικὸν σπέρμα, τοὺς ἐκλεκτούς, διὰ τῆς προειρημένης φωνῆς παρατίθεται.

⁹³ It seems likely that this comes from a Valentinian exegesis of Paul *1Cor* 12.

⁹⁴ It is worth remarking once more that this does not change the pleromatic hierarchy, but it simply explains in what terms the inferiority of the feminine imagery should be understood.

invisible part is the Name, which is the Only-Begotten Son.⁹⁵ With Sophia being the visible part of Christ, two major soteriological and ecclesiological consequences arise. If Sophia is the Logos' body in the inferior and material world, she is the one who acts and suffers passion for the redemption of the spiritual seed, thus assuming a major soteriological function. In this respect, it is worth specifying that Sophia does not become Jesus, but simply the Saviour 'cladded in her', assuming in himself the spiritual substance that is in need of redemption. As such, the ecclesiological implication of Sophia's συμ-πάθεια should also be underlined, for *ExTheod* is probably the most explicit source regarding Sophia's identification with the Church. Here, Sophia also represents the totality of the 'spiritual seed' that has been informed by the Saviour.⁹⁶ Sophia is, therefore, the perfect and restored Church of the elect, of which she is Mother, since the spiritual seed united in her and in Christ will enter the Pleroma through their Passion. I believe it is important to highlight that this identification of Sophia with the Church clarifies also what I have attempted to explain regarding Sophia as type of the "body" of Christ. It is likely that the Valentinian teacher of *ExTheod* derived this theory from an allegorical exegesis of the Scripture. Indeed, the belief that Sophia represents the 'body of Christ' fits well the Pauline theology of *Eph* 5:30, where the Church is identified with the body of Christ. Furthermore, these fragments align within the well-known tradition of the spousal metaphor as representative of the relationship between God and his Church.⁹⁷

From an eschatological perspective, the passions suffered by Sophia, or the 'original sin' which disrupted the pleromatic order, are destroyed by means of her Passion on the cross with Christ:

Moreover, if he who came down was the object of the desire of the All
 ("for the entire Pleroma assumed a bodily form") and the Passion was

⁹⁵ *ExTheod* 26, 1: Τὸ ὁρατὸν τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ἡ Σοφία καὶ ἡ Ἐκκλησία ἦν τῶν σπερμάτων τῶν διαφερόντων, ἣν ἐστολίσατο διὰ τοῦ σαρκίου, ὥς φησιν ὁ Θεόδοτος· τὸ δὲ ἀόρατον <τὸ> Ὄνομα, ὅπερ ἐστὶν ὁ Υἱὸς ὁ Μονογενής. On Sophia's dependence upon Christ, see also Orbe (1977), 21-26.

⁹⁶ *ExTheod* 42.

⁹⁷ For an overview of the Christian and non-Christian traditions about the marriage with Sophia/Wisdom, see Horsley (1979).

his, it is clear that the [spiritual] seeds in him shared his passion, and that through them the “Whole” and the “All” are found to be suffering. In addition, they say that the All suffered with him, instructed by the passion of the twelfth aeon.⁹⁸

Not only does *ExTheod* suggest that Sophia is sharing Christ’s sufferings during passion, but it even implies that the entire Pleroma is suffering with Christ through them.⁹⁹ According to the typological mechanism which governs the Gnostic cosmos, the myth of Sophia represents therefore the protological antecedent of Christ’s Passion on the cross, as the suffering of the divine is transposed to an intra-divine level, thus intertwining the redeemer with the redeemed. Hence, in a Valentinian logic, the theologoumenon of Sophia’s subjection to passions reveals the Christian mystery of God’s sufferings. Just as Sophia’s passionate desire to imitate the Father caused the intra-divine disruption, so she contributed to her own redemption by sharing Christ’s passion.¹⁰⁰

In conclusion, these fragments show that the fallen feminine plays a major role in the theology of eastern Valentinian schools. Notwithstanding the subordination of female aeons to male aeons – since feminine imagery is used to indicate the defective part of the divine, whilst masculine imagery is used to indicate its perfect status – the character of Sophia gains a primary role within this form of Valentinianism. Being type of the visible and material part of God and sharing the sufferings of the Saviour in the Passion, her myth reveals the Christian mystery of divine and human redemption. Therefore, feminine

⁹⁸ *ExTheod* 31, 1-2: Ἀλλὰ καὶ εἰ ὁ κατελθὼν εὐδοκία τοῦ Ὁλοῦ ἦν («ἐν αὐτῷ γὰρ πᾶν τὸ Πλήρωμα ἦν σωματικῶς»), ἔπαθεν δὲ οὗτος, δῆλον ὅτι καὶ τὰ ἐν αὐτῷ σπέρματα συνέπαθεν, δι’ ὧν τὸ Ὅλον καὶ τὸ Πᾶν εὐρίσκεται πάσχον. Ἀλλὰ καὶ διὰ τῆς τοῦ δωδεκάτου Αἰῶνος πείσεως τὰ Ὅλα «παιδευθέντα», ὥς φασι, συνεπάθησεν.

⁹⁹ Similarly, see Simonetti (1999), 509 and Orbe (1976), 283.

¹⁰⁰ In a very interesting comment on this Valentinian perspective on Christ’s passion, Clement does not fail to notice in *ExTheod* 30, 1-2 how this doctrine is the most unforgivable heresy of the Valentinian school: ‘Then, forgetting the glory of God, they impiously say he suffered. For inasmuch as the Father shared in suffering, though he is, says Theodotus, rigid and unyielding in nature, by showing himself yielding, in order that Silence might understand this, it was suffering. For sympathy is the suffering of one for the sake of another’s suffering. Moreover, when the Passion took place, the whole shared in the same suffering for the recovery of the sufferer.’ On the discussion about God’s subjection to passions in Valentinianism, see Lettieri (2017) and (2012).

imagery becomes the metaphorical and philosophical way to express the existence of a divine principle which mingles with the material world. Indeed, my analysis reveals how Valentinian Gnostics understand the myth of Sophia's passion as an archetype of the Passion of the Saviour, which they transpose to a protological level due to their typological way of interpreting the evangelical narrative. Therefore, the myth of Sophia becomes the core of Valentinian theology, for it is an attempt to make sense of the Christian mystery of the Saviour's suffering.¹⁰¹

III.3.1.3 The Controversial Account of Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* I, 11, 1

This chapter of Irenaeus' work is one of the most controversial Valentinian sources, for the attribution of these doctrines to Valentinus has been contested by several scholars.¹⁰² Nevertheless, it presents a very peculiar Valentinian doctrine of the fallen feminine, which shows that there is a linguistic change in the use of gender categories in intra-pleromatic and extra-pleromatic discourses.

According to Irenaeus, the founder of the Valentinian movement believed the following:¹⁰³

Christ was not emitted by the aeons in the Pleroma, but he was brought forth from the knowledge of better things by the Mother among the shadows, while she was out (of the Pleroma). He, being male, severed the shadow from himself, thus ascending to the Pleroma. Having left his

¹⁰¹ This way of interpreting feminine imagery could have important implications also for early Christian studies in general, particularly for the use of symbolic imagery for the Church and later for the Virgin Mary. In this regard, see Tsironis (2000) and Brubaker – Cunningham (2016).

¹⁰² Among those scholars who have rejected the attribution of this chapter to Valentinus, see Marksches (1992), 364-369 and Thomassen (2006), 23-27.

¹⁰³ In my reconstruction of the Sophia myth in Valentinus, I am in strong disagreement with Marksches (1992), who denied the existence of a Sophia myth in Valentinus. Marksches' argument has been developed further by Dunderberg (2008), who has however admitted a form of continuity between Valentinus and his follower. Against Marksches and Dunderberg, see Quispel (1947) and Chiapparini (2012). In particular, Chiapparini has put Valentinus in strong continuity with the following Valentinian tradition.

Mother among the shadows and devoid of spiritual substance, she generated another son.¹⁰⁴

Sophia/Mother is described as a fallen aeon who dwells in the midst of ‘shadows’ (σκιά), the inferior world in which she fell after leaping out of the Pleroma. The Pleroma is indeed separated from the world by Limit (Ὁρος),¹⁰⁵ the peripheral aeon that prevents Sophia from going back into the divine fullness. Following her fall, Sophia/Mother generated two sons: Christ and the Demiurge. In order to generate Christ – the perfect spiritual child – Sophia/Mother exhausted her spiritual self and remained deprived of spiritual substance (τῆς πνευματικῆς ὑποστάσεως), of which Christ was made. Since he was both spiritual and male, he abandoned his mother in the shadows and ascended to the Pleroma. Only after Sophia/Mother had been severed from her spiritual part did she generate the Demiurge.

Although the name Sophia is not explicitly mentioned, the appellative Μήτηρ ought to be interpreted as referring to her, since it is specified that the Mother is fallen and ‘dwells into the shadows’. Although the concept of Μήτηρ occurs in other Gnostic texts as well, the use of this word in reference to Sophia bears particularly significant meanings in Valentinian theology. For instance, in Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite texts, the fallen aeon is called ‘mother’ mainly in reference to the pleromatic ‘Mother’, thus underlining the connection between the two characters. However, in the previous section, it has been argued that the highest female pleromatic being is not known with the name of Μήτηρ in Valentinianism, thus stressing the connection between the Father and the Son. How should one then interpret the attribution of this appellative to Sophia? It is undeniable that the name carries some Trinitarian implications, as

¹⁰⁴ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I,11, 1: Καὶ τὸν Χριστὸν δὲ οὐκ ἀπὸ τῶν ἐν τῷ Πληρώματι Αἰώνων προβεβλήσθαι, ἀλλὰ ὑπὸ τῆς Μητρὸς, ἔξω [suppl. δὲ] γενομένης, κατὰ τὴν γνώμην τῶν κρείττονων ἀποκεκυῆσθαι μετὰ σκιάς τιнос. Καὶ τοῦτον μὲν, ὅτε ἄρρενα ὑπάρχοντα, ἀποκόψαντα ἀφ’ ἐαυτοῦ τὴν σκιάν, ἀναδραμεῖν εἰς τὸ Πλήρωμα. Τὴν δὲ Μητέρα ὑπολειφθεῖσαν μετὰ τῆς σκιάς, κεκενωμένην τε τῆς πνευματικῆς ὑποστάσεως, ἕτερον υἱὸν προενέγκασθαι.

¹⁰⁵ *AdHaer* I, 11, 1 informs us that Valentinus believed in the existence of two Limits: one between the Father and the Pleroma and one between the Pleroma and Sophia. If Irenaeus’ information is correct, Valentinus attempted to preserve the transcendence and unknowability of the Father by making his alienation from the Pleroma marked by the Limit.

underlined by her involvement in Christ's generation. In this regard, having more information about the Christology of Valentinus might have helped the enquiry about Sophia's role as Mother of Christ. Unfortunately, Irenaeus' account of Valentinus' doctrines is not sufficient to speculate further on this topic, which will instead be expanded in regard to *ExVal* and Ptolemy's theological system.¹⁰⁶

Regardless of the Christological issue, the narrative of the myth of separation is illustrated in this passage clearly, where the separation between Sophia's spiritual and material parts happens by means of filiation. Hence, Sophia's inferiority to male beings is stressed by underlining her inferiority to her own son. By bringing forth Christ on her own, Sophia remains utterly devoid of spiritual substance and she is forced into the darkness, while her own son abandons her to move upward. It seems to me that, in this text, Sophia is bound to the darkness precisely because of her femaleness; otherwise, Christ's ascent would not have any explanation. Indeed, before bringing forth Christ, Sophia was unable to raise herself above the shadows that trapped her, albeit she had maintained her spiritual nature. Contrariwise, Sophia's spiritual offspring did not remain trapped in the inferior world, since – as the text specifies – ‘he was male (ἄτε ἄρρενα ὑπάρχοντα)’ and thus able to sever himself from the shadows and to ascend to the Pleroma. Both Sophia and Christ are spiritual beings, but only the latter is able to rescind the bond with the shadows and save himself. Therefore, in this account, we encounter once more the idea that female gender carries with it some attributes that make female pleromatic beings inferior to male ones, thus marking two levels within the pneumatic nature.

This interpretation of the separation as filiation leaves, however, one open matter, for *AdHaer* I, 11, 1 seems to suggest that Sophia has utterly been devoid of her spiritual substance through the generation of Christ. If so, does that imply that Sophia – being now a psychic being herself – can bring forth only another psychic such as the Archon? This would contradict what has been observed in the *ExTheod*, where Sophia seems to maintain a certain spirituality

¹⁰⁶ *Supra* III.3.1.1 and *infra* III.3.2.2.

after Christ has abandoned her.¹⁰⁷ Nonetheless, the text of *AdHaer* I, 11, 1 seems quite clear in this regard. Therefore, if Sophia becomes a psychic being, two issues arise. First, it raises the issue of the fixity of the three Valentinian natures, for it is unclear how she could have been saved by Christ.¹⁰⁸ Secondly, it opens a new possible interpretation for the literary and philosophical use of gender categories, since outside of the Pleroma, the metaphorical language of generation changes and it is no longer based on the opposition between male/active and female/passive. Outside of the Pleroma, Sophia seems to have the power to generate a healthy offspring on her own, for she is able to supply the spiritual substance by herself. Indeed, the account claims that Sophia brought forth Christ from τὴν γνώμην τῶν κρείττονων, thus in a status of knowledge of the higher realities and not in one of ignorance, as in the case of the Demiurge, her second son. Thus, Sophia generated a spiritual being insofar as she was a spiritual being herself; on the contrary, she generated a psychic being when she had become a psychic being. It seems therefore plausible to hypothesize that, in this account, the difference between bringing forth a spiritual or defective offspring lies in the ontological nature of the parent rather than in the syzygial union. It would appear that this Valentinian myth employs two different metaphorical and linguistic registers; one applies to intra-pleromatic divine beings whilst the other applies to extra-pleromatic being. In this second register, the feminine is no longer synonymous with passivity, which does suggest that the feminine gains *some* active role in the generation, since Sophia seems able to generate on her own a formed spiritual substance outside of the Pleroma.

Henceforth, if one trusts Irenaeus' account, one has to admit that Valentinus' doctrine of the generation of Christ reveals a great deal about the representation of the fallen feminine. Although this account confirms the

¹⁰⁷ For instance, *ExTheod* 21, 1-3 in which Sophia is equated with the spiritual Church.

¹⁰⁸ The debate regarding the fixity of the three natures in Valentinianism is still very much open. In this regard, the main problem concerns the eschatological destiny of the psychic nature; particularly, if the psychic nature will be saved as it is or if it needs to change into a pneumatic nature in order to achieve salvation. For more information about the proponents of the fixity of natures, see Simonetti (1966) and (1999); Magris (1997); Lettieri (2017). For those scholars who hypothesize the fluidity of natures, see Thomassen (2013); Löhr (1992); Pagels (1974).

superiority of pleromatic male over pleromatic female beings, it also suggests that the metaphorical and linguistic register employed to discuss the *extra-pleromatic* events partially subverts the philosophical meanings attributed to gender categories in *intra-pleromatic* events.

III.3.2 Two Sophia System

The version of the Valentinian myth of separation that presents the doubling of Sophia is characteristic of two major Valentinian texts: the *GN* of Irenaeus and the *GosPhil*. These two texts could be considered as representing two opposite Valentinian schools: while *GosPhil* presents mostly eastern Valentinian teachings, the *GN* informs us about the teachings of Ptolemy, one of the most prominent western Valentinian teachers, and his disciples.¹⁰⁹ The presence of the two Sophias system in both eastern and western Valentinianism confirms that the one Sophia and two Sophias systems are not specific of either eastern nor western Valentinianism.

III.3.2.1 Sophia Echmot and Sophia Echamot in the *Gospel of Philip* (NHC II, 3)

In *GosPhil*, the feminine plays a major and prominent role, since the gospel is filled with feminine and nuptial imagery.¹¹⁰ It is worth mentioning that, although I am convinced of the internal coherence of *GosPhil*,¹¹¹ the use of an allusive and metaphorical language makes it sometimes difficult to interpret. The text does not follow a definite narrative, but often resorts to Pindaric flights. For instance, *GosPhil* does not describe how the separation between the

¹⁰⁹ For the attribution of the *GN* to Ptolemy, see Thomassen (2006), 17-22 and Marksches (2000).

¹¹⁰ For this reason, the feminine in *GosPhil* has attracted the attention of many scholars, see particularly Sfameni Gasparro (1977), Buckley (2000); Pagels (2000).

¹¹¹ As previously noted in III.1, there are some uncertainties regarding the internal coherence of *GosPhil*. In spite of the doubts illustrated by Turner (1996) and (1997), I believe that this treatise represents a coherent and unitary Valentinian work. My thesis is also supported by Sfameni Gasparro (1977), Simonetti (1999) and Thomassen (1997).

two Sophias happened, but it just assumes the existence of two distinct characters:

The “Father” and the “Son” are single names (ΠΕΙΩΤ ΜΝ ΠΩΗΡΕ ΝΖΑΠΛΟΥΝ ΝΕ ΡΡΑΝ), the “Holy Spirit” is a double name (ΠΠΝΑ ΕΤΟΥΑΛΒ ΟΥΡΑΝ` ΠΕ ΝΔΙΠΛΟΥΝ). [...] The Holy Spirit is in the revealed: it is below. It is in the concealed: it is above.¹¹²

Echamot is one thing and Echmot another (ΚΕΟΥΑ ΠΕ ΕΧΛΜΩΘ ΑΥΩ ΚΕΟΥΑ ΠΕ` ΕΧΜΩΘ). Echamot is Sophia simply (ΤΣΟΦΙΑ ΖΑΠΛΩΣ), but Echmot is the Sophia of death (ΤΣΟΦΙΑ ΜΠΜΟΥ) which is the one which knows death, which is called “the little Sophia”.¹¹³

Both passages indicate that Sophia – here also identified with the Holy Spirit – is distinct in two opposed selves. In the first case, *GosPhil* stresses that, unlike the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit’s liminality between worlds results in an ontological duality: the Holy Spirit ‘above’ and the Holy Spirit ‘below’. In the second passage, *GosPhil* personifies these two characters in two Sophias, namely Sophia Echmot and Sophia Echamot, one that dwells in the unknown pleromatic world and one that works in the visible world.¹¹⁴ Therefore, one could summarise the main features of the two Sophias in the following manner:

- a) Sophia Echmot personifies the *lower and defective Sophia*, who is awaiting the coming of the Saviour to give her life.¹¹⁵ Although she is called ΤΣΟΦΙΑ ΜΠΜΟΥ (‘Sophia of death’), Echmot is also ‘Holy Spirit’

¹¹² *GosPhil* II, 59, 11-19.

¹¹³ *GosPhil* II, 60, 10-15.

¹¹⁴ Sfameni Gasparro (1977), 264-265 underlines how there is merely a vocalic difference between the two names, since they do not differ from a semantic perspective.

¹¹⁵ The imagery of life/death and light/darkness is essential to understand the different works of the two Sophias, especially since they are often used by the author of *GosPhil* as a metaphor for the separation between the redeemed and the forsaken ones, see *GosPhil* II, 75, 2-14. In this regard, see also *GosPhil* II, 52, 6-15: ‘Those who are heirs to the dead are themselves dead, and they inherit the dead. Those who are heirs to what is living are alive and they are heirs to both what is living and the dead. The dead are heirs to nothing. For how can who is dead inherit? If he who is dead inherits what is living he will not die, but he who is dead will live even more.’

and ‘Mother’ insofar as she generates the pneumatic seed that is hidden in the world when she is in syzygy.

- b) Echamot is called **ΤΣΟΦΙΑ ΖΑΠΛΩΣ** (‘simply Sophia’) and corresponds to the *pleromatic and redeemed Sophia*, that is, the Sophia who has been restored to her pleromatic status by the Saviour.

In order to understand better the opposition between the two characters, I will start with the identification of Sophia Echamot as salt and Sophia Echamot as barren:

The apostles said to the disciples, “May your offering obtain salt.” They called [Sophia] “salt.” (**ΖΜΟΥ**) Without it no offering [is] acceptable. But Sophia is barren [without] child (**ΟΥΣΤΕΙΡΑ ΤΕ ΑΧΝ ΨΗΡΕ**). For this reason, she is called “[trace] of salt.” (**ΠΚΕΣΕΠΕΙ ΝΖΜΟΥ**)¹¹⁶

As for Sophia whom they call barren, she is the mother of the angels (**ΤΣΟΦΙΑ ΕΤΟΥΜΟΥΤ[Ε ΕΡΟ]Σ ΧΕ ΤΣΤΙΡΑ ΝΤΟΣ ΤΕ ΤΜΑΛΥ ΝΗΑΓΓΕΛΟΣ**). And the companion of the [*lacuna*] Mary Magdalen (**ΑΥΩ [Τ]ΚΟΙΝΩΝΟΣ ΗΠΙΣ [... ΜΑ]ΡΙΑ ΤΜΑΓ[ΔΑ]ΛΗΝΗ**).¹¹⁷

Sophia Echmot is here described by a paradox: she is a barren mother. I believe that the interpretative key to this obscure passage ought to be found in the Valentinian notion of the deformity of Sophia’s children. Echmot is **ΤΣΤΙΡΑ** insofar as she is unable to produce a formed offspring as long as she is on her own.¹¹⁸ As a matter of fact, the deformity of those who are generated only by a woman is explained by the author of *GosPhil* by the use of several examples. In one instance, the author affirms that the union of male and female should be considered as ‘a case of strength complemented by weakness’;¹¹⁹ consequently, the children of a woman should be identified as weak, for they have not received the paternal strength. In another instance, *GosPhil* stresses that it is the mother who provides the material substance of which the child is made,

¹¹⁶ *GosPhil* II, 59, 27-34.

¹¹⁷ *GosPhil* II, 63, 30-33.

¹¹⁸ This topic will be explained later on in this section.

¹¹⁹ *GosPhil* II, 76, 6-9. This passage finds a perfect parallel in *ExTheod* 68.

since a child is moulded after the man that the woman loves and of whom she thinks while having intercourse.¹²⁰ Consequently, even if she provides the matter of which the foetus is made, the form is given by the male of whom she is thinking. Although these examples refer to normal human procreation, they can apply to Sophia in virtue of the typological mechanism, which is clearly stated also in *GosPhil*.¹²¹ Hence, just as women, Sophia is deemed to generate only in syzygy; if she does not do so, she is called ‘barren’ for her children are unformed. On the contrary, Sophia Echmot is described as salt, which I think is a metaphor for the spiritual nature, since Irenaeus uses the same image in *GN*.¹²² It is indeed in her capacity as spiritual ‘salt’ that Sophia can rightly be called ‘Holy Spirit’, whereas the visible Sophia cannot be called ‘salt’, but merely ‘trace of salt’, because she is imperfect and defective.

The contrast between Echmot and the spiritual Echamot is further confirmed by the association between Sophia Echmot and a prostitute. In order to understand such meaning, it is worth looking at *GosPhil*’s understanding of prostitution:

If a marriage is open to the public, it has become prostitution (ΟΥΓΑΜΟΣ ΕΦΑΚΩΚΑΖΗΥ ΑΦΩΠΕ ΙΠΟΡΝΕΙΑ), and the bride becomes the harlot not only when she is impregnated by another man but even if she slips out of her bedroom and is seen (ΑΥΩ ΤΩΕΛΕΕΤ’ΟΥ ΜΟΝΟΝ ΕΣΦΑΧΙ ΠΣΠΕΡΜΑ ΙΚΕΖΟΥΤ’ ΑΛΛΑ ΚΑΝ ΕΣΦΑΝΡ ΠΒΟΛ ΙΠΕΣΚΟΙΤΩΝ ΙΣΕΝΑΥ ΕΡΟΣ ΑΣΠΟΡΝΕΥΕ). Let her show herself only to her Father (ΙΠΕΣΕΙΩΤ) and her Mother (ΤΕΣΜΑΛΥ) and to the Friends of the bridegroom (ΠΩΒΗΡ ΙΠΝΥΜ’ΦΙΟΣ) and the Sons of the bridegroom (ΙΝΩΗΡΕ ΙΠΝΥΜ’ΦΙΟΣ). These are permitted to enter every day into the bridal chamber. But let the other yearn just to listen to her voice (ΕΤΕΣΜΗ) and enjoy her ointment (ΙΠΕΣΣΟΒΙ), and let them feed from the crumbs that fall from the table, like the dogs. Bridegroom and bride belong to the bridal chamber (ΟΥΝ

¹²⁰ *GosPhil* II, 78, 12-24.

¹²¹ *GosPhil* II, 84, 20-21; II, 85, 14-15.

¹²² This association had already been noticed by Sfameni-Gasparro (1977), 260-261.

Ζἄννυμ'φιος ἦν Ζἄννυμφι ἡπ'ἐπνυμφῶν). No one shall be able to see the bridegroom with the bride unless [he becomes] such a one.¹²³

This passage is inserted into a long digression about the Valentinian bridal chamber and, at first glance, it might appear to have little in common with Sophia Echmot.¹²⁴ On the contrary, I believe that this passage confirms that the secret hidden by the bridal chamber is indeed the story of Sophia's fall and redemption. Like Lettieri, I am inclined to consider this passage as a Valentinian exegesis of the book of the *Sos*.¹²⁵ Sophia, just like the bride of the *Sos*, became a prostitute when she abandoned her bedroom. Consequently, she was the one who 'slipped out of the bedroom' – that is, outside of the bridal union which is the syzygy – and prostituted herself by refusing to be united with her spouse and by being seen in the inferior world. Just like the bride of the *Sos*, Echmot is a prostitute who wanders outside of her bedroom, since she has abandoned the divine plenitude and has shown herself to the world. In truth, she ought to be seen only by other members of the Pleroma – that is, her 'Father', her 'Mother', the 'Friends of the bridegroom' and the 'sons of the bridegroom'.¹²⁶ Being a pleromatic being, Sophia should be seen only by her Father (that is, the abyssal aeon who originates the Pleroma), her Mother (the Father's syzygial companion), the 'friends of the bridegroom' who – according to *ExTheod* – are the 'angels' that are with the Logos, and, lastly, the 'sons of the bridegroom'. These latter are the spiritual human beings who are born in the syzygy, thus being the only human beings to be 'imperishable'.¹²⁷ Only the 'Sons of the bridegroom' and the bride will be admitted to the bridal chamber, whereas the others will remain outside, listening to Sophia's 'voice' and smelling her 'anointment', but being deprived of her presence.¹²⁸

¹²³ *GosPhil* II, 82, 10-26.

¹²⁴ The topic of the bridal chamber will also be discussed later, *infra* III.4.2.

¹²⁵ Lettieri (2008). For the importance of the *Sos* for Valentinian exegesis, see also Meloni (1975), 60-69.

¹²⁶ According to *ExTheod* 65, 1, the friends of the Bridegroom are the angels who rejoice when he enters the bridal chamber with the Bride.

¹²⁷ *GosPhil* II, 75, 10-14.

¹²⁸ In this regard, it is interesting to note Sfameni-Gasparro's interpretation of the anointment as the odour of immortality which is left by Christ in Sophia, see Sfameni-Gasparro (1977), 253. This theme is also discussed at length in Meloni (1975), 60-69.

The parallels between Sophia and the bride of *Sos* become even more meaningful if one considers that Sophia is rescued by Jesus/bridegroom, for it reveals the connection between Sophia Echmot and Echamot. Being the fallen Echmot, Sophia is the pleromatic Echamot only insofar as she is rescued by a male Saviour. *GosPhil* clarifies that Sophia needs a male counterpart in order to be rescued and to be mother of the saved: ‘When we were Hebrews we were orphans and had only our mother, but when we became Christians we had both father and mother.’¹²⁹ Hence, as in the other Valentinian accounts, the actions of female beings require the intervention of a male figure who fulfils them:

If the woman had not separated from the man, she would not die with the man (ΝΕ Μ'ΠΕ' Τ'ΣΖΙΜΕ ΠΩΡΧ ΕΦΟΟΥΤ ΝΕCΝΑΜΟΥ ΑΝ ΠΕ ΜΝ ΦΟΟΥΤ). His separation became the beginning of death (ΠΕCΠΩΡΧ ΝΤΖΑC'ΩΠΠΕ ΝΑΡΧΗ ΜΠΜΟΥ). Because of this Christ came to repair the separation which was from the beginning and again united the two (ΔΙΑ ΤΟΥΤΟ ΑΠΕΡΧΡ̅C ΕΙ ΧΕΚΑΛC ΠΠΩΡΧ ΝΤΑΖΩΠΠΕ ΧΙΝ' ΩΠΠ' ΕCΝΑCΕΖΩC ΕΡΑΤC' ΠΑΛΙΝ' ΝCΖΟΤΡΟΥ ΜΠCΑΝΥ), and gave life to those who died as a result of the separation and united them (ΑΥΩ ΝΕΝΤΑΖΜΟΥ ΖΜ ΠΠΩΡΧ' ΕCΝΑ† ΝΑΥ ΝΝΟΥΩΝΖ ΝCΖΟΤΡΟΥ). But the woman is united to her husband in the bridal chamber (ΖΜ ΠΠΑCΤΟC). Indeed, those who have been united in the bridal chamber (ΖΜ ΠΠΑCΤΟC) will no longer be separated.¹³⁰

Although this passage is inserted by the author into the discussion regarding the separation between Adam and Eve, it is clear that such a separation is merely a type of the pleromatic separation of Sophia and her partner. This separation contaminated the Pleroma, by causing separation within God, which only the Saviour's coming will mend. As the woman will be united with her husband in the bridal chamber, so Sophia will be saved by Christ. In this

¹²⁹ *GosPhil* II, 52, 21-24. It is interesting to note that this passage finds a clear parallel in *ExTheod* 68: ‘For as long as we were children of the female only, as if of a base intercourse, incomplete and infants and senseless and weak and without form, brought forth like abortions, we were children of the woman, but when we have received from the Saviour, we have become children of the groom and the bridal chamber.’

¹³⁰ *GosPhil* II, 70, 10-19.

regard, I strongly disagree with Ménard,¹³¹ since I have not found any evidence to suggest that Sophia may not be redeemed. On the contrary, it would appear that the restoration of the syzygial unity is represented primarily by Christ's union with Sophia:

Indeed, one must utter a mystery (ΝΟΥΜΧΣΤΕΡΙΟΝ). The Father of Everything united with the virgin who came down (ΑΠΕΙΩΤ' ἸΠΠΗΡΩ ΖΩΤῚ ΑΤ'ΠΑΡΘΕΝΟΣ ΝΤΑΖΕΙ ΑΠΙΤῚ), and a fire shone from him on that day. He appeared in the great bridal chamber (ἸΠΠΑΣΤΟΣ). [...] It left the bridal chamber as one who came into being from the bridegroom and the bride (ΑΦΕΙ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΗ ΠΠΑΣΤΟΣ ΝΘΕ ἸΠΠΕΝ'ΤΑΖΩΠΕ ΕΒΟΛ ΖῚ ΠΝΥΜΦΙΟΣ ΜῚ ΤΝΥΜΦΗ). So Jesus established everything in it through these.¹³²

Henceforth, it would seem to me that the myth of Sophia and the sacrament of the bridal chamber are strictly intertwined, for the Valentinian sacrament finds its theological meaning in the mythological story of Sophia's fall and redemption.

Having established that Sophia's destiny is the core of the sacrament of the bridal chamber, there is still one question that needs to be addressed. If Sophia Echmot is a 'barren mother' and a 'prostitute', as it would appear from the previous analysis, to what extent can she be identified with the Trinitarian person of the 'Holy Spirit'? In this regard, *GosPhil* specifies that:

The saints are served by evil powers, for they are blinded by the Holy Spirit into thinking that they are serving an ordinary man whenever they do so for the saints (ΣΕΘ ΓΑΡ ἸΒΛΛΕ ΖΙΤῚ ΠῚΑ ΕΤΟΥΛΛΕ' ΧΕΚΑΑΣ ΕΥΝΑΜΕΕΥΕ ΧΕ ΕΥῚΖΥΠΗΡΕΤΕΙ ΝΝΟΥΡΩΜΕ ΖΟΠΟΤΕ ΕΥΕΙΡΕ ἸΝΕΤΟΥΛΛΕ). Because of this a disciple asked the Lord one day for something of this world. He said to him: "Ask your Mother (ΠΕΧΑΩ ΝΑΩ'

¹³¹ Ménard (1967).

¹³² *GosPhil* II, 71, 3-13.

ⲕⲉ ⲉⲣⲓⲁⲓⲧⲉⲓ ⲛⲧⲉⲕⲙⲁⲁⲩ), and she will give you of the things which are another's (ⲁⲓⲱ ⲙⲛⲁⲓⲱⲧⲧ ⲛⲁⲕ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ ⲉⲛ ⲁⲗⲗⲟⲧⲣⲓⲟⲛ)"¹³³

Regardless of her collocation in the Gnostic cosmos, Sophia/Holy Spirit is able to give her 'sons' (in this instance, they are the saints who are worthy of the bridal chamber) 'the things which are another'. *GosPhil* stresses that Sophia acts covertly in this world, tricking and subjugating evil powers to do her work.¹³⁴ The theme of Sophia's acting secretly in this world is also common among many Gnostic traditions,¹³⁵ but it emerges in a very prominent way in this Valentinian text. Unlike *ApJohn*, where Sophia tricks Yaldabaoth to blow the spirit into Adam, *GosPhil* uses the examples of saints – that is, those who are inspired by Sophia/Holy Spirit – as a testimony of Sophia's actions in the world below. This narrative choice underlines the different theological priorities of the two Gnostic authors. While the author of *ApJohn* aimed at stressing the protological redeeming actions of Sophia, the Valentinian author of *GosPhil* rejects – or, at the very least, overlooks – the involvement of female characters in protological events to focus on Sophia's role as spiritual agent in the world below. As in *ExTheod*,¹³⁶ the role of Sophia is primarily ecclesiological: she is the church of saints, that is, the Church of the Spiritual Seed. In this regard, *GosPhil* is an additional testimony of the Valentinian intent to re-think the Trinitarian role of 'Holy Spirit', since Sophia is assimilable to the Holy Spirit only insofar as she is both 'mother' of the spiritual seed and fallen female being. On the one hand, the spiritual seed is redeemed because Sophia is redeemed, for she is the bride whom the bridegroom will marry. On the other hand, she is Holy Spirit insofar as she dwells outside of the Pleroma, intervening in human affairs. In this regard, it is interesting to mention her role in the conception of Christ from Mary:

Some said: "Mary conceived by the Holy Spirit (ⲡⲉⲕⲉ ⲉⲃⲟⲓⲛⲉ ⲕⲉ ⲁ ⲙⲁⲣⲓⲁ ⲱ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ ⲉⲛ ⲡⲓⲛⲁ ⲉⲧⲟⲩⲁⲗⲉ)" They are in error. They do not

¹³³ *GosPhil* II, 59, 19-27.

¹³⁴ *GosPhil* II, 60, 29-31: 'The Holy Spirit shepherds everyone and rules [all] the powers, the "tame" ones and the "wild" ones, as well as those which are unique.'

¹³⁵ Especially *ApJohn* II, 14, 13 – 19, 33, see *supra* II.3.1.

¹³⁶ *Supra* III.3.1.2.

know what they are saying. When did ever a woman conceive by a woman? (ΑΨ ΝΖΟΟΥ ΕΝΕΖ ΠΕΝΤΑ ΣΖΙΜΕ Ω ΕΒΟΛ` ΖΝ ΣΖΙΜΕ) Mary is the virgin whom no power defiled. (ΜΑΡΙΑ ΤΕ ΠΑΡΘΕΝΟΣ ΕΤΕ ΜΠΕ ΔΥΝΑΜΙΣ ΧΟΖΜΕΣ) She is a great anathema to the Hebrews, who are the apostles and [the] apostolic men. This virgin whom no power defiled [...] the powers defiled themselves. And the Lord [would] not have said “My [father who is in] heaven” unless he [had] had another Father, but he would have said simply “[My father]”.¹³⁷

Like Sfameni-Gasparro, I would be inclined to interpret this passage in reference to an intra-Valentinian polemic between those who believed Christ had a psychic body and those who claimed he was utterly spiritual.¹³⁸ While the author of *GosPhil* denies the involvement of Sophia Echmot – that is, the Holy Spirit who dwells in the world – he seems to combine the characters of Mary, Sophia Echamot and Eve. In particular, the last reference to Mary as the undefiled virgin resembles very closely the story of the spiritual Eve in *HypArch*.¹³⁹ This separation between Echmot and Echamot in regard to the conception of Jesus reveals the radical duplicity of the fallen feminine in *GosPhil*. On the one hand, by excluding the involvement of Echmot/Holy Spirit in the conception of Jesus, *GosPhil* denies that Jesus might have had a psychic body. On the other hand, by associating so closely Mary, Sophia Echamot and the spiritual Eve by means of types, the author is stressing the role of the pleromatic Sophia in the bringing forth of Jesus. Contrariwise, it seems to me that in this passage, Mary should be identified with the pleromatic Sophia, whereas the role of Echmot is utterly denied. My interpretation is also confirmed by *GosPhil*’s affirmation that Christ was born from ‘a virgin’ (ΟΥΠΑΡΘΕΝΟΣ) rather than from two virgins like Adam (ΠΑΡΘΕΝΟΣ ΣΝΤΕ).¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ *GosPhil* II, 55, 23-32.

¹³⁸ On this intra-Valentinian debate, see Hippolytus, *Ref.* VI, 35, 5-7. See Sfameni-Gasparro (1977), 270-271.

¹³⁹ *HypArch* II, 90, 17-28.

¹⁴⁰ *GosPhil* II, 71, 16-21: ‘Adam came into being from two virgins, from the Spirit and from the virgin earth. Christ, therefore, was born from a virgin to rectify the fall which occurred in the beginning.’ This passage will be discussed further, *infra* III.4.2

In this regard, I disagree with both Thomassen and Foster, who claim that Christ had to be born from two virgins as Adam was.¹⁴¹

In conclusion, *GosPhil* presents female characters that play a primary role within the mythology. This analysis has revealed two major functions of the fallen feminine. First, the myth of Sophia's fall and redemption is the theologoumenon which underlies the Valentinian sacrament of the bridal chamber. Insofar as she is Echmot, she archetypically represents the division which occurred within the syzygy, whilst insofar as she is Echamot she archetypically represents the reunion in the bridal chamber between the bride (Sophia) and bridegroom (Jesus). Secondly, Sophia Echmot and Sophia Echamot are shown acting in their capacities as 'Mother' and 'Holy Spirit'. On the one hand, Sophia is mother to the spiritual seed which is in this world, which she embodies as the Church of the spiritual seed. On the other hand, she is Holy Spirit, that is, she who acts covertly in this inferior world. In both of these two capacities, she has the soteriological role to guide secretly the spiritual seed to its ascent to the Pleroma, for she is to be reunited in the bridal chamber with the bridegroom.¹⁴² In this regard, I would like to suggest that my findings refute Ménard's theory about the negativity of Sophia in *GosPhil*.¹⁴³ Although the language used by this Valentinian gospel is very "negative", I hope to have shown that Sophia constitutes the core of the Valentinian theological system of redemption.

III.3.2.2 The *Grande Notice* and *Excerpta ex Theodoto* 43-65: Pleromatic Sophia and Sophia Achamot

Unlike Valentinus, Ptolemy portrays Sophia as separating into a superior Sophia and an inferior one: the former is usually called 'Sophia', whereas the latter is often referred to as 'Sophia Achamot'. In his system, the cause of

¹⁴¹ See Thomassen (2006), 90-93 and Foster (2007), 422-423.

¹⁴² In this regard, I agree with the study of Sfameni-Gasparro (1977), who had already underlined that Sophia seems to possess a certain soteriological relevance, even if her actions are not sufficient for the salvation of the seed.

¹⁴³ Ménard (1967).

Sophia's separation is identified in the intellectual guilt of wanting to know the Father, who is instead unknowable.¹⁴⁴ As a consequence of her reckless actions, Sophia is said to suffer passions, which contaminates the rest of the Pleroma, and to produce a οὐσίαν ἄμορφον (unformed substance). As we have observed in many other Valentinian texts, the reason for the uniformity is found in her female gender, for she brings forth 'a substance that a woman can bring forth'.¹⁴⁵ Therefore, Ptolemy seems to adhere to the well-attested Valentinian doctrine according to which the generation of the woman is weak and incomplete if it is not complemented by a male being. In order to avoid the contamination of the Pleroma because of Sophia's guilt, the Father separates her from the rest of the Pleroma by means of Limit:

Having fallen subject to these passions, she had a change of heart and tried to return to the Father, but she had pushed herself to a certain limit and remained without strength, thus she begged the Father. [...] Afterwards the Father, by means of the Only-Begotten, emitted the abovementioned Limit as part of no syzygial couple, without the female element. This Limit they call Cross, Redeemer, Reaper, Limiter and Restorer. They claim that Sophia was purified by this Limit and strengthened and restored in the syzygy. Indeed, having separated from her the Enthymesis (Intention) with the subsequent passions, she remained within the Pleroma. On the contrary, the Enthymesis with the passions was expelled and casted out (of the Pleroma), thus constituting the spiritual substance, since she had the natural impulse of the Aeon, but it was deprived of form and shape since Sophia had not understood anything. For this reason, they call her a weak feminine fruit.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ *AdHaer* I, 2,1.

¹⁴⁵ *AdHaer* I, 2, 3.

¹⁴⁶ *AdHaer* I, 2, 3-4: Ἐγκαταγενομένην δὲ τοῖς πάθεσι λαβεῖν ἐπιστροφὴν, καὶ ἐπὶ τὸν Πατέρα ἀναδραμεῖν πειρασθῆναι, καὶ μέχρι τινὸς τολμήσασαν, ἐξασθενῆσαι, καὶ ἰκέτιν τοῦ πατρὸς γενέσθαι. [...] Ὁ δὲ Πατὴρ τὸν προειρημένον Ὅρον ἐπὶ τούτοις διὰ τοῦ Μονογενοῦς προβάλλεται ἐν εἰκόνι ἰδίᾳ, ἀσύζυγον, ἀθήλυντον. Τὸν γὰρ Πατέρα ποτὲ μὲν μετὰ συζυγίας τῆς Σιγῆς, ποτὲ δὲ καὶ ὑπὲρ ἁρρὲν, καὶ ὑπὲρ θηλυ εἶναι θέλουσι. Τὸν δὲ Ὅρον τούτον καὶ Συλλυτρωτὴν [l. Σταυρὸν καὶ Λυτρωτὴν], καὶ Καρπιστὴν, καὶ Ὁροθέτην, καὶ Μεταγωγέα καλοῦσι. Διὰ δὲ τοῦ Ὁρου τούτου φασὶ κεκαθάρθαι καὶ ἐστηρίχθαι τὴν Σοφίαν, καὶ ἀποκατασταθῆναι τῇ συζυγίᾳ· χωρισθείσης γὰρ τῆς Ἐνθυμώσεως ἀπ' αὐτῆς σὺν τῷ ἐπιγινόμενῳ πάθει, αὐτὴν μὲν ἐντὸς πληρώματος εἶναι· τὴν δὲ ἐνθυμήσιν αὐτῆς σὺν τῷ πάθει ὑπὸ τοῦ Ὁρου ἀφορισθῆναι καὶ ἀποστερηθῆναι [l. ἀποσταυρωθῆναι], καὶ ἐκτὸς αὐτοῦ γενομένην, εἶναι μὲν πνευματικὴν οὐσίαν, φυσικὴν τινα Αἰῶνος ὁρμὴν τυγχάνουσαν· ἄμορφον

There are three innovative elements in this account which deserve to be highlighted. First, the separation between the two Sophias and the generation of a formless substance happen in the Pleroma, rather than outside of it. This element is of pivotal importance for it shows a radical contamination of the divine world, which is tainted and threatened by Sophia's recklessness. By assuming that Sophia's actions affect the Pleroma, Ptolemy is extending her passion to the rest of divine world, which is in an un-godly state of disruption. In this regard, Ptolemy's account seems to be in neat disagreement with the Valentinian teacher of *AdHaer* I, 1, 11, that envisions Sophia's generation of her sons as a consequence of her fall outside of the Pleroma, thus preserving the transcendence and purity of the divine world.¹⁴⁷ Secondly, the character of Limit assumes here a prominent role, since its purpose is double: on the one hand, it seems to be the spouse of the pleromatic Sophia, since he restrains her and keeps her in the Pleroma; on the other hand, it clarifies the meaning of Sophia's sufferings in the Pleroma. In this regard, it is worth noting the ambiguity of his name: he is both Ὁρος (Limit) and Σταυρός (Cross).¹⁴⁸ He is not only the means through which the Father – through Monogenes – restrains the passions of the superior Sophia, but he is also the cross which absolves her mistakes. Hence, as in Theodotus' doctrine,¹⁴⁹ this account presents the theme of Sophia's passion as a typological antecedent of Christ's sufferings on the cross. Regardless, Sophia's mistake is still corrected by a male character, which is a typological antecedent of the Saviour who will rescue the inferior Sophia – here identified with Enthymesis – for only a male being has the power to restrain the weak female product. Interestingly, Ptolemy believes Sophia's condition is evangelically represented by the woman who suffers from bleeding (*Mk* 5:21-34).¹⁵⁰ As the woman's illness is cured by Jesus, so are Sophia's passions cured exclusively by the intervention of a male Redeemer. Therefore, the work of Limit is to restrain Sophia and to expel the error from

δὲ καὶ ἀνείδεον διὰ τὸ μηδὲν καταλαβεῖν· καὶ διὰ τοῦτο καρπὸν ἀσθενῆ καὶ θήλυν αὐτὸν λέγουσι.

¹⁴⁷ In this regard, Orbe underlined also the bond between Monogenes and the unformed matter emitted by Sophia, see Orbe (1997), 145-146.

¹⁴⁸ *AdHaer* I, 3, 5.

¹⁴⁹ *Supra* III.3.1.2.

¹⁵⁰ *AdHaer* I, 3, 3.

the divine world, functioning as a veil between the Pleromatic world and the inferior world. Finally, the separation between the two Sophias is represented as a separation between Sophia and her misguided Intention and passions. Such separation is here described as an intellectual act: it is the separation of a spiritual being from her intellectual intention, thus underlining how all Valentinian actions, including the procreative ones, should always be intended as intellectual acts.¹⁵¹

The inferior Sophia, who is called Achamot, is described as follows:

The Enthymesis of the Sophia above, whom they also call Achamot, was separated from the Pleroma with her passions and she was seething according to the necessity of the places of shadow and emptiness. She was casted out of the light and of the Pleroma and she was formless and shapeless, as an abortion, having learned nothing. Christ had pity on her and by his own power, having stretched himself beyond the Cross, he gave her form according to the substance, but not according to knowledge. When he had accomplished this, having withdrawn his power, he returned upward and so forsook her, in order that she, being aware of her passion which had been caused by her separation from the Pleroma, might desire the better things, since she retained some fragrance of immortality which had been left in her by Christ and Holy Spirit. Therefore, she too is given two names: Sophia patronomically, for her father is Sophia, and Holy Spirit due to the Spirit of Christ.¹⁵²

In primis, the Enthymesis of Sophia is unformed matter. Thus, Achamot is a formless being, subject to passions and in need of male redemption, so much so

¹⁵¹ Deconick (2003), 324-327.

¹⁵² *AdHaer* I, 4, 1: Τὴν Ἐνθύμησιν τῆς ἄνω Σοφίας, ἣν καὶ Ἀχαμῶθ καλοῦσιν, ἀφορισθεῖσαν τοῦ [ἄνω] πληρώματος σὺν τῷ πάθει λέγουσιν, ἐν σκιαῖς καὶ σκηνώματος [κενώματος] τόποις ἐκβεβράσθαι κατὰ ἀνάγκην. Ἐξω γὰρ φωτὸς ἐγένετο καὶ Πληρώματος, ἄμορφος καὶ ἀνείδεος, ὥσπερ ἔκτρωμα, διὰ τὸ μηδὲν κατελιφέναι· οἰκτεῖραντά τε αὐτὴν τὸν [ἄνω] Χριστὸν, καὶ διὰ τοῦ Σταυροῦ ἐπεκταθέντα, τῇ ἰδίᾳ δυνάμει μορφῶσαι μόρφωσιν τὴν κατ' οὐσίαν μόνον, ἀλλ' οὐ τὴν κατὰ γνῶσιν· καὶ πράξαντα τοῦτο ἀναδραμεῖν συστείλαντα αὐτοῦ τὴν δύναμιν, καὶ καταλιπεῖν, ὅπως αἰσθομένη τοῦ περὶ αὐτὴν πάθους διὰ τὴν ἀπαλλαγὴν τοῦ Πληρώματος, ὀρεχθῇ τῶν διαφερόντων, ἔχουσα τινα ὁδὴν ἀφθαρσίας, ἐγκαταλειφθεῖσαν αὐτὴν [1. αὐτῇ ὑπὸ] τοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου Πνεύματος. Διὸ καὶ αὐτὴν τοῖς ἀμφοτέροις ὀνόμασι καλεῖσθαι, Σοφίαν τε πατρωνυμικῶς, (ὁ γὰρ πατὴρ αὐτῆς Σοφία κληῖζεται), καὶ πνεῦμα ἅγιον ἀπὸ τοῦ περὶ τὸν Χριστὸν πνεύματος.

that she is called an ἔκτρομα, a term which other Gnostic mythologies attributed to the psychic and ignorant Ruler of the inferior world.¹⁵³ Her deformity is due to three factors: a) her female gender, which is weak; b) the absence of a syzygial partner; c) her ignorance. It is only because Christ takes pity on her, thus acting as her companion *pro tempore*, that she is given form. However, he gives her form only κατ'οὐσίαν (according to the substance), thus separating the three substances that appeared because of Sophia's passions. First, the spiritual substance is formed out of her laugh and because of the 'fragrance of immortality' which Christ left in her when he formed her. Secondly, the psychic substance – including the Demiurge – is formed from Sophia's ἐπιστροφή (conversion) towards him who formed her. Lastly, the passions which remain from her ἐπιστροφή form the hylic substance.¹⁵⁴ In this first formation, Sophia is not sanctified, but she is formed by Christ, who stabilizes Sophia's substance. This explains why she possesses merely a 'fragrance of immortality' before being rescued and sanctified by the intervention of the Saviour.¹⁵⁵ Receiving formation κατὰ γνῶσιν (according to knowledge) means to be able to know the realities of the Pleroma, which Ahamot, instead, ignores. Hence, the distinction between the formation κατ'οὐσίαν and κατὰ γνῶσιν is essential to understand Ptolemy's system, for the former is a formation of individual substances, while the second grants the divinization of beings.¹⁵⁶ Furthermore, the sanctification κατὰ γνῶσιν is fruitful from an ontological perspective. For instance, Ahamot is able to bring forth her pneumatic offspring out of the spiritual substance only when the Saviour forms her κατὰ γνῶσιν. Consequently, she produces a female offspring, which is the spiritual seed, and a male offspring, which is the angelic one.¹⁵⁷ This is also confirmed by *ExTheod* 45, 3: 'Thus through the appearance of the Saviour, Sophia was freed from passion and created all things which are outside (of the Pleroma): "For all things were made by him and without him

¹⁵³ See *HypArch* II, 94, 5-18; *OrigWorld* II, 99, 23 – 100, 5.

¹⁵⁴ *AdHaer* I, 4, 1-5; *ExTheod* 46, 1-2 and 54, 1-3

¹⁵⁵ For a deeper analysis of the metaphor see Orbe (1977), 16-17 and Meloni (1979), 60-69.

¹⁵⁶ For a detailed explanation of these different formations see Orbe (1995), 117-118.

¹⁵⁷ *AdHaer* I, 4, 5.

was not anything made””.¹⁵⁸ These beings are considered syzygial couples that are separated insofar as they dwell in the inferior world, but they will be again one in the eschatological times.¹⁵⁹ As in *GosPhil* and *ExTheod*, Achamot’s bringing forth of the spiritual substance makes her both ‘Mother’ and spiritual Church.¹⁶⁰ However, in Ptolemy’s system, this appellative is dependent upon her redemption by the hands of the Saviour, since only once she is united in syzygy with her partner, she can properly be called a ‘Mother’. Once again, this appellative is explicative of Sophia’s paradoxical status: insofar as she has received the formation κατ’οὐσίαν, she is mother to all substances, whereas insofar as she has been formed κατὰ γνῶσιν, she is Mother of the spiritual seed.¹⁶¹

In this regard, it worth explaining how Sophia can be called both ‘mother’ and ‘father’. In the previous passage, Achamot is called Sophia insofar as her “father” is Sophia, whereas she is called Holy Spirit insofar as she is touched by the Spirit of Christ. These appellatives are the perfect example of the paradoxical nature of the feminine in Valentinianism. According to the Pleromatic standards, Sophia is a weak and defective being both in her pleromatic and inferior selves. However, once the pleromatic Sophia has been restored and purified by Limit, she can act as πατήρ to the inferior Sophia, who is instead confined in the inferior world. In this inferior reality, the pleromatic Sophia represents the pneumatic being from which the inferior Sophia receives the φυσικὴν ὁρμήν¹⁶² (natural impulse), thus making her male. It is indeed this seed of maleness that allows her to receive the ‘Spirit of Christ’, which is, therefore, a female force acting in the world. In this case, the male gender is used to represent the perfection proper to the Pleromatic status, whereas the female gender is used to indicate its complement. In this instance, the gender categories of femaleness and maleness indicate abstract philosophical concepts

¹⁵⁸ *ExTheod* 45, 3: Οὕτως διὰ τῆς τοῦ Σωτῆρος ἐπιφανείας, ἡ Σοφία <ἀπαθής> γίνεται, καὶ τὰ ἔξω κτίζεται· «Πάντα γὰρ δι’ αὐτοῦ γέγονεν, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ γέγονεν οὐδέν.»

¹⁵⁹ On the union between the female spiritual seed and the angels, see Orbe (1977), 26-30.

¹⁶⁰ *AdHaer* I, 5, 3: ‘They call the Mother also Ogdoad, Wisdom, Earth, Jerusalem, Holy Spirit and Male Lord.’

¹⁶¹ For more detail, see Orbe (1997), 148-149.

¹⁶² See the passage quoted above: *AdHaer* I, 2, 3-4.

and they are unrelated to the physical gender of the mythological characters. Unlike the pleromatic Sophia, Achamot is not called ‘father’, but she is called ‘Mother’ and ‘Holy Spirit’, like in *GosPhil* and *ExTheod*. Hence, Ptolemy interpretes Sophia’s duplicity as her being both female and male: she is male insofar as she is restored by Limit in the Pleroma, whilst she is female insofar as she is mother of the elect seed and Holy Spirit acting in the world.¹⁶³ Having received both the formation κατ’οὐσίαν and κατὰ γνῶσιν, she becomes a soteriological agent who originates the three substances and covertly guides the spiritual substance back to the Pleroma to which it belongs. As a matter of fact, when the pneumatic seed – that is, her offspring – will re-enter the Pleroma, she will be eschatologically re-united in syzygy with the Saviour who formed her κατὰ γνῶσιν.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, Achamot is rescued by the coming of a Christ-like figure called the Saviour,¹⁶⁵ who comes down with his angels:

They say that when their Mother had endured every passion and had with difficulty raised herself up, she turned to supplicate the Light, that is Christ, who had left her. Having returned to the Pleroma, he was unwilling to descend a second time, thus he sent an advocate to her – that is a Saviour – [...] He was sent to her with the angels, his companions. They say that when Sophia met him, she first covered herself out of reverence, but, having gazed on him with all his revenue (angels), she took courage from his appearance and ran towards him. Then, he formed her according to knowledge [...] They teach that when Achamot had been freed from passion and had received with joy the contemplation of the lights which were with him – that is, of the angels that were with him – and had yearned after them, she brought forth fruits after their image, a spiritual offspring born after the likeness of the Saviour’s companion.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ Similarly, Orbe (1977), 20.

¹⁶⁴ *AdHaer* I, 7,1.

¹⁶⁵ The Christology of the GN is particularly complicated, see Thomaseen (2006), 119-127.

¹⁶⁶ *AdHaer* I, 4, 5: Διοδεύσασαν οὖν πᾶν πάθος τὴν Μητέρα αὐτῶν, καὶ μόγις ὑπερκύψασαν, ἐπὶ ἱκεσίαν τραπήναι τοῦ καταλιπόντος αὐτὴν φωτός, τουτέστι τοῦ Χριστοῦ, λέγουσιν· ὃς ἀνελθὼν μὲν εἰς τὸ πλήρωμα, αὐτὸς μὲν εἰκὸς ὅτι ὤκνησεν ἐκ δευτέρου κατελθεῖν, τὸν Παράκλητον δὲ ἐξέπεμψεν [εἰς] αὐτὴν, τουτέστι τὸν σωτῆρα [...] ἐκπέμπεται δὲ πρὸς αὐτὴν μετὰ τῶν ἡλικιωτῶν αὐτοῦ τῶν Ἀγγέλων. Τὴν δὲ Ἀχαμῶθ ἐντραπεῖσαν αὐτὸν λέγουσι πρῶτον μὲν κάλυμμα ἐπιθέσθαι δι’ αἰδῶ, μετέπειτα δὲ ἰδοῦσαν αὐτὸν σὺν ὅλῃ τῇ καρποφορίᾳ αὐτοῦ, προσδραμεῖν αὐτῷ, δύναμιν λαβοῦσαν ἐκ τῆς ἐπιφανείας αὐτοῦ· κἀκεῖνον μορφῶσαι αὐτὴν μόρφωσιν τὴν κατὰ γνῶσιν [...] Τὴν τε Ἀχαμῶθ ἐκτὸς πάθους γενομένην, καὶ συλλαβοῦσαν τῇ

As in the case of *GosPhil*, this part of the myth represents almost a systematic exegesis of the *Sos*.¹⁶⁷ First, the longing and union between Ahamot and the Saviour is represented as the longing of the bride for the bridegroom in the biblical book. Just as the bride of the *Sos* begs for her spouse to come back to her, here Sophia begs Christ to return to her.¹⁶⁸ Secondly, the myth says that when Sophia first saw Christ, she ‘covered herself out of reverence’. Similarly, the theme of the concealing of the bride and bridegroom is constantly present in the *Sos*. Moreover, the veiling of Ahamot ought also to be considered as hinting to the restriction the pleromatic beings have undergone by means of Limit, which is also interpreted as the veil between the two worlds.¹⁶⁹ Thirdly, this account affirms that Sophia ‘took courage from his appearance and ran towards him’, just as the bride runs after the bridegroom’s fragrance in *Sos* I, 3. Lastly, as in the *Sos*, the ‘friends of the bridegroom’ are matched by the ‘maidens’ who surround the bride; here the angelic companions of the Saviour are considered the eschatological mates of Ahamot’s offspring. Henceforth, the nuptial imagery of the union between the bridegroom and the bride is indeed essential to understand the dynamics of generation of the spiritual seed, that is, of those pneumatic beings hidden in the world who need to find their way back to the Pleroma.¹⁷⁰ In this regard, I am inclined to agree with Orbe, who notes that the feminine nature of the spiritual seeds mirrors their mothers’ feminine nature, just as the masculinity of the angels is mirrored in Christ’s maleness.¹⁷¹ Consequently, just as Christ is salvific mediator for Sophia, so the angels are salvific partner for the spiritual seed, thus reproducing typologically the union between the true Bride and Bridegroom.

χαρᾷ τῶν ἐν αὐτῷ φώτων τὴν θεωρίαν, τουτέστι τῶν Ἀγγέλων τῶν μετ’ αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἐγκισήσασαν αὐτοὺς, κεκυηκέναι καρποὺς κατὰ τὴν εἰκόνα διδάσκουσι, κῆμα πνευματικὸν καθ’ ὁμοίωσιν γεγονότως [γεγονός] τῶν δορυφόρων τοῦ Σωτῆρος. I would like to underline that these mythological events are described in a very similar manner in *ExTheod* 44-45.

¹⁶⁷ Thus, once again, I agree with Lettieri (2008).

¹⁶⁸ *Sos* 3, 1-4.

¹⁶⁹ *AdHaer* I, 3, 5.

¹⁷⁰ This exegesis of the *Sos* is further confirmed by Sophia’s appellative as ‘Jerusalem’ in *AdHaer* I, 5, 3.

¹⁷¹ Orbe (1997), 148.

Overall, the representation of the intra-pleromatic Sophia in Ptolemy's account could be defined as quite negative, for she does not possess any function other than that of causing the disruption of the Pleromatic rest. This is further confirmed by the clear distinction between the pleromatic Sophia and the aeon of the Holy Spirit. According to Irenaeus' account, the syzygy Christ/Holy Spirit is emitted by the Father to strengthen the Pleroma after Sophia's sin. The work of the Holy Spirit is limited to making the aeons equals and introducing them to the eternal rest of the Pleroma. In particular, the work of the Holy Spirit consists in making all male aeons equal to the male elements of the primordial Ogdoad and all female aeons equal to the female elements of the Ogdoad. In this regard, I agree with Orbe, who shows how this aeon bears the sanctifying function of the Holy Spirit, whereas the inferior Sophia seems to maintain the ecclesiological role of the Holy Spirit.¹⁷² In conclusion, the fallen feminine in the *GN* and *ExTheod* 43-65 shows three main features of western Valentinianism. First, it shows that Ptolemy and his followers radicalized the notion of Sophia's intra-divine rupture by envisioning the separation between the two Sophias as an intra-pleromatic event. As a result, the divine Pleroma is contaminated by Sophia's passions to its very core, making Sophia the most prominent character of this Valentinian account. Secondly, by separating Sophia's formations κατ' οὐσίαν and κατὰ γνῶσιν, Sophia's inferiority to Christ and her need of male redemption are revealed, since all her actions require male fulfillment to be salvific and effective. Lastly, as well as the eastern Valentinian sections of *ExTheod*, they envisioned Sophia's passion as a typological antecedent of Christ's Passion on the cross. It is indeed this element of subjection to passions that reveals the intrinsic Christian nature of Valentinianism.

II.3.3 Concluding Remarks on the Fallen Feminine and the Two "Myths of Separation"

In this section on the fallen feminine in Valentinianism, it has been shown that the myth of separation knows different variants according to the different

¹⁷² Orbe (1997), 145.

Valentinian systems. Regardless of which system the Valentinian teachers used, all accounts confirm that they consider the fallen feminine to be the cause and beginning of the disruption of the divine order. Furthermore, in both systems, Sophia is a defective needing male redemption, since she is always bound to the intervention of a male figure – whether her son or her spouse – to give her and her offspring form. However, I hope to have proved that it would be superficial to limit one’s investigation about the fallen feminine to this aspect since, in Valentinian more than in other Gnostic accounts, it is possible to glimpse the theological reason that underlies the myth of the fallen feminine: the impossibility – and yet the necessity – of conceiving the passion of God. In the Valentinian system, the tension between a Platonic philosophical paradigm that understood the divinity as a transcendent and immutable reality and an evangelical paradigm of a God who suffers passion is expressed in a complex mythology which explains the actions of God in the world. The ‘separation’ of Sophia results from the impossibility of holding together the perfect rest of the Pleroma and the dynamic history of salvation of the biblical narrative. In this regard, the role of Sophia as Holy Spirit reveals the Christian quintessence of Valentinianism – as well as of the Gnosticism overall – for it shows the process through which the acting force of God is thought to work in the world. As it has been observed, the connection between Sophia and Christ is manifest in both accounts of the myth. Although she is subordinated to him, Christ could not perform his work if Sophia had not made the extra-pleromatic world accessible to him by her mingling with it. In brief, the fallen feminine is the Christian essence of Valentinianism, for it illustrates by means of myths the story of the Passion of the divine in his attempt to rescue the world.

III.4 The Incarnated Valentinian Feminine

It has already been observed that Gnostics often consider Eve as type of Sophia. In Sethian, Ophite and Barbeloite texts, the two female characters are so strictly intertwined that they could sometimes be confused. Overall, Valentinianism follows the same mythological paradigm of the other Gnostic movements. Nevertheless, the theological implications of the typological relationship between Eve and Sophia are highly innovative when it comes to the Valentinian sacrament of the bridal chamber.

In order to illustrate the similarities and differences regarding the figure of Eve between the Valentinian systems and that analysed in the previous part, I deem it necessary first to discuss the theory of the creation of humankind in *ExTheod*; after this, I will explore its theological implications for the bridal chamber as presented in *GosPhil*.

III.4.1 The Creation of Eve in the *Excerpta ex Theodoto*

In Valentinian literature, the creation of humankind is mainly discussed in the *ExTheod*, particularly in sections A, B and C. Although C belongs to a different Valentinian tradition – for it is usually associated with western Valentinianism – I will occasionally refer to it since some fragments help to clarify some important passages found in part A and B. Nevertheless, this section is mainly concerned in discussing the creation of Eve in eastern Valentinianism.

One of the clearest passages in this regard is *ExTheod* 21:

The Valentinians say that the finest emanation of Sophia is spoken of in “He created them in the image of God, male and female created he them.” (*Gen.* 1:27) Now the male elements from this emanation are the “election,” but the female elements are the “calling”. They call the male elements “angelic”, and the females – that is, themselves – “the superior seed”. So also, in the case of Adam, the male element remained in him,

but all the female seed was taken from him and became Eve, from whom the female elements are derived, as the males are from him. Therefore, the male elements are drawn together with the Logos, but the female ones, becoming men, are united to the angels and pass into the Pleroma. Therefore, the woman is said to be changed into a man, and the Church here on earth into Angels.¹⁷³

Sophia's spiritual emanation – that is, the emanation that she brought forth after receiving the formation κατὰ γυνῶσιν – is constituted by some male and some female elements. Agreeing with Buckley against Pagels,¹⁷⁴ I interpret this emanation as happening in cooperation with Christ, who is the one to give form to Sophia's offspring. The male elements constitute the totality of the angels that were emanated with a higher level of perfection, whence the attribution of a male gender. Being male, they are usually identified with the companions of the bridegroom.¹⁷⁵ Contrariwise, the female elements are identified with the spiritual seed – that is, the Church of perfect ones who dwell in the inferior world – which strives to be united with the male element in order to reach the required level of perfection to enter the Pleroma. They are less perfect than their male counterparts – hence the female gender. According to a typological mechanism, Sophia's emanation mirrors the formation and composition of the Pleroma, since she brought forth syzygial couples in which the male part represents the strong element, whereas the female element represents the weak one. Furthermore, consistently with what it has been observed in this chapter, this passage shows that it would be incorrect to understand female or male genders as the physical sexes. The angels' maleness does not correspond in any way to a physical status and neither does the femaleness of the spiritual seed. It would be equally incorrect to interpret the

¹⁷³ *ExTheod* 21, 1-3: Τῷ «κατ' εἰκόνα Θεοῦ ἐποίησεν αὐτούς, ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ ἐποίησεν αὐτούς» τὴν προβολὴν τὴν ἀρίστην φασὶν οἱ Οὐαλεντινιανοὶ τῆς Σοφίας λέγεσθαι, ἀφ' ἧς τὰ μὲν ἄρρενικὰ ἢ ἐκλογή, τὰ δὲ θηλυκὰ ἢ κλησίς. Καὶ τὰ μὲν ἄρρενικὰ ἀγγελικὰ καλοῦσι, τὰ θηλυκὰ δὲ ἑαυτούς, τὸ διαφέρον σπέρμα. Οὕτως καὶ ἐπὶ τοῦ Ἀδάμ, τὸ μὲν ἄρρενικὸν ἔμεινεν αὐτῷ, πᾶν δὲ τὸ θηλυκὸν σπέρμα ἀρθὲν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ Εὐὰ γέγονεν, ἀφ' ἧς αἱ θήλειαι, ὡς ἀπ' ἐκείνου οἱ ἄρρενες. Τὰ οὖν ἄρρενικὰ μετὰ τοῦ Λόγου συνεστάλη· τὰ θηλυκὰ δὲ ἀπανδρωθέντα ἐνοῦται τοῖς Ἀγγέλοις καὶ εἰς Πλήρωμα χωρεῖ. Διὰ τοῦτο ἡ γυνὴ εἰς ἄνδρα μετατίθεσθαι λέγεται καὶ ἡ ἐνταῦθα Ἐκκλησία εἰς Ἀγγέλους.

¹⁷⁴ See Buckley (1986b), 63; Pagels (1974), 42.

¹⁷⁵ *ExTheod* 65, 1.

passage about the transformation of women into men as some sort of gender shifting or a specific ritual – as Buckley did in reference to Logion 114 in the *Gospel of Thomas* – since neither the allegorical language of Valentinian texts nor their sacramental theology provide any evidence that suggests the existence of rituals of gender transformation.¹⁷⁶ As a matter of fact, the female spiritual seed constitutes the spiritual Church, in which there are both men and women; consequently, all those who belong to the spiritual Church, regardless of their birth sexes, should be considered “female”. On the contrary, the “male” represents a different emanation from that of the spiritual seed, a superior emanation which resembles Christ – that is, the male part of the syzygy that brought them forth – rather than Sophia. The transformation of the “female” into a “male” will happen when the syzygy will be re-united. When the pneumatic human beings will be eschatologically married to the angels and the syzygy Sophia-Christ will be constituted once again, the female pneumatic beings will be ‘changed into male’ for it will be one with the male angels.

This interpretation of the passage goes strongly against Buckley’s interpretation, since I claim that Sophia’s emanation is a spiritual emanation in both its male and female form; otherwise, one would be compelled to admit that the female seed, which constitutes the church of the Valentinians, is mostly made of psychic beings.¹⁷⁷ Furthermore, it would mean that Sophia herself is not being sanctified by the intervention of Christ, thus remaining a psychic being.¹⁷⁸ I believe that these misunderstandings regarding the philosophical use of gender categories in this text is caused by two factors: a) the continuing shift of terminology between the Pleromatic world and the inferior world, which has already been observed in regard to Sophia’s appellation of father;¹⁷⁹ b) the presence of two contrasting models of Valentinian anthropology. The Valentinian system of *ExTheod* – and of

¹⁷⁶ *Gospel of Thomas*, Logion 114, 51:18 – 51:26. See Buckley (1985).

¹⁷⁷ However, this possibility is strongly refuted in Gnostic texts, since one of the most renowned features of Gnostic communities is the belief that they were the elected seed. For instance, see Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 6, 4, where he affirms that Valentinian Gnostics used to consider themselves as the ‘elect’.

¹⁷⁸ See Buckley (1986b).

¹⁷⁹ *Supra* III.3.2.2.

Valentinianism in general – seems to oscillate between two different anthropological models, even within the same texts. On the one hand, it would appear that they propose a tripartite anthropology, according to which human beings are constituted by spirit (πνεῦμα), soul (ψυχή) and material body (ὕλη). This is indeed the case of the abovementioned passage of *ExTheod* 21 and others, such as *ExTheod* 2, 51 and 63. In particular, *ExTheod* 2 specifies that while the spirit has been sown in Adam by the Logos, the soul and material body are a creation of Sophia.¹⁸⁰ On the other hand, Valentinian Gnostics seem to divide human beings into three categories that correspond to the three natures: πνευματικοί (pneumatic/spiritual ones), ψυχικοί (psychic ones) and, lastly, the ὑλικοί (material ones). In this model, the categories seem fixed and each human being seems to be born into a particular nature, thus being bound to the eschatological destiny of the nature to which he or she belongs. This is indeed the anthropological model that is exemplified in *ExTheod* 56.¹⁸¹ The integration of these two models in a single doctrine has proven to be highly problematic, particularly concerning the use of gender categories. According to the first anthropological model, the male element is represented by the spirit in Adam, whereas the female element is represented by Adam's soul. Contrariwise, according to the second anthropological model, the male element is represented by the higher class of spiritual beings, whereas the female element is constituted by the psychic beings. In the abovementioned *ExTheod* 21, these two anthropological models clash one against the other. In the first part, the author opts for the second anthropological model, using however the genders opposition to indicate two levels of perfection within the spiritual nature (that is, angels and spiritual seed). Here, the feminine is associated with the pneumatic nature, rather than the psychic nature as claimed by Buckley,

¹⁸⁰ *ExTheod* 2, 1-2: 'But the followers of Valentinus maintain that when the animal body was fashioned a male seed was implanted by the Logos in the elect soul while it was asleep and that this is an effluence of the angelic seed, in order that there may be no deficiency. And this worked as leaven, uniting what appeared to have been divided – that is, soul and flesh – which had also been put forth separately by Sophia. And Adam's sleep was the soul's forgetting, so that the soul was restrained from dissolution by the spiritual seed which the Saviour inserted into it. The seed was an effluence of the male and angelic [element]. Therefore, the Saviour says, "Be saved, thou and thy soul."'

¹⁸¹ As I mentioned before, these conflicting anthropological models have been object of many studies, especially concerning the debate about whether the psychic nature will be saved eschatologically. *Supra* III.3.1.3.

since it strives to be reunited with the male angels, who represent the better emission of Sophia.¹⁸² This association is confirmed by the difference between the ‘election’ (ἐκλογή) and the ‘calling’ (κλήσις): while the male angelic beings are already elected for they possess a higher status of perfection, the pneumatic seed is κλήσις insofar as it has not yet reached the status of perfection proper to the ἐκλογή.¹⁸³ By contrast, the second part applies the first anthropological model, according to which Adam retains the male and angelic part of the human being (τὸ ἀρρενικόν) – that is, the πνεῦμα – whilst Eve bears the feminine part of the threefold anthropology (τὸ θηλυκόν), that is, the ψυχή. A possible explanation of the shift from one anthropological model to the other can be found in section C of *ExTheod*. Here, the three races of human beings are traced back to Adam’s and Eve’s offspring: Cain is the forefather of the hylic human beings; Abel is the forefather of the psychic human beings; lastly, Seth is the forefather of the spiritual seed.¹⁸⁴ Although the tradition of Seth as the initiator of a seed of elect pneumatic beings is well attested also in other Gnostic movements, the myth according to which Cain and Abel were the initiators of the races of psychic and hylic human beings does not appear to find any further confirmation either in Valentinian or in other Gnostic works. Consequently, this remains an open problem in Valentinian studies.¹⁸⁵

Regardless of which anthropological models one refers to, it is worth noting that, in *ExTheod*, the apex of human life must be identified in the reunion of masculine and feminine elements:

Henceforth the spiritual elements having put off their souls, together with the Mother who leads the bridegroom, also lead bridegrooms – their angels – and pass into the bridal chamber within the Limit and attain to

¹⁸² See Buckley (1986b), 61-70. In addition, I believe this is confirmed by *ExTheod* 2, 1-2.

¹⁸³ Like Simonetti (1999), 506, I note here the anomaly of using the terms ἐκλογή and κλήσις to indicate two different stages of perfection, rather than the opposition of between pneumatic and psychic as in the *GN* (*AdHaer* I, 6, 4) and in Heracleon’s fragments (Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* X, 33).

¹⁸⁴ *ExTheod* 54, 1-3.

¹⁸⁵ The complex integration of these two models has been discussed, but not solved, by Thomassen (2013).

the vision of the Father, – having become intellectual Aeons, in the intellectual and eternal marriages of the syzygies.¹⁸⁶

Hence, *ExTheod* considers unity as the goal of human life, for the separation between masculine and feminine is not accepted within the Pleroma. In the final times, the rest of the Pleroma will be restored and, then, only syzygies will exist in the divine realm. Therefore, this union between male and female is conceived as a spousal union, which will happen in the ‘bridal chamber’. How should we then deem the ‘bridal chamber’ to be, according to the two anthropological models? In the threefold anthropological model, the bridal chamber will happen when the masculine spirit and the psychic soul become one, that is, when Adam and Eve are united in syzygy as they were in the original creation. This is well exemplified in *ExTheod* 80, 1-2, which discusses the role of Christ in giving life to the death which came into being because of Eve’s separation from Adam.¹⁸⁷ Similarly, in the second anthropological model, the bridal chamber will be realized when the angels will be eschatologically married to the spiritual seed. In this regard, *ExTheod* 86, 3 is particularly clear, for it uses the parable of the wise and foolish virgins (*Mt.* 25, 1-13) as an allegory of the reunion of the masculine and feminine elements.¹⁸⁸

In summary, notwithstanding the terminological differences due to the different anthropological models, the use of gender categories remains consistent with what has been observed in other cases: maleness represents the better and higher status of perfection, whereas femaleness indicates the status of those who need to be perfected. However, these two stages are either applied to the opposition between two natures – that is, pneumatic versus psychic

¹⁸⁶ *ExTheod* 64: Τὸ δὲ ἐντεῦθεν, ἀποθέμενα τὰ πνευματικὰ τὰς ψυχάς, ἅμα τῇ Μητρὶ κομιζομένη τὸν Νυμφίον, κομιζόμενα καὶ αὐτὰ τοὺς νυμφίους, τοὺς Ἀγγέλους ἑαυτῶν, εἰς τὸν Νυμφῶνα ἐντὸς τοῦ Ὁροῦ εἰσίσαι, καὶ πρὸς τὴν τοῦ Πατρὸς ὄψιν ἔρχονται, Αἰῶνες νοεροὶ γενόμενα, εἰς τοὺς νοεροὺς καὶ αἰωνίους γάμους τῆς συζυγίας.

¹⁸⁷ *ExTheod* 80, 1-2: ‘He whom the Mother generates is led into death and into the world, but he whom Christ regenerates is transferred to life into the Ogdoad. And they die to the world but live to God, that death may be loosed by death and corruption by resurrection.’ This finds a perfect parallel in *GosPhil* II, 68, 22-26.

¹⁸⁸ *ExTheod* 86,3: ‘These are the children who are now resting in bed and “the wise virgins,” with whom the others, who are late, did not enter into the goods which have been prepared, on which the angels desire to gaze.’

nature – or to two different levels of divine perfection – that is, a higher level of divinity versus a lower level of divinity. Therefore, the threefold Valentinian anthropology does not seem to share the same mythologoumenon of the Sethian, Ophite and Barbeloite tradition, according to which Eve separates into two different beings: a spiritual Eve and a carnal Eve. Concerning the mythologoumenon of Eve's creation, in *ExTheod* Eve is the psychic part of Adam which is taken away from him, whilst in Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite traditions Eve is considered to be the incarnated manifestation of Sophia's spirit. Hence, while Eve and Sophia are strictly intertwined in the Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite texts that I have analyzed due to their spiritual nature, the Valentinian system of *ExTheod* links the two characters primarily by means of their defectiveness: just as Sophia is the inferior and defective part of God, Eve is the imperfect part of Adam. Nevertheless, from a theological perspective, the other anthropological model of *ExTheod* maintains the doctrine according to which the feminine is an allegorical representation of the inferior level of divinity, that is, the spiritual seed. In this case, Eve and Sophia are linked ecclesiologically since they are metaphors of the eschatological Church of the elect. In conclusion, I believe that the representation of the incarnated feminine in *ExTheod* confirms the paradoxical nature of the feminine in Valentinianism, for Eve is both allegory of Adam's soul and the entirety of the spiritual seed. Furthermore, it is worth noting that *ExTheod* displays the properly Valentinian doctrine of the bridal chamber, which is envisioned as the eschatological reunion of masculine and feminine elements.

III.4.2 Eve in the Bridal Chamber in the *Gospel of Philip* (NHC II, 3)

In *GosPhil*, the connection between the incarnated feminine and the bridal chamber is even more strict than it is in *ExTheod*, since most quotations about the first woman in *GosPhil* concern the sacrament of the bridal chamber.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁹ Scholars have discussed the rituals implied by this sacrament, but the debate remains very much open. The scholarly debate focuses mainly on two points, namely the liturgical and social role of sex in the performance of the ritual of the bridal chamber and the theological purpose of the ritual. While the latter topic will be the focus of the chapter, I believe it is worth giving the reader a brief overview of the scholarly debate regarding the former. In this regard, there are three scholarly trends. Some scholars, such as Segelberg (1960), believe that the

Consequently, I believe that a brief – albeit not exhaustive – outline of this sacrament is necessary in order to understand the role of Eve in Valentinian imagery.

Valentinian Gnostics employed a strong sexual imagery to express the mystery of the bridal chamber and it is in this context that the creation of Adam and Eve is discussed:

The soul of Adam (ΤΦΥΧΗ ΝΑΑΔΑΜ) came into being by means of a breath. The partner of his soul (ΠΕCΖΩΤΡ) is the spirit (ΠΠ[Ν]Α). His mother (ΤΕΦΜΑΛΥ) is the thing that was given to him. His soul (ΦΥΧΗ) was taken from him and replaced by a [spirit] (ΠΝΑ). When he was united (to the spirit), [he spoke] words incomprehensible to the powers. They envied him [...] spiritual partner (ΖΩΤΡ ΠΠΝΕΥΜΑ[ΤΙΚ...]) [...] hidden [...] opportunity [...] for themselves alone [...] bridal chamber ([...Π]ΑCΤΟC) so that [...]¹⁹⁰

Although the passage is fragmentary, two elements emerge clearly. First, Adam was endowed with a soul ‘by means of breath’, namely through the works of the Demiurge. Secondly, since this soul was imperfect, it needed a partner who belonged to a superior nature, that is, the spirit. Thus far, the information deducible from *GosPhil* confirms those provided by *ExTheod*. However, the interpretation of this passage becomes trickier when one compares the second part of the passage with other Gnostic mythologies, particularly that of *ApJohn*, *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*, where Eve is identified with the spirit. As a matter of fact, *GosPhil* presents the myth of Adam speaking incomprehensible words in the presence of ‘powers’ once he is filled by this spirit, which is the partner of his soul. This mythologoumenon

bridal chamber represents an utterly non-sexual ritual, whereas others contemplate the possibility that this ritual implied some sort of sexual union, particularly Grant (1961a); Ménard (1967) and Buckley (1980). Following Brown (1988) and Pagels (1991), a third interpretation has been proposed by De Conick (2003) and (2011), who has claimed that the ritual was different for psychic and pneumatic couples respectively. While marriage is a carnal affair for psychic men and women, the sexual union between a pneumatic woman and a man is considered a matter of ‘will’, therefore it is not finalised to procreation and accepted. Among these unions, Valentinians preferred the latter.

¹⁹⁰ *GosPhil* II, 70, 22-33.

resembles very closely that of *HypArch* and *OrigWorld* in which Adam speaks with the spiritual Eve who is awakening him.¹⁹¹ Hence, these elements suggest that *GosPhil* is here following the tradition of Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite texts according to which there is a spiritual Eve hidden in Adam. Moreover, this would also be confirmed by other passages of *GosPhil*, such as: ‘Adam came into being from two virgins (ἡΠΑΡΘΕΝΟΣ), from the spirit (ΖἸ ΠΠΝΑ) and from the virgin earth (ΖἸ ΠΚΑΖ ἡΠΑΡΘΕΝΟΣ)’.¹⁹² Here, I am inclined to identify the two virgins as Sophia Echamot and Sophia Echmot: while the latter contributes to the material and psychic substance of which Adam’s body and soul are made, the former – that is, Eve – is its spiritual substance. In this instance, *GosPhil* follows a different trend to that of *ExTheod*, for it does not employ gender categories as philosophical categories where maleness indicates spiritual and pneumatic nature, whilst femaleness indicates the deficient and inferior nature, regardless of whether it is psychic or hylic. Contrariwise, *GosPhil* follows the mythologoumena proper to the Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite traditions.

Despite the mythological similarities with Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite traditions presented so far, *GosPhil* does not display any of the theological implications according to which Eve is a pneumatic and soteriological agent. Nevertheless, it does equate Eve to Adam’s pneumatic life principle:

When Eve (ΕΥΖΑ) was still in Adam (ΑΔΑΜ) death (ΜΟΥ) did not exist. When she was separated (ΝΤΑΡΕCΠΩΡΧ) from him death came into being. If he enters again and attains his former self, death will be no more.¹⁹³

If the woman (CΖΙΜΕ) had not separated (ΠΩΡΧ) from the man (ΕΦΟΟΥΤ), she would not die with the man (ΦΟΟΥΤ). His separation became the beginning of death. Because of this Christ came to repair the separation which was from the beginning and again unite the two and give life to

¹⁹¹ See *HypArch* II, 88, 15 and *OrigWorld* II, 115, 30 – 116, 25, which I have already discussed in *supra* II.4.2 and II.4.3.

¹⁹² *GosPhil* II, 16-21.

¹⁹³ *GosPhil* II, 68, 22-26.

those who died as a result of the separation and unite them. But the woman is united to her husband in the bridal chamber (Ζῆ ΠΠΑΣΤΟΣ). Indeed, those who have been united in the bridal chamber (Ζῆ ΠΠΑΣΤΟΣ) will no longer be separated. Thus, Eve (ΑΕΥΖΑ) separated (ΠΩΡΧ) from Adam (ΑΑΔΑΜ) because it was not in the bridal chamber (Ζῆ ΠΠΑΣΤΟΣ) that she united with him (ἸΤΑΣΖΩΤΕΡ).¹⁹⁴

On the one hand, this passage confirms that, in accordance to the majority of Gnostic stories about the creation of humankind, human beings are created as androgynous beings, since the separation into two sexes comes at a later time. On the other hand, it shows the paradoxical nature of the feminine. Although Eve is identified with the pneumatic presence who gives life to Adam, her separation from him also represents the beginning of death.¹⁹⁵ Indeed, due to a typological reading of Genesis, Sophia is type of Eve. Just as the order of the Pleroma is disrupted by Sophia's separation from her syzygial partner, so the separation of Eve from Adam causes death to exist among human beings. Following this logic, one could say that just as Sophia is the origin of evils for the divine world, Eve is the beginning of evil in the material world. From a soteriological perspective, Christ's coming ought to be effective for Eve's disruption as well as for that of Sophia: if Sophia is eschatologically reunited with her partner, so must Eve be reunited. Hence, this passage seems to suggest that the final purpose of human life is to rebuild the protological androgynous unity of human beings. If this is the case, how should we then interpret this androgynous unit? I propose to interpret it as an allegory of the union which will be realized in the bridal chamber between the male element and the female element, which are here intended – however – in the opposite way compared to the rest of the Valentinian works.¹⁹⁶ In this regard, I agree with Grant,¹⁹⁷ who was the first scholar to reflect on the 'archetypical unity', thus connecting the bridal chamber with the creation of Adam and Eve.

¹⁹⁴ *GosPhil* II, 70, 10-22. This passage has been analysed in the previous chapter, *supra* III.3.2.1.

¹⁹⁵ See Pagels (2000), 198-206.

¹⁹⁶ On the importance and sacramental value of the verb 'ΖΩΤΕΡ' (unite) in *GosPhil* see Buckley – Good (1997), 12-13.

¹⁹⁷ Grant 1961, 134-135; Thomassen (2006), 394-396.

In summary, the incarnated feminine in *GosPhil* presents Valentinian theologoumena, although it employs mythologoumena that are closer to Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite traditions. The most striking Valentinian feature consists in its doctrine of the bridal chamber. *GosPhil* claims that the separation between Adam and Eve does not happen in the Pleroma and that it does not take place in the bridal chamber. On the contrary, it would appear that the separation causes them to lose the status required to enter the bridal chamber, since the text is extremely clear regarding the idea that the separation of Eve from Adam is the beginning of evils for human beings. The goal of human life remains therefore the annulment of the separation which happened in the beginning, since Christ came into the world to make one out of the two. Moreover, this is valid both in the case of Sophia and in that of Eve, since both separations cause division in syzygial unions: just as Eve is separated from Adam, thus Sophia is separated from the Saviour. Hence, this analysis has led me to the conclusion that the bridal chamber is a Valentinian sacrament that mimicked typologically the re-constitution of the syzygial unity between men and women. However, unlike *ExTheod*, *GosPhil* considers Eve as the spiritual substance that vivifies Adam, thus resembling the mythologoumena proper to the Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite traditions. By uniting these two different trends, *GosPhil* accentuates the paradoxical nature of the feminine, which is both spirit in human beings and the cause of human disgrace.

III.4.3 Concluding Remarks on the Incarnated Valentinian Feminine

The representation of Eve in Valentinianism is more unitary than it appears at first glance. With regard to the two works that we have studied in this chapter, it is sufficient to summarize briefly their different anthropologies. On the one hand, *ExTheod* is characterized by two different anthropological models, in which Eve is type of either the psychic soul in human beings or of the totality of the spiritual seed. On the other hand, *GosPhil* makes Eve type of spiritual nature in Adam. Although it is true that *ExTheod*'s and *GosPhil*'s mythologoumena and theologoumena differ to a certain extent, the two texts share a fundamental Valentinian theologoumenon: the idea that the status of

perfection is gained by means of reunion of the masculine and feminine parts in a unity, which is considered as the spousal union that takes place in the 'bridal chamber'. Furthermore, both texts envision this union as the re-composition of the protological unity between Adam and Eve; consequently, they envision a very close connection between Eve and Sophia, since both Eve and Sophia are the brides waiting to be reunited with their lawful spouse in the bridal chamber. It is indeed this close connection between Sophia, Eve and the mystery of the bridal chamber that marks the specificity of the Valentinian way of conceiving the incarnated feminine.

III.5 Conclusion

The analysis conducted in this part of my work has shown that, although the feminine principle is generally interpreted as subordinate to the masculine, it nevertheless plays a fundamental role in Valentinianism.

From a pleromatological perspective, it has been observed that female characters – for example, Silence – perform primarily a generative role. In the so-called pleromatologies of type B, Silence works in syzygy with the Father to generate the totality of the pleromatic aeons, which are also emanated in couples, thus resembling the primordial syzygy. This syzygial structure – that is, the organization of the Pleroma into male/female couples – has been found to be the basic rule which governs pleromatic activities, which are always performed by two entities. Nevertheless, the male and female entities do not equally partake in the act of generation, for the male elements perform an active role, whereas the female elements are relegated to a passive role. In particular, it has been stressed that Silence partakes in the Father's intellectual generation of the Pleroma by assuming the passive role of spiritual substratum, which the *GN* specified as that of μήτρα (matrix). As such, Silence works as a container of the Father's power; consequently, I have concluded that Valentinian pleromatic female characters do not show any of the active generative roles that are proper to female characters in Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite movements, for Valentinian Gnostics stress primarily the syzygial subordination of the female to the male element.

Notwithstanding the importance of Valentinian pleromatologies, I have identified the core of Valentinianism in the myth of the fallen feminine. In this regard, the peculiarity of Valentinianism consists in the representation of Sophia through a 'myth of separation', according to which the fallen feminine is always distinguished in two characters: a superior pleromatic entity and an inferior defective being. However, this myth is known in two different versions in Valentinian sources. The first version is represented by the one Sophia system, detectable in *ExVal*, *ExTheod* (section A-B-D) and Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 11, 1. Here, the separation of Sophia happens by means of filiation, for

Sophia's better self is identified with her son Christ. All three accounts underline the subordination of female beings to male ones, envisioning Sophia as a defective being needing redemption, which will happen through Christ, being him both her son and her syzygial partner. My analysis of the subordinate role of Sophia to her son Christ has resulted in two important findings. First, I have found that some Valentinian Gnostics incorporate Sophia's defectiveness within the Godhead, since they envision Sophia's passion as the mythological and pleromatic archetype of the historical Christ's passion. Secondly, I have underlined that other Valentinian Gnostics personify in Sophia the totality of the spiritual seed, insofar as they identify Sophia with the visible part of Christ. In particular, *ExTheod* attributes to Sophia the main ecclesiological functions of the third person of the Trinity, namely the Holy Spirit. Hence, Sophia gains both a Christological function (archetype of Christ's passion) and an ecclesiological function (totality of spiritual seed), but never a soteriological function, in the Christ/Sophia Valentinian myth. The second version of the myth of separation is represented by two Sophias system, expressed in *GosPhil* and the *GN*. In these cases, Sophia's separation is conceived as the separation between a pleromatic Sophia (named either Sophia Echmot or simply Sophia) and a defective Sophia (named either Sophia Echmot or Sophia Achamot). The originality of the two Sophias systems consists in affirming that the defective feminine is the active force of God, acting covertly in the world and guiding the spiritual seed back into the Pleroma. Moreover, I have highlighted that these accounts stress Sophia's need of male intervention, for her male partner is the one who can give form – either κατ'οὐσίαν or κατὰ γνῶσιν – to Sophia Achamot. Therefore, the fallen feminine maintains the same Christological and ecclesiological functions despite the different versions of the separation myths. Lastly, I have shown that *GosPhil* and the *GN* also reveal the myth of Sophia as the theological core of the Valentinian practice of the bridal chamber, since this sacrament finds its *raison d'être* in the protological story of Sophia's fall.

Since the myth of Eve's creation is directly linked to the sacrament of the bridal chamber in both *ExTheod* and *GosPhil*, the bridal chamber constitutes the main theological and mythological link between the fallen feminine and the

incarnated feminine. In this regard, I have highlighted that Valentinian Gnostics believe that the separation between Adam and Eve, who were originally created as one androgynous human being, is the beginning of death among humans, for it causes the loss of the original status of perfect syzygial unity. Consequently, according to the Valentinian anthropological doctrine, the separation of Eve from Adam is equated to Sophia's separation from her syzygial companion. Moreover, just as Sophia is restored after her sin by the intervention of the Saviour, so the separation between Adam and Eve needs to be mended. This is indeed the purpose of the sacrament of the bridal chamber.

Moreover, according to my interpretation of *ExTheod*, Valentinian Gnostics understand the re-constitution of the original unity between Adam and Eve in two ways: one is based on a threefold anthropological model – according to which human beings are constituted by spirit, soul and body – and the other is based on a classification of humankind into three classes – pneumatic, psychic and hylic. In the anthropological model in which Eve is considered the psychic part of human beings, the re-composition of the syzygy is interpreted as the harmonisation of the spiritual and psychic part of the human being, where the spiritual part is probably conceived as leading the psychic part. On the contrary, in the anthropological models in which Eve is considered as an allegory of the feminine pneumatic seed striving to be reunited with its angelic male counterpart, the re-constitution of the syzygy is envisioned as the eschatological union of Sophia's male and female emissions. In this regard, I would like to bring some attention to the philosophical use of gender categories that is used by Valentinian teachers. Indeed, the attribution of female or male gender to a specific being do not necessarily correspond to the physical and biological sex of the being itself. This is primarily demonstrated by the feminine character attributed to the spiritual seed, that is, the totality of men and women that constitute Sophia's lower emission. As a matter of fact, the use of gender categories corresponds to a specific philosophical intent, which associated maleness with perfection and femaleness with imperfection.

In conclusion, Valentinian Gnostics employ feminine imagery in order to describe the mystery of the divine in its many forms. From a Trinitarian

perspective, the different interpretations of the feminine reveal the shift from a Trinitarian speculation which considers the third person of the Trinity as the mother of the Saviour to one of the first Trinitarian doctrines of the Holy Spirit as an acting force of God. From a Christological perspective, the interpretation of the feminine as type of Christ's body shows the difficulties found by Valentinian Gnostics in dealing with the idea of God's suffering. Lastly, from a theological and soteriological perspective, the feminine reveals the underlying principle of the Valentinian sacrament of the bridal chamber, which envisions the restoration of the divine and the unity between the male and female elements in God.

IV. Gnostic Case-Studies: The Feminine in Other Gnostic Traditions

In the previous sections of my work I have discussed the representation of the three aspects of the feminine in well-known and widely studied Gnostic traditions. In this last section, my research addresses the less studied Gnostic texts which present a peculiar or significant feminine imagery. Given the multifaceted nature of the Gnostic movement, it is essential to include these texts into my investigation of the feminine to give voices to those texts which have been underestimated in the study of such a complex religious phenomenon, since they provide precious insights for understanding feminine imagery in Gnostic circles. However, unlike the previous traditions, these texts do not belong to any specific Gnostic tradition. Consequently, they have been grouped together in this section mostly because of their originality within Gnosticism, rather than because they present specific similarities.

In the first chapter, I will explore the representation of the feminine in the so-called Simonian Gnosis. In particular, I will focus on the character of Helena of Tyre, the alleged prostitute who was Simon Magus' companion. In the second chapter, I will analyse the *Book of Baruch*, which is known to us in the transcription of Hippolytus. This text presents a unique Gnostic mythology in which feminine imagery plays a fundamental and, yet, unique role. In the third chapter, I will discuss the role of the feminine in the Nag Hammadi treatise entitled *The Exegesis of the Soul*. This Coptic treatise is centred on a female character, the soul, and its journey towards salvation, thus representing one of the most significant examples of Gnostic feminine imagery.

IV.1 Helena of Tyre in the so-called Simonian Gnosis

The character of Simon Magus is one of the most controversial of all times.¹ Although he is mentioned only once in the New Testament,² he had an unusual success among early Christian authors. As a matter of fact, he is widely mentioned in ancient Christian literature, where he is often depicted as the first Gnostic heretic.³ Due to the extremely polemical nature of ancient sources on his life, it has not been possible to determine with certainty who he was. Some sources claim he was an opponent of Peter's power in Jerusalem;⁴ others that he was one of the many magicians who dwelled in Palestine during the first century;⁵ all heresiological sources agreed he was the founder of a Gnostic movement.⁶ Many scholars have investigated this topic and many different conclusions have been reached so far. As Haar's research has proved,⁷ it is not possible to find a definitive, conclusive and uniform answer to the question of

¹ The bibliography on Simon Magus is quite extensive. I will mention here only the few that have dedicated some attention to the character of Helena: Beyschlag (1974); Filoramo (1990), 143-152; Adamik (1998), 52-64; Haar (2003). Ferreiro (2005) has the merit to have highlighted first the lack of scholarly investigation on Helena. See also Lettieri (2008).

² *Acts* 8:9-25.

³ On the possible Samaritan origin of Gnosticism, see Fossum (1985).

⁴ Such as the *Acts of Peter*.

⁵ The description of his magical deeds is well attested in the *Pseudo Clemenine Literature*; both *Hom* and *Rec*. In particular, see *Hom* II, 22-24; *Hom* II, 32; and *Rec* II, 9.

⁶ See Justin, *ApPr* 26, 1-3; Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 23, 1-5; Hippolytus, *El* VI, 9-18. In this chapter, I will only analyse in details these three heresiological sources; whereas others (such as Epiphanius, *Pan* I, 22, 1-7 or Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* II, 12, 3 – 15, 1) will be used only as a general reference, since they do not add any additional information to previous sources.

⁷ See Haar (2003), 294-307. In his conclusions, he addressed the question regarding Simon's identity from three different perspectives: 1) If one considers the definition of Gnosticism agreed in 1966 at the Colloquium of Messina, then Simon should not be regarded as a Gnostic. Nevertheless, he was forced to admit that 'from the viewpoint of Messina there are sufficient grounds to answer a tentative "yes" to him being a pre-Gnostic in the terms of the definition; yet, as noted, there are non-compliant factors in the reports of Simon's teaching and activities which question this apparent correspondence'. 2) If one considers the accounts of ancient writers from their own perspective, then he was the 'Father of all heresy [...] and only "first Gnostic" by implication'. 3) Haar attempted to unveil the historical Simon and, in this regard, he concluded that 'from the viewpoint of "Simon," or at least from the evidence of his reconstructed teachings, there are reasons to conclude he was a charismatic figure adept in the traditions of the *Magoi*, who exercised considerable ability, authority, and influence. A self-proclaimed expert in divine things, Simon would not have rejected the notion of being a "Gnostic;" at least not in the original classical sense of the word. He taught a source of truth and salvation that differed from mainstream Jewish thought and practice; he claimed the preeminent role of "Standing One"—some called him the "first God," Christians viewed him as a "Christ pretender"—and he enjoyed public favour and widespread respect from Samaria to Rome'. From the reading of Haar's work, his personal preference for the latter options appears clear.

the historical Simon's identity. However, this should not discourage Gnostic scholars from dedicating due attention to Simonian gnosis, which remains a religious phenomenon that has interested many heresiologists and theologians of later centuries.⁸ In this chapter, I will focus on the testimonies regarding Helena, Simon's companion, since I am convinced that her character can cast some light on the core doctrines of the so-called Simonian gnosis. Indeed, I aim at demonstrating that her portrayal in heresiological sources groups together all three aspects of Gnostic feminine imagery: first, she is portrayed as the feminine in the Godhead for she is identified with Ennoia, the female companion of Simon's First-God; secondly, she is represented as the fallen female figure, since she lost her divine position and entered the historical cycle of re-incarnation; lastly, she is identified with the carnal woman who went about with Simon. In this respect, it is worth underlining that the affiliation of the historical Simon Magus to Gnosticism falls beyond the scope of my research, for the chapter aims at discussing the place of Helena within the Simonian gnosis, as presented in ancient accounts.

Although Helena is not mentioned in any of the early sources regarding Simon – that is, *Acts of Apostles* and *Acts of Peter* – she assumes a prominent role in all accounts after the second half of the second century; so much so that Jerome, in his *Letter to Ctesiphon*,⁹ listed an apostolic and heretical succession of women that started with Helena. Her absence from earlier sources is indeed puzzling and one might argue that the story of Simon and Helena's illicit love relationship played a major role in discrediting Simon's character in heresiological accounts.¹⁰ In this regard, one must remember that Helena's relationship with Simon has a significant role also in non-heresiological narratives, such as the *Pseudo-Clementine Literature*, thus suggesting that she has some ulterior purpose within the Simonian system. If she is not merely a

⁸ In truth, he also had a discrete success during the Middle and Modern Age: see Ferreiro (2005), 201-319.

⁹ Jerome, *Epistula* 133. To deepen this topic, see Ferreiro (1993).

¹⁰ Another chapter could be written to investigate the reasons why this illicit relationship would have helped heresiologists to discredit Simon Magus. Due to brevity, it is only worth noting that the idea of the superiority of celibacy over marriage (especially in its illegitimate forms) was beginning to spread as early as the first century, see Paul *1Cor* 7, 32-38. See Brown (1988).

cunning ploy to discredit Simon, what makes Helena so important as to be always mentioned in relation to Simon? By reading the sources on Simon's life, it is only possible to formulate an educated guess: either she was carefully fashioned by heresiologists in order to make Simon a credible Gnostic teacher¹¹ or she was indeed originally part of the Simonian system. Either way, it is clear that Simon's connection to this woman was essential to recognise him as Gnostic teacher.¹² Whether she was a historical figure or not and whether Simon's adversaries super-imposed these features on her character or even fashioned her from scratch, it remains noteworthy that her character has been exploited to make Simon a credible Gnostic teacher. The focus of my research will therefore be on the representation of Helena within the Simonian Gnostic cosmos and on how the character of Simon was skilfully fashioned by ancient writers with the purpose of creating the archenemy *par excellence*, the forefather of the biggest heretical threats of the first centuries. In summary, the Gnostic Simon is – probably unwillingly – the main example of how meaningful and inescapable the feminine is for Gnostic mythology.

IV.1.1 The Character of Helena in Ancient Accounts of Simonian Gnosis

Justin Martyr informs the reader in depth about the immorality of Simon's life. In Justin's *ApPr* 26, 1-3,¹³ Simon is presented as a Samaritan from the town of Gitto who lived under the emperor Claudius (41-54 AD). Supposedly, he was not only active in Samaria, but in Rome as well, where he was even venerated as a god. He was popular to such degree that people dedicated a statue to his cult, the cult of the 'First God'.¹⁴ Simon's fame gained him many followers, who appeared to have created a sect of magic-practitioners.¹⁵ Among them,

¹¹ If so, it is unfortunately impossible to determine with absolute certainty whether they had re-fashioned a real woman or invented her entirely.

¹² This aspect of the Simonian gnosis has been mainly overlooked by previous scholarly investigations. As far as I am aware, the only exception is Quispel (1951).

¹³ Justin's apology was probably written not many years before his death (165 CE), since it addressed the roman emperor Antoninus Pius (138-161 CE) but it contained also a letter of Marcus Aurelius (161-180 CE). For the Greek text, see Minns – Parvis (2009); the translation is mine.

¹⁴ According to Justin, the statue bared an inscription *Simoni Deo Sancto*. A statue with such an inscription was indeed recovered in Rome in 1574 near the island of Tiber, but archaeologists believe it was dedicated to the cult of the Sabine deity *Semo Sancto*.

¹⁵ Justin, *ApPr* 26, 3.

Justin lists Menander, whom he accuses of '[having] deceived many while he was in Antioch by his magical art'.¹⁶ Justin concludes his account apologising to the reader for the scarcity of information and mentioning another of his work, probably his lost *Syntagma*, in which 'all heresies', including that of Simon, were discussed at length.¹⁷

It is noteworthy that Justin does not explicitly refer to Simon as a Gnostic teacher in his *ApPr*. Nonetheless, all of the accusations which Justin moves against Simon seems to point in that direction, especially Simon's self-proclamation as 'first God'. It appears reasonable that this appellative implicitly presupposes the existence of other gods that seem to be inferior to Simon-First God; consequently, it seems that Simon's doctrine proposed a rough form of dualism, similar to the Gnostic one, which postulated the existence of a superior God (the Father-Abyss) and an inferior God (the Demiurge). Moreover, it is interesting to note that Simon First-God presents most characteristics of the Christian redeemer: he is an *incarnated* divine being who comes to redeem and save those who believe in him. However, all doubts that one might have about Justin's opinion on Simon's identity should be cleared by Justin's portrayal of Helena:

And nearly all the Samaritans and a few from other nations even now still confess him to be the first God, and worship him. And a certain Helen, who went about with him at that time, and who had formerly been placed in a brothel in Tyre of Phoenicia, they call the first thought (ἔννοια) that came to be from him.¹⁸

Here, Helena is presented as a female divine entity, namely the ἔννοια (First Thought) of Simon-First God. Since the use of such an appellative to describe the highest female divinity has numerous and interesting parallels in Gnostic

¹⁶ Justin, *ApPr* 26, 3.

¹⁷ Justin, *ApPr* 26, 8: 'But I have a treatise against all the heresies that have existed already composed, which, if you wish to read it, I will give you.'

¹⁸ Justin, *ApPr* 26, 3: καὶ σχεδὸν πάντες μὲν Σαμαρεῖς, ὀλίγοι δὲ καὶ ἐν ἄλλοις ἔθνεσιν, ὡς τὸν πρῶτον θεὸν ἐκείνον ὁμολογοῦντες ἐκείνον καὶ προσκυνοῦσι· καὶ Ἑλένην τινά, τὴν περινοστήσασαν αὐτῷ κατ'ἐκεῖνο τοῦ καιροῦ, πρότερον ἐπὶ τέγους σταθεῖσαν, τὴν ὑπ'αὐτοῦ ἔννοιαν πρώτην γενομένην λέγουσι.

literature, Justin is willingly attributing to Helena a Gnostic feature. As a matter of fact, this is the appellative of the companion of the Abyss in the Ptolomean system,¹⁹ in *ApJohn*,²⁰ and in the Ophite system described in Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 30. Furthermore, Justin's statement that Helena was 'going about with him at that time' suggests that Simon and Helena were presenting themselves as the incarnation of the original divine couple of Gnostic systems, which were indeed composed by a First God and his Ennoia. If needed, an additional confirmation of their divine status of couple can be found in the fact that the text clearly states that Helena was worshipped by Simon's followers as well. In this respect, it is worth underlining that describing Simon as a higher god and Helena as the first thought produced by this First God corresponds to Simon and Helena being a Gnostic syzygy. As a matter of fact, a few decades later, Irenaeus would describe the primordial Gnostic syzygy of the Valentinian movement as composed by a 'perfect pre-existent Eon called Pre-Origin, Pre-Father and Abyss', who was not alone since an 'Ennoia exists together with him, and she is also called Grace or Silence'.²¹

In addition to the appellative of Ennoia and the syzygial unity, Justin's identification of Helena with a prostitute is a further indicator of a Gnostic framework. On the one hand, her status of prostitute links Helena to Sophia – that is, she who caused the intra-divine fracture due to her lust and her refusal to act within the lawful union with her partner. On the other hand, Helena's promiscuity with men puts her in the position of needing salvation, which is promptly provided by the arrival of Simon-First God, who thus assumes also the feature of a Redeemer.

Justin's portrayal of Helena is also confirmed by the second account on Simon's life and doctrines: Irenaeus' *AdHaer* I, 23, 1-5.²² This account about

¹⁹ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 1, 1.

²⁰ *ApJohn* II, 4, 27 – 5, 11 where Barbelo is identified with the 'Forethought of All', 'First Thought', 'Womb of Everything'.

²¹ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 1, 1: Λέγουσιν γάρ τινα εἶναι ἐν ἀοράτοις καὶ ἀκατονομάστοις ὑψώμασι τέλειον Αἰῶνα προόντα· τοῦτον δὲ καὶ [προαρχὴν καὶ] προπάτορα καὶ Βυθὸν καλοῦσιν. [...] συνυπάρχειν δ' αὐτῷ καὶ Ἐννοίαν, ἣν δὴ καὶ Χάριν, καὶ Σιγὴν ὀνομάζουσι. For more information, *supra* III.2.2.

²² Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 23, 1-5.

Simon seems to confirm that of Justin. However, Irenaeus is far more generous regarding details about Helena:

Now Simon, the Samaritan, from whom all sorts of heresies got their start, proposed the following sort of heretical doctrine. Having himself redeemed a certain Helen from being a prostitute in Tyre, a city of Phoenicia, he was in the habit of carrying her about with him, saying that she was the First Ennoia (Thought) of his Mind, the Mother of All, through whom, in the beginning, he conceived in his mind to make angels and archangels. For he asserted that this Ennoia leaped forth from him, since she knew what he, the Father, wanted, and descended to the lower regions, and gave birth to angels and powers, by whom also this world was made. But after she had given birth to them, she was detained by them out of envy, since they were unwilling to be looked upon as the progeny of any other being. For he was entirely unknown to them. His Ennoia, however, who was detained by those powers and angels who had been produced by her, also suffered all kinds of abuses at their hands, so that she could not return upwards to her Father. She suffered eventually to the extent of being imprisoned in a human body, and of transmigrating for ages into other female bodies, as from one vessel into another.²³

According to Irenaeus, Helena perfectly resembles the female aeons of some Gnostic mythologies, for he attributes to her all those features that are typical of Gnostic female figures. First, as ἔννοια – the ‘First Thought of his Mind’, produced by the Father as an extension of his own power – she represents the feminine in the Godhead. Secondly, as ‘the Mother of All’ who leaps out of the Pleroma and remains trapped in matter, Helena represents the fallen feminine; so much so that Irenaeus interprets Helena’s status of a prostitute as a

²³ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 23, 2: *Simon autem Samaritanus, ex quo universae hereses substituerunt, habet huiusmodi sectae materiam. Hic Helenam quondam, quam ipse a Tyro civitate Phoenices quaestuariam cum redemisset, secum conducebat, dicens hanc esse primam mentis eius conceptionem, matrem omnium, per quam in initio mente concepit angelos facere et archangelos. Hanc enim Ennoiam exsilientem ex eo, cognoscentem quae vult pater eius, degredi ad inferior et generare angelos et potestates, a quibus et mundum hunc factum dixit. Posteaquam autem generavit eos, haec detenta est ab ipsis: Ennoiam autem eius detentam ab iis quae ab ea emissae essent potestates et angeli; et omnem contumeliam ab iis passam, uti non recurreret sursum ad suum patrem, usque adeo ut et in corpore humano includeretur et per saecula veluti de vase in vas transmigraret in altera muliebria corpora.*

typological reproduction of Sophia's celestial promiscuity with evil powers.²⁴ Lastly, she also represents the incarnated feminine by remaining trapped in the inferior world and being forced to assume several material forms, the last of which is the prostitute Helena. In this regard, I believe it is necessary to highlight that both Justin's and Irenaeus' accounts rely on the Gnostic typological structure of the cosmos, that is, the fact that the inferior level of reality mirrors the superior one. The characters of Simon and Helena are always described as types of celestial reality: the fact that Simon, the Gnostic teacher, claimed to be the First God whilst Helena, his companion, was identified with *Ennoia* means that they identified themselves with protological divine beings. Hence, they were both the protological First-God and Ennoia who originated the cosmos, and the man and the woman who preached about the celestial events. However, in Simonian accounts, the different ontological levels of reality – that is the celestial and earthly ones – are not only intertwined, but are even overlapped one with the other. In all these accounts, Helena is not only type of the higher female divinity, but she *is* the higher female divinity. Equally Simon is, at the same time, First God and type of the First-God. In this perspective, Simon's deeds are subject to a double interpretation: on the one hand, Simon's actions are merely human acts; on the other hand, these actions have always a deeper meaning, a divine one, where Simon is not only a man but the First God. In other words, whereas the human Simon was merely making Helena his lover, Simon-First God was instead righting the wrong caused by his companion's prostitution. Consequently, Helena is essential to the history of redemption, for freeing Helena from the dominion and slavery of evil powers is indeed the reason why Simon-Saviour abandoned his celestial form to assume a material one:²⁵

He himself came for this reason that he might first take her to himself, free her from the bonds, and then bring salvation to humankind by his own knowledge. The angels governed the world badly, because each one

²⁴ This portrayal of Helena is extremely similar to the one of the female protagonist of *ExSoul*, *infra* IV.3. For the relation between this text and the so-called "Simonian gnosis", see Arai (1981).

²⁵ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 23, 1: 'He represented himself, in a word, as being the loftiest of all powers, that is, the Being who is the Father over All.'

desired to be sovereign. So he came, he said, to set matters right; having been transformed and made like the principalities and powers and angels, he appeared in turn as a man, though he was not a man. He appeared to suffer in Judaea, though he did not suffer.²⁶

Simon, just as the Christ of Valentinian myth,²⁷ is the male divine principle incarnated to save his female counterpart, to restore her to her previous self so that she may regain her rightful place inside the Pleroma. Descending into the inferior world, he is forced to assume a material appearance, but also to make himself known to humans, which can now be saved because of their knowledge.²⁸ In this scenario, Helena is the evangelical ‘lost sheep’²⁹ that wanders alone, losing her way back home. In order to regain her celestial status, she has to be united with Simon-First God, thus reproducing in the inferior world, in which they dwell, the divine unity of the First God and his Thought. Hence, once one has highlighted Simon’s relation with Helena and identified the typological mechanism of Simonian mythology, one can appreciate all Helena’s hues: she is ‘Ennoia’, ‘Mother of All’ and ‘prostitute’ all at once, becoming a peculiar figure within Gnostic mythologies, since all aspects of the feminine are grouped in a single character.

Another account of Simon’s teachings is found in Hippolytus’ *El VI*, 5-20. Here the author claims to be in possession of the *Great Announcement*,³⁰ an original work of Simon Magus.³¹ This book is supposed to contain a detailed account of Simonian doctrines. Simon’s system was based on ‘pairs’,³²

²⁶ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 23, 3: *Quapropter et ipsum venisse, uti eam assumeret primam et liberaret eam vinculis, hominibus autem salutem praestaret per suam agnitionem. Cum enim male moderarentur angeli mundum, quoniam unusquisque eorum concupisceret principatum, ad emendationem venisse rerum et descendisse eum transfiguratum et assimilatum virtutibus et potestatibus et angelis, ut et in hominibus homo appareret ipse, cum non esset homo, et passum autem in Iudaea putatum, cum non esset passus.*

²⁷ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 2, 4.

²⁸ Similarly, Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 2, 5: ‘For they claim that Christ taught them the nature of their conjugal union, that they would be able to know the comprehension of the Ingenerate.’

²⁹ *Lk* 15:1-7.

³⁰ Hippolytus, *El VI*, 11-18.

³¹ This text has been largely commented by scholarship, I will only list here the major contributions: Frickel (1968); Salles-Dabadie (1969); Aland (1973).

³² Hippolytus, *El VI*, 12, 1-4: ‘The world, therefore, that which is generated, was produced from the unbegotten fire. It began, however, to exist, he says, according to the following manner. He who was begotten from the principle of that fire took six roots, and those primary

opposite sex couples (very similar to the Gnostic ‘syzygy’) that emanate all other divine entities. Hippolytus stresses two major ‘errors’ of the Simonian movement: a) that Simon’s teachings were deduced from an erroneous exegesis of the Scriptures; b) that Simon’s teachings depended greatly on Greek philosophies. As a matter of fact, Hippolytus presents Simon’s doctrine in a highly philosophical form, where Greek mythology, literature and philosophy are mixed with Gnostic elements.³³ This highly syncretistic representation of Simon’s doctrines suits well the intent of *El*, which wants to connect each heresy with a different philosophical movement.

Interestingly, this philosophical reading of Simonian doctrines does not seem to affect Helena’s description:

He gives an allegorical meaning to the wooden horse and to Helena with the torch and to many other elements. He lies for he refers them to himself and to Epinoia (Helena). (He said) she was the lost sheep and she was always abiding among women; she troubled the powers in the world by reason of her surpassing beauty; whence also the Trojan war arose, because of her. As a matter of fact, in the Helena born at that time dwelled Epinoia; and thus, because all the powers were disputing about her, sedition and war arose, during which he (Simon?) was manifested to people. [...] The angels and the powers below – who, he says, created the world – caused her (Helena’s) transference from one body to another; and subsequently she stood on the roof of a house in Tyre, a city of Phoenicia. Once (Simon) descended, he found her. He stated that he first came down looking for her, in order to rescue her from the bondage. And after having thus redeemed her, he was in the habit of conducting her about with himself, alleging that this [Helena] was the lost sheep, and affirming himself to be the Power above all things. But the liar, since he was in

ones, of the originating principle of generation. And, he says that the roots were made from the fire in pairs, which roots he terms “Mind” and “Intelligence,” “Voice” and “Name,” “Ratiocination” and “Reflection.” And that in these six roots resides simultaneously the entire indefinite power potentially, (however) not actually. And this indefinite power, he says, is he who stood, stands, and will stand.’

³³ For instance, Hippolytus claims that, according to Simon, the origin of everything should be found in the element of fire. None of the other source about Simon ever mention such theory; therefore, it is more likely that Hippolytus is overlapping Stoic and Empedoclean doctrines into Simon’s system. To deepen Hippolytus’ use of Greek philosophy, see Simonetti (2011).

love with this woman called Helena, took her as his wife, after having ransomed her; being ashamed in front of his disciples (because of this), he created this myth.³⁴

Notwithstanding the presence of a syncretistic touch – according to which Helena of Troy is a precedent incarnation of Simon’s lover – the account of *El* is extremely similar to that of Irenaeus. Just as the latter, the former describes Helena as Simon’s Ennoia, that somehow fell into a condition of slavery and was forced to dwell among women, assuming different bodies. At the time Simon found her, she was incarnated in a prostitute from Tyre. As in the previous heresiological account, Helena regained her rightful and proper status becoming Simon’s companion. It is worth noting that none of the heresiological accounts gives an explanation of Helena’s fall outside of the Pleroma. Such an omission is indeed interesting for it creates a significant gap in the plot.³⁵ Once again, this representation of Helena fits perfectly the Gnostic representation of the feminine within Gnostic myth. However, the *Great Announcement* in *El* does not add any new elements to previous descriptions of the character of Helena.

In summary, according to Irenaeus’ and Justin’s description, Simon was undoubtedly a Gnostic teacher. The typological interpretation given by Irenaeus – according to which Simon was the original male principle and Helena his female companion – listed Simon within the Gnostic movement. In particular, one cannot fail to notice some similarities between the Simonian myth and the Valentinian one; and, consequently, to wonder whether Irenaeus’

³⁴ Hippolytus, *El* VI, 19, 1-5: καὶ γὰρ τὸν δούρειον ἵππον ἀλληγορεῖ, καὶ τὴν Ἑλένην ἅμα τῇ λαμπάδι, καὶ ἄλλα πλεῖστα ὅσα μεταγγί(σας περ)ί τε αὐτοῦ καὶ τῆς Ἐπινοίας πλαστολογεῖ. εἶναι <δ>έ γε ταύτην τὸ πρόβατον τὸ πεπλανημένον, ἣτις αἰεὶ καταγινομένη ἐν γυναιξὶν ἐτάρασσε τὰς ἐν <τῷ> κόσμῳ δυνάμεις διὰ τὸ ἀνυπέρβλητον αὐτῆς κάλλος. ὅθεν καὶ ὁ Τρωϊκὸς πόλεμος δι’ αὐτὴν γεγένηται· ἐν γὰρ τῇ κατ’ ἐκεῖνο καιροῦ γενομένη Ἑλένη ἐνέκησεν [ἐν αὐτῇ] ἡ Ἐπίνοια, καὶ οὕτως πασῶν ἐπιδικαζομένων αὐτῆς τῶν ἐξουσιῶν στάσις καὶ πόλεμος ἐπανεστὶ ἐν οἷς ἐφάνη ἔθνεσιν. [...] Μετενσωματουμένην <δὲ αὐτὴν καί> ὑπὸ τῶν ἀγγέλων καὶ τῶν κάτω ἐξουσιῶν – οἱ καὶ τὸν κόσμον, φησὶν, ἐποίησαν –, ὕστερον ἐπὶ τέγους ἐν Τύρῳ τῇ(ς) Φοινίκῃ πόλει στήναι. ἦν κατελθὼν εὗρεν· ἐπὶ γὰρ τὴν τα(ύ)τ(η)ς πρώτης ζήτησιν ἔφη παραγεγονέναι, ὅπως ῥύσ(η)ται αὐτὴν τῶν δεσμῶν. ἦν λυτρωσάμενος ἅμα ἑαυτῷ περιῆγε, φάσκων τοῦτο εἶναι τὸ ἀπολωλὸς πρόβατον, ἑαυτὸν δὲ λέγων τὴν ὑπὲρ πάντα δυνάμιν εἶναι. ὁ δὲ ψυδρὸς ἐρασθεὶς τοῦ γυναιίου τούτου, Ἑλένης καλουμένης, ὠνησάμενος εἶχε, καὶ τοὺς μαθητὰς αἰδοῦμενος τοῦτον τὸν μῦθον πλασεν.

³⁵ A possible reason for this narrative gap will be proposed in the conclusion of this chapter, *infra* IV.1.2.

account is genuine or rather a reinterpretation of Simon's teachings in a Valentinian perspective. However, I have made clear that Irenaeus keeps all of the basic features of Justin's representation of Helena and Simon. Despite Justin's and Irenaeus' works being only a couple of decades apart, it was in those years that the Valentinian movements reached their acme, thus dominating the intellectual scene of second century Gnosticism. The success that this movement knew should lead modern interpreters at least to contemplate the possibility of a contamination between Irenaeus's understanding of the Simonian and the Valentinian heresies. Given the similarities, it is likely that Irenaeus enriched his account of Simonian gnosis with elements from other Gnostic traditions, especially the Valentinian one.³⁶ Although this potentially compromises the credibility of Irenaeus' account of Simonian gnosis, it cannot be ignored that his account finds confirmation in the news reported by Justin. Nonetheless, since all three heresiologists report the same information with only few variations, one cannot help wondering whether there is a dependence of one on the other. Such unusual concordance among sources should immediately raise suspicions rather than induce a false sense of reassurance. How is it possible to find so many similarities among texts written in different times and locations? There are two possible explanations: either they have a common source, or they are relying one on the other. Regarding the first possibility, we are not aware of any work which could have been used for this purpose. Consequently, the issue that needs to be addressed concerns the possibility that Irenaeus used Justin's lost *Syntagma* as a source for his *AdHaer*.³⁷ In this regard, I would agree with Thomassen in assuming that the author of the *El* used Irenaeus' *AdHaer* as a source.³⁸ Hence, the interpreter faces here what I would call a *methodological impasse*: if all heresiological sources about Simon Magus may be traced back to Justin's works, they can be deemed trustworthy only if one trusts Justin's account.

³⁶ In particular, the Valentinian account of Ptolemy in Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 1-8.

³⁷ Norelli investigated selected case-studies about this topic. He studied – among other issues – the relationship between Irenaeus' *AdHaer* and Justin's lost *Syntagma*, building his case on the example of *AdHaer* V, 26, 2 and concluding Irenaeus depends greatly on Justin's work. Norelli (2005) was aware of the partiality of his conclusions and hoped for further studies on this subject. Equally, Lettieri believed Irenaeus depends on Justin, see Lettieri (2008), 106.

³⁸ See Thomassen (2006), 77-81.

Fortunately, there are three other sources that one can use to verify the veracity of heresiological information about Helena: *Acts* 8:4-25; *Pseudo-Clementine* literature and *Acts of Peter*.

IV.1.2 Was Helena mentioned in *Acts*?

The portrayal of Simon presented in *Acts* 8:4-25 does not present elements of Gnostic teachings; rather it emphasises Simon's magical deeds and his fraudulent conversion to Christianity. Here, Simon is presented as a magician who initially practiced magical arts in the region of Samaria and then converted to Christianity. However, his conversion was fraudulent for he was convinced that the apostles were magicians, as Peter realised when Simon tried to pay him in exchange for the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Acts devoted only one sentence to introduce Simon, specifying that he 'amazed the people of Samaria [...] with his magic' and that he claimed to be 'the power of God that is called Great'.³⁹ Regarding Simon's magic, Haar's analysis of the use of the word *magos* in the ancient world is extremely useful. Haar, who mostly agrees with Segal,⁴⁰ believed that the meaning of this term varied significantly from text to text, assuming both positive and negative connotations. Haar claims that, since the use of the word was not consistent and the common practice indicated an ambiguous use of the term, there are no sufficient reasons to interpret in a pejorative sense the attribute *magus* that it is given to Simon by the author of *Acts*. Despite the veracity of his research, I am still persuaded of the defamatory intent of the author of *Acts*, who evidently used this term to discredit the activity of Simon.⁴¹ Furthermore, the defamatory intent of the author is confirmed by the fact the event is taking place in

³⁹ *Acts* 8:9-11: Ἀνὴρ δέ τις ὀνόματι Σίμων προὔπηρχεν ἐν τῇ πόλει μαγεύων καὶ ἐξιστάνων τὸ ἔθνος τῆς Σαμαρείας, λέγων εἶναί τινα ἑαυτὸν μέγαν, ὃ προσεῖχον πάντες ἀπὸ μικροῦ ἕως μεγάλου λέγοντες, Οὗτός ἐστιν ἡ δύναμις τοῦ θεοῦ ἡ καλουμένη Μεγάλη. προσεῖχον δὲ αὐτῷ διὰ τὸ ἱκανῶ χρόνῳ ταῖς μαγείαις ἐξεστακέναι αὐτούς.

⁴⁰ See Segal (1981), pp. 349–75.

⁴¹ Such a conclusion seems almost obvious when one takes into consideration the other two episodes of *Acts* in which the disciples encounter magicians or exorcists: *Acts* 13:4-12 and *Acts* 19:11-20. In the first case, the magician Bar-Jesus is described as a 'Jewish false prophet' and 'a son of the devil, enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villany'. In the second passage, the sons of the high priest Scaeva were leaped on by the evil spirit they tried unsuccessfully to exorcise and forced to '[flee] out of the house naked and wounded'.

Samaria, a land well-known for being religiously heterodox, even within Judaism. Simon's dwelling in Samaria may indeed be a genuine indication of his origin but, most likely, it is the author's indication of his unorthodox background.⁴² Indeed, in Samaria, a land where the apostles' missions were numerous,⁴³ the apocalyptic and messianic traditions were also very present.⁴⁴ Therefore, it is at least plausible to consider Simon's title of ἡ δύναμις τοῦ θεοῦ as another messianic claim, which means that Simon could have been interpreted by the author of *Acts* as one of the many "messiahs" who dwelled in Palestine during the first century.⁴⁵

In *Acts*' portrayal of Simon, Helena does not play any role. Her absence has not passed unnoticed by scholars, so much so that Lüdemann hypothesised that the ἐπίνοια of *Acts* 8:22 is a veiled reference to Helena.⁴⁶ Notwithstanding the fascination of Lüdemann's hypothesis, its argument presents a terminological issue. If it is remarkable that *Acts* 8:22 is the only occurrence of the term ἐπίνοια, which is indeed a key-term of Gnosticism, it is also true that ἐπίνοια is not the only term used by subsequent writers to refer to Helena: she is more often the ἔννοια rather than the ἐπίνοια of Simon.⁴⁷ It is clear that Lüdemann tried to enforce the equivalence of these two terms but, unfortunately, his theory is not entirely convincing. In conclusion, the information provided by *Acts* is not conclusive regarding Simon's identity and, most of all, is not sufficient to justify the complex portrayal of Simon that characterises later sources.

⁴² To this regard, I tend to agree with Haar (2003), 164-165 who claims Luke's reference to Samaria serves merely a literary purpose. Anyway, I admit that both instances could be true: Simon was a resident of Samaria and the author of *Acts* seized the opportunity to denigrate him.

⁴³ For a better understanding of the value of Samaria for early Christian missions, see Cullmann, (1956), 183-192.

⁴⁴ For the apocalyptic and messianic tradition in Samaria, see Lettieri (2008).

⁴⁵ For the messianic claims of Simon Magus, see Lettieri (2008) and Haar (2003).

⁴⁶ In *Acts* 8:22, Peter reprehends Simon with these words: 'Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart (ἐπίνοια τῆς καρδίας) may be forgiven you.' For Lüdemann's interpretation of this passage, see Lüdemann (1989), 96-98.

⁴⁷ As a matter of fact, the term ἐπίνοια is used exclusively in Hippolytus, *El* VI, 19, 2.

IV.1.3 The *Acts of Peter* and *Pseudo-Clementine Literature*

ActPt is a text that belongs to the so-called *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostle*, where numerous adventures of the apostles are narrated. The text was originally written in Greek, but it is known to us in the Latin translation of the Vercelli manuscript.⁴⁸ The place and date of composition of *ActPt*, as well as its author, are unfortunately obscure.⁴⁹

In spite of the importance of *ActPt* for the study of ancient Christian literature, this text cannot be used to add more information about Helena, since she is never mentioned in it.⁵⁰ The document is quite brief and the narrative is mainly focused on the fight between Peter and Simon, showing the former victorious and the latter losing. According to the portrayal of *ActPt*, Simon was therefore Peter's archenemy, the opposing rival who pulled people away from Christian faith by means of his false magic.⁵¹ The main focus of the text is on Peter's wonders, to which Simon's fraudulent magical practices are opposed. Interestingly, Ferreiro noted that the *ActPt* belonged to a different trend of tradition about Simon than the other texts analysed so far. He hypothesised the existence of two traditions concerning Simon's character: one, created by the heresiologists, according to which Simon was the first heretic; the other, to which both *ActPt* and *Acts* belonged, bequeathed the tradition of Simon as a magician. Moreover, he underlined how this latter tradition was victorious over the former since it almost completely disappeared around the sixth century

⁴⁸ To deepen this topic, see Hilhorst (1998).

⁴⁹ Bremmer (1998), 14-20 hypothesises that the text was written in Asia minor and that it was probably translated in Latin during the second half of the fourth century. See also Walker (2015), 227-272.

⁵⁰ For study on this work, see Elliot (1993), 390-426 and Thomas (2003).

⁵¹ Interestingly, the practice of magic is not here attributed exclusively to the "heretical" Simon, for also Peter performs 'marvellous wonders' which amazed the audience (*ActPt* IX). There are many texts that report the wonders of the apostles. Where then does the difference between them and Simon lie? First of all, it is worth underlining a terminological difference: when the author refers to Simon, he addresses him with the appellative 'sorcerer' (*ActPt* XXX), whereas when he refers to Peter he uses the term 'wonder-workers' (*ActPt* IX). Secondly, the difference between them lies in the powers from whom they received their magical powers. On the one hand, Simon performed magical deed because of his 'wickedness' (*ActPt* VI); on the other hand, Peter used these wonders to testify the power of Jesus, 'by whom all things impossible are made possible'. To deepen the argument of the rivalry between Peter and Simon in ancient literature see Côté (2001).

CE.⁵² Apart from this information, there is not much more that can be deduced from the text regarding Simon and Helena. The author does not report any of Simon's teachings or doctrines, nor does he mention any episode of his life, apart from his magical deeds. This scarcity of information leads me to think that the Simon portrayed in this work is merely a straw man, a fictitious character – inspired by the tradition according to which Simon is a magician – custom-fitted to the narrative exigencies of the *Acts*' author.⁵³ In addition, it is worth noting, once again, the fact that the author never mentions Helena. If one shares Ferreiro's hypothesis of two different traditions concerning Simon, the absence of Helena from both *Acts* and *ActPt* certainly stands out, for it means that she is absent from both texts which belonged to the tradition according to which Simon was primarily a magician.

Before drawing some conclusions regarding the character of Helena, there is another text that needs to be taken into consideration, namely, the *Pseudo-Clementine Literature*. This name is used to indicate two works, the *Recognitiones* and the *Homilies*, whose authorship was traditionally attributed to Clement of Rome. Just as the *ActPt*, their plot is centred on the literary *topos* of Simon's rivalry with Peter. The nature and the date of composition of these works have been discussed at length by recent scholarship without arriving at a definitive conclusion. Both works were originally written in Greek; however, whereas *Hom*'s text has been recovered in the original language, *Rec* survived only in the Latin translation of Rufinus.⁵⁴ Jones has recently published many articles on this subject, theorising that both *Rec* and *Hom* derived from a common Jewish-Christian source, the alleged *Periodoi Petrou*,⁵⁵ and that they were composed at the beginning of the fourth century. Despite Jones' mention of a possible influence of Marcionism, I think he has not underlined properly the highly Gnostic features of these texts, especially that of *Hom*. For instance, some of the speeches pronounced by Peter – especially his exegesis of the first

⁵² Ferreiro (2005a).

⁵³ To this regard I agree utterly with Luttikhuisen (1998).

⁵⁴ For a complete survey of manuscripts and versions of *Pseudo-Clementine Literature* see Jones (2012), 8-20.

⁵⁵ Also known as *Kerigma Petri*. For more details on this text, see Vinzent (1999); Jones (2012), 8-49; Reed (2018).

chapter of Genesis – have a strong Gnostic aftertaste.⁵⁶ In addition, the highly apocalyptic tone of the *Pseudo-Clementine* has not been underlined adequately; the latter is essential for understanding the representation of Helena.⁵⁷ As a matter of fact, the texts present many elements that come from the Jewish apocalyptic tradition,⁵⁸ as well as many others that belong to the Hellenistic one.⁵⁹ It is therefore likely that they were written in a widely syncretistic environment, where different religious traditions were strictly intertwined.

Despite their late redaction, *Pseudo-Clementine Literature* is a precious source for Simon Magus and Helena. In both *Rec* and *Hom*, Simon claimed to be a god⁶⁰ and he made his followers call him the ‘Standing One’,⁶¹ for he could not fall into corruption; as a god, he was not of this world but he had chosen to ‘appear as a man among men’ only to save Helena,⁶² who is once more associated with Helena of Troy.⁶³ Secondly, Simon openly professed his polytheism, affirming the existence of a multitude of gods, which were governed by a superior God of gods.⁶⁴ Thirdly, Simon expressed a very harsh evaluation of Jewish Law, which was typical of most Gnostic movements.⁶⁵ Lastly, he was convinced that Jesus was not the superior God, for the superior God revealed himself to ‘whom he wished’ from the beginning of times.⁶⁶

⁵⁶ It is important to underline that *Hom* present more Gnostic element than the *Rec*. For an example of Gnostic speeches see the one pronounced by Peter in *Hom* III, 22-28.

⁵⁷ In the apocalyptic tradition, the feminine is often represented in a highly negative form – that is, in a very similar manner to Peter’s speech in *Hom* III, 22-28. This passage will be discussed later more in details.

⁵⁸ For instance, both *Rec* and *Hom* inherited the myth of the fallen angels that finds its roots in the apocalyptic trends of Judaism, see *Rec* I, 29 and IV, 26; *Hom* VII, 13-20. This example shows the familiarity of the author with the *BWatch* and the *Enl*. For a more detailed account of these apocalyptic tradition see Stroumsa (1984).

⁵⁹ For instance, the astrological digressions of *Rec* IX-X.

⁶⁰ *Rec* II, 14 and III, 45-47.

⁶¹ *Rec* II, 6 and *Hom* II, 22.

⁶² *Rec* II, 14.

⁶³ *Hom* II, 25. It is worth remembering that such association had already been made in Hippolytus, *El* VI, 19, 1.

⁶⁴ *Rec* II, 40-45 and *Hom* III, 38. Interestingly, in *Rec* II, 47, Simon proposes an interpretation of *Mt* 11:27 according to which even Jesus acknowledged the existence of a superior God. In addition, in *Hom* XVI, 6, Simon wants to prove that the OT declares the existence of more than one God.

⁶⁵ For instance, in *Rec* II, 39.

⁶⁶ In *Hom* XVII, 4, Simon pronounced the following speech: ‘But Jesus, the teacher of Peter himself, came and said, “No one knew the Father except the Son, as no one knoweth even the Son except the Father, and those to whom the Son may wish to reveal Him.” If, then, it was the Son himself who was present, it was from the time of his appearance that he began to reveal to

Notwithstanding the many Gnostic features attributed to Simon, the portrayal of Helena is, once again, one of the most compelling arguments used to uncover his identity. In both *Rec* and *Hom*, the story of Simon and Helena is intertwined with the story of Simon and Dositheus, a rival magician.⁶⁷ At a first glance, the reader could be floored by the combination of the two stories; however, I believe that this responds to a precise narrative intent. In order to understand the author's reasons, it is necessary to analyse in more detail the narrative plot, for each element reveals additional information regarding Helena. John the Baptist, who was the founder of the movement to which Simon and Dositheus belonged, had thirty favourite disciples and Helena was close to this selected circle:⁶⁸ 'For after that John the Baptist was killed [...] when Dositheus had broached his heresy, with thirty other chief disciples, and one woman, who was called Luna [Moon].'⁶⁹ After John's death, Dositheus was designated leader of the sect. Being utterly dissatisfied with Dositheus' leadership and believing that he possessed a superior power, Simon decided to take over the leadership of the movement. In *Rec*, one of the reasons that pushed Simon to replace Dositheus was indeed the love for Helena:

But not long after he fell in love with that woman whom they call Luna;
and he confided all things to us as his friends: how he was a magician,
and how he loved Luna, and how, being desirous of glory, he was
unwilling to enjoy her ingloriously, but that he was waiting patiently till

those to whom he wished, Him who was unknown to all. And thus the Father was unknown to all who lived before him, and could not thus be He who was known to all.'

⁶⁷ For the story of Simon and Helena see *Rec* II, 8-9 and 12; *Hom* II, 23 and 25.

⁶⁸ The two texts disagree concerning Simon's affiliation to the sect: whilst in *Rec* II, 8 Simon was admitted in the group of thirty by Dositheus after John's death, in *Hom* II, 23 Simon was already among the thirty when John was alive; he was supposed to be the successor of John, but Dositheus was elected by his fellow disciples through a fraudulent stratagem. To deepen the role of John the Baptist within Gnosticism, see for instance what Heracleon said in his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, whose fragments can be found in Origen, *ComJn* VI, 20-21.

⁶⁹ *Rec* II, 8: *Iterfecto etenim, [...], baptista Iohanne, cum Dositheum et haereseos suae inisset exordium cum aliis triginta principalibus discipulis et una muliere quae Luna vocitata est*. The texts give two different versions regarding Helena's affiliation to John's sect: whereas *Hom* II, 23 listed Helena among John's thirty favourite disciples (albeit it is specified that she counted as 'half a man'); in *Rec* she was listed in addition to John's thirty disciples. Anyhow, it is noteworthy that both texts insisted on the importance of the number thirty, which is the same number of aeons of the Valentinian Pleroma. In the *Recognitiones*, Helena is called with the name of Luna, and I will propose an explanation of this unusual name in the following paragraphs.

he could enjoy her honourably; yet so if we also would conspire with him towards the accomplishment of his desires.⁷⁰

In order to accomplish his desire to possess Helena, he had to discredit Dositheus, so much so that the story continues with the narration of Simon's magical fight against Dositheus. Why was Dositheus an obstacle towards the Simon's honourable union with Helena? Although it is not explicitly stated in the text, it seems logical to conclude that Simon could not enjoy the company of Helena 'honourably' because she was Dositheus' lover. As a matter of fact, a few paragraphs later the author specified:

Therefore, after the death of Dositheus, Simon took Luna to himself; and with her he still goes about, as you see, deceiving multitudes, and asserting that he himself is a certain power which is above God the Creator, while Luna, who is with him, has been brought down from the higher heavens, and that she is Sophia, the Mother of All Things, for whom, says he, the Greeks and barbarians contending, were able in some measure to see an image of her; but of herself, as she is, as the dweller with the first and only God, they were wholly ignorant.⁷¹

But Simon is going about in company with Helena, and even till now, as you see, is stirring up the people. And he says that he has brought down this Helena from the highest heavens to the world; being queen, as the all-bearing being, and Sophia, for whose sake, says he, the Greeks and barbarians fought, having before their eyes but an image of truth; for she, who really is the truth, was then with the chiefest god. Moreover, by cunningly explaining certain things of this sort, made up from Grecian myths, he deceives many; especially as he performs many signal marvels,

⁷⁰ Rec II, 9: *Sed hic non multo post incidit in amorem mulieris illius quam Lunam vocant, nobisque utpote familiaribus suis omnia concredebat, quod magus esset et quod amaret Lunam quodque gloriae cupidus nollet ea inglorious frui, sed exspectaret patienter donec honeste ea uti liceret, sit amen etiam nos conspiremus ei ad omnia quae velit.*

⁷¹ Rec II, 12: *Igitur post obitum Dosithei Simon accepit Lunam, cum qua usque ad praesens circuit, ut videtis, decipiens turbas et adserens semetipsum quidem virtutem esse quamdam, quae sit super conditorem deum, Lunam vero quae secum est, esse de superioris caelis deductam, eandemque cuctorum genetricem adserit esse sapientiam, pro qua, inquit, Graeci et barbari confligentes imaginem quidem eius aliqua ex parte videre potuerunt, ipsam vero, ut est, penitus ognorarunt, quipped quae appud illum primum omnium et solum habitaret deum.*

so that if we did not know that he does these things by magic, we ourselves should also have been deceived.⁷²

At first glance this account might appear quite bare; however a closer look discovers many ‘hidden’ elements. For instance, the number thirty is worthy of deeper analysis since even the text explicitly suggests that ‘this might be without a dispensational significance’.⁷³ The number thirty is indeed a key number for Gnostic cosmology for it is the number that constitutes the fullness of the divine Pleroma in Irenaeus’ account of the Valentinian gnosis.⁷⁴ According to Gnostic cosmologies, this is also the number of archons who dwelled in the inferior world and were commanded by the chief archon, Yaldabaoth.⁷⁵ It is then plausible to hypothesise that the number thirty was symbolically referred to the archon, which is allegorically represented by the false ‘Standing One’, Dositheus, to whom Helena was bound before Simon’s liberation. Moreover, I believe that the appellative Luna, given to Helena, is a “clue” to uncover the real cosmological meaning of this passage.⁷⁶ Indeed, Helena’s appellative is related to her imperfection, for ancient tradition believed that the lunar cycle of twenty-eight days was not as perfect as the solar one.⁷⁷ Furthermore, Helena’s sexual promiscuity – thus her status of prostitute – equates her to the ‘prophetess’, which is one of the appellatives

⁷² *Hom* II, 25: ἐκεῖνου στάντος, αὐτὸς πεσὼν ἐτελεύτησεν. ὁ δὲ Σίμων τὴν Ἑλένην παραλαβὼν ἐκπεριέρχεται, καὶ μέχρι τοῦ δεῦρο, ὡς ὀρᾷς, ἀναστατεῖ τοὺς ὄχλους. αὐτὴν δὲ τὴν Ἑλένην ἀπὸ τῶν ἀνωτάτων οὐρανῶν κατενηνοχέει λέγει τῷ κόσμῳ, κυρίαν οὖσαν, ὡς παμμήτορα οὐσίαν καὶ σοφίαν, ἧς ἕνεκεν (φησὶν) Ἕλληνες τε καὶ βάρβαροι ἐμαχέσαντο, εἰκόνα φαντασθέντες ἀληθείας· ἡ γὰρ ὄντως οὖσα τότε παρὰ τῷ πρωτίστῳ ὑπῆρχεν θεῶ. πλὴν τοιαῦτά τινα Ἑλληνικοῖς μύθοις συνπεπλασμένα πιθανῶς ἀλληγορῶν ἀπατᾷ πολλοὺς, ἐξαιρέτως πολλὰ τερατώδη θαυμάσια ποιῶν, ὡς, εἰ μὴ ᾔδειμεν ὅτι μαγεία ταῦτα ποιεῖ, ἡπατήθημεν ἂν καὶ αὐτοί.

⁷³ *Hom* II, 23: ‘As the Lord had twelve apostles, bearing the number of the twelve months of the sun, so also he, John, had thirty chief men, fulfilling the monthly reckoning of the moon, in which number was a certain woman called Helena, that not even this might be without a dispensational significance. For a woman, being half a man, made up the imperfect number of the triacontad; as also in the case of the moon, whose revolution does not make the complete course of the month.’

⁷⁴ See Irenaeus, *AdHaer.* I, 3, 2; Hippolytus, *El* VI, 31; see also Epiphanius, *Pan* I, 31, 5-6.

⁷⁵ The Demiurge made the world as faded copy of the world above, see Irenaeus, *AdHaer.* I, 5, 1.

⁷⁶ Interestingly, Lettieri (2008), 107 notes the wordplay in Greek (Σελήνη/Ελήνη) and, more importantly, the connection between the name Luna and the pagan goddess of Samaritan apocalyptic tradition.

⁷⁷ I have already mentioned *Hom* II, 23 where it is said that Helena is the imperfect as the lunar cycle, which means she is only ‘half a man’.

given to Eve⁷⁸ in the *Pseudo-Clementine*. The prophetess is an extremely negative character who acts as follows:

Wherefore, stealing the seeds of the male and sowing them with her own seeds of the flesh, she brings forth the fruits—that is, words—as wholly her own. And she promises that she will give the present earthly riches as a dowry, wishing to change the slow for the swift, the small for the greater. However, she, not only presuming to say and to hear that there are many gods, but also believing herself to be one, and in hope of being that which she had not a nature to be, and throwing away what she had, and as a female being in her courses at the offering of sacrifices, is stained with blood; and then she pollutes those who touch her.⁷⁹

As long as Helena is not united with the male element, she can only dwell in the temporary world, in the material and fleeting world.⁸⁰ Only abandoning this shameful condition and uniting with Simon, she regains the rightful in the

⁷⁸ *Hom* III, 22-23: ‘But a companion was created along with him [Adam], a female nature, much differing from him, as quality from substance, as the moon from the sun, as fire from light. She, as a female ruling the present world as her like, was entrusted to be the first prophetess, announcing prophecy with all amongst those born of woman. But the other, as the son of man, being a male, prophesies better things to the world to come as a male. Let us then understand that there are two kinds of prophecy: the one male; and let it be defined that the first, being the male, has been ranked after the other in the order of advent; but the second, being female, has been appointed to come first in the advent of the pairs. This second, therefore, being amongst those born of woman, as the female superintendent of this present world, wishes to be thought masculine.’

⁷⁹ *Hom* III, 23-24: διὸ κλέπτουσα τὰ τοῦ ἄρσενος σπέρματα καὶ τοῖς ἰδίοις τῆς σαρκὸς σπέρμασιν ἐπισκέπουσα ὥς ὅλα ἴδια συνεκφέρει τὰ γεννήματα, τουτέστιν τὰ ῥήματα. καὶ τὸν παρόντα ἐπίγειον πλοῦτον ὥς προῖκα δώσειν ἐπαγγέλλεται, τῷ ταχεῖ <τὸ βραδύ>, τὸ βραχὺ τῷ μείζονι ὑπαλλάξαι θέλουσα. πολλοὺς μέντοι θεοὺς λέγειν καὶ ἀκούειν οὐμόνον τολμῶσα, ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτὴ γενέσθαι πιστεύουσα, καὶ ἐλπίδι τοῦ γενέσθαι ὃ μὴ ἔχει φύσιν καὶ ὃ ἔχει προσπολλύουσα, καὶ ὥς θήλεια <ἐν> ἐνμηνίοις γινομένη προφάσει θυσιῶν αἰμάσσεται καὶ οὕτως τοὺς ψαύοντας αὐτῆς μολύνει.

⁸⁰ The text continues in *Hom* III, 24-27: ‘But when she conceives and brings forth temporary kings, she stirs up wars, shedding much blood; and those who desire to learn truth from her, by telling them all things contrary, and presenting many and various services, she keeps them always seeking and finding nothing, even until death. For from the beginning a cause of death lies upon blind men; for she, prophesying deceit, and ambiguities, and obliquities, deceives those who believe her. [...] The male is wholly truth, the female wholly falsehood. But he who is born of the male and the female, in some things speaks truth, in some falsehood. For the female, surrounding the white seed of the male with her own blood, as with red fire, sustains her own weakness with the extraneous supports of bones, and, pleased with the temporary flower of flesh, and spoiling the strength of the judgment by short pleasures, leads the greater part into fornication, and thus deprives them of the coming excellent bridegroom. For every person is a bride, whenever, being sown with the true Prophet’s whole word of truth, he is enlightened in his understanding.’ It would be utmost interesting to investigate the representation of the feminine in the *Pseudo-Clementine* literature. Unfortunately, for the sake of brevity, the present work is exclusively focus on the representation of Helena.

‘higher heaven’ with Simon. Her condition is not ‘inglorious’ only for Simon, but also for her, who is prostituting herself with someone unworthy of her higher status, thus indulging her inferior female nature. In other words, before being reunited with Simon, Helena is merely an ‘image of truth’ – where ‘image’ platonically means ‘faded copy’ – whereas she is ‘really the truth’ only once she is ‘with the chiefest God’.⁸¹ Only after Simon defeats the false god, they can be proclaimed and acknowledged as a divine couple: ‘God the Creator’ and ‘Sophia’.⁸² It is worth noting that the various appellatives attributed to Helena – ‘Mother of All things’, ‘All-bearing being’, ‘Truth’, etc. – corresponds to the ones attributed to her by previous accounts. I believe the elements presented in *Rec* and *Hom* make a good case regarding the Gnostic nature of Simon and Helena.

IV.1.4 Concluding Remarks on Helena

The sources about Helena raise many questions: why is she absent from the accounts of *Acts* and *ActPt*?⁸³ How is it possible to explain such a multi-faceted Gnostic feminine imagery at the middle of the first century? Was Helena a historical character or was she a heresiological construct fashioned to discredit Simon? Helena’s absence from two accounts of *Acts* and *ActPt* is indeed puzzling. From a chronological perspective, *Acts* is the closest source to the half of the first century and it is also the one that does not mention Helena at all. In addition, both *Acts* and the *ActPt* are openly hostile to Simon, thus mentioning his illicit love relationship would have certainly strengthened their case. Moreover, another question arises: since the *ActPt* were composed approximately at the same time as Justin’s *ApPr*, why do they not mention Simon’s lover? I believe the only solution to this conundrum is to acknowledge the fact that Helena is a heresiological construct, a custom-fitted character fashioned by Justin and then embraced by the following heresiological

⁸¹ *Hom* II, 25.

⁸² *Rec* II, 12.

⁸³ For more information on women in Acts, see Arlandson (1997). It is also worth noting that feminist scholars have noted a tendency to downplay women’s importance in Luke’s works, see Richter Reimer (1995).

writers.⁸⁴ A few decades later, the author of the *Pseudo-Clementine* literature, whether he was building on the *Periodoi Petrou* or not, inserted the story of Helena in his work, for it fitted perfectly both its narrative and its literary purposes.

In addition, this hypothesis explains the narrative gap in the heresiological accounts and in the *Pseudo-Clementine*. According to their descriptions, originally Helena was the first aeon produced by the First God, Simon ‘power of God’.⁸⁵ As such, she was dwelling in the Pleroma, but she fell out of it into the lower regions, where the archons were dwelling.⁸⁶ Once she had fallen, she was trapped by these evil powers and reduced into slavery. Moreover, when dwelling in the material world, she was forced to assume material bodies, the last of which was that of a prostitute from Tyre. At last, Simon ‘First God’, who also assumed a material appearance, found her and restored her to her original divine status. Notwithstanding the fact that the story is quite detailed, it never mentions the reason why Helena fell out of the Pleroma. I believe that the only explanation for such an omission is that the heresiologists, and consequently the author of *Rec* and *Hom*, were implicitly overlapping the story of Helena with the story of Sophia’s fall. From an heresiological perspective, it was not necessary to explain the cause of her fall because the comparison with Sophia was evident. As a matter of fact, the heresiological narrative projected so many features of Sophia on Helena that it is almost possible to establish a systematic comparison between the two characters. Interestingly, since Helena groups together all aspects of feminine imagery – for she is the feminine in the Godhead, the fallen divine being and the carnal woman – her portrayal also borrowed features from other Gnostic female characters, such as Barbelo or

⁸⁴ On the contrary, Scopello (2000) does believe that the stories about Helena are true; whereas Lettieri (2008), 106 believes that ‘ad Elena non può essere riconosciuta alcuna reale consistenza storica, interpretandola come l’incarnazione polemica della demonizzazione apocalittica del messia rivale proiettata dalla missione giudeo-cristiana in Samaria sul Simone attestatoci da *Acts* 8 e, a mio avviso, da *Gv* 4, oltre che da un importante testo di Giuseppe Flavio.’

⁸⁵ As his Ennoia, she would be involved in the creation of other aeons that dwell in the high regions, see Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 23, 2.

⁸⁶ The sources disagree on whether she is involved in the creation of the evil powers that dwell in the lower regions, see Epiphanius, *Pan* I, 21, 2, 4.

Eve.⁸⁷ Anyway, this only strengthens the case that she was custom-fitted to respond to a precise design. Furthermore, this hypothesis solves the problem of admitting the existence of such complex feminine imagery in the second half of the first century. Indeed, there is no evidence of any Gnostic mythology around the middle of the first century. It is far more likely that several elements were borrowed from other female Gnostic characters and projected onto Helena by the heresiologists. The more complex the Gnostic mythology became (as in the case of Hippolytus or Epiphanius), the more complex the portrayal of Helena was. It is not a coincidence that, following the chronological order of the heresiological accounts, the character of Helena became more and more complex, adding always further details to her description. Be that as it may – that is, whether she was or was not a real woman – it does not change the fact that heresiologists superimposed Gnostic features onto her in order to build their case against Simon. As a matter of fact, I believe that the syzygy Simon-Helena is a heresiological construct fashioned in order to make Simon a more credible Gnostic teacher. In this sense, the character of Helena assumes an important value for this research, since it represents an example of how significant and inescapable the feminine is for Gnostic mythology. In order to present a valuable and credible Gnostic teacher, the opponents of Gnosticism felt the need to match him with a female character without whom their story would not have been entirely credible.

⁸⁷ This convergence of many characters in one has been unconsciously noticed by Epiphanius, *Pan* I, 21, 2, 2-4: ‘He [Simon] had the nerve to call the whore who was his partner the Holy Spirit, and said that he had come down on her account. He said, “I was transformed in each heaven in accordance with the appearance of the inhabitants of each, so as to pass my angelic powers by unnoticed and descend to Ennoia to this woman, likewise called Prunicus and Holy Spirit, through whom I created the angels. But the angels created the world and men. But this woman is the ancient Helen on whose account the Trojans and Greeks went to war.”’

IV.2 The *Book of Baruch* of the Gnostic Teacher Justin

The *Book of Baruch* of the Gnostic teacher Justin represents a peculiar case in early Christian literature.⁸⁸ Studying this Gnostic text means facing a double mystery: on the one hand, Justin, the author of the book, is no more than a name among many Gnostic teachers; on the other hand, the authorship of the *El*, the book in which this text is bequeathed to us, is still contested. Hence, *Bar* represents a fascinating tangle of historical problems that are still waiting for a solution.

Besides being an intriguingly obscure text, this Gnostic book represents also a valuable source for the study of Gnostic feminine imagery, since it portrays a female character – namely, Edem – whose characteristics do not fit into a specific Gnostic movement but rather constitute a unique case. The author of *El* classified *Bar* among Sethian or Ophite works.⁸⁹ This classification has been widely accepted by scholars since the myth presents some elements proper to the Ophite and Sethian movements, the most striking of which is the presence of the angel Naas.⁹⁰ However, by contrast with previous studies on this topic, my analysis will show that Edem, as well as *Bar*'s nuptial imagery, presents strong Valentinian elements.

For the sake of clarity, I will here summarise briefly the plot. Elohim and Edem are two unbegotten divine principles that, together with the Good One, form the Gnostic Pleroma of Justin's system. The Good One is a transcendent deity who possesses foreknowledge and unknowability. Elohim is the inferior pneumatic male divinity, who is unknowable and invisible, but does not possess foreknowledge and is unaware of the existence of a higher pneumatic divinity. Edem is instead a psychic and hylic female principle, described as half woman and half viper. After having introduced all the deities, the myth focuses on the vicissitudes that happened when Elohim and Edem become enamoured

⁸⁸ *Bar* occupies part of the fifth book of Hippolytus' *El* V, 26, 1 – V, 27, 5.

⁸⁹ Regarding the distinction between Sethian and Ophite myths, see Hippolytus, *El* V, 1-27; Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 29-30.

⁹⁰ Simonetti (1999), 87-101.

of each other and begot the world out of their mutual pleasure. The intra-divine crisis which is common to Gnostic myths is here represented by Elohim's decision to abandon Edem in the world they created to return to the pneumatic regions of heaven, to which he truly belongs because of his nature. Having failed to bring Elohim back to her side, Edem unleashes her fury over the creation, particularly against the spirit of Elohim which is trapped in human beings. Moved by the suffering of his offspring, Elohim sends Baruch, his third angel, to save those spiritual parts of him that are trapped in the world. After a series of unsuccessful attempts, Baruch entrusts his message to Jesus, thus achieving the salvation for spiritual humankind.

The Gnostic myth described in *Bar* is unique within Gnosticism for it is centred on two divine characters, Elohim and Edem, who do not appear in any other Gnostic system. Indeed, neither the vicissitudes of Elohim and Edem are mentioned elsewhere, nor is the story of the redeemer Baruch told in other Gnostic books. Moreover, none of the other Gnostic teachers ever attributed such importance to the pact (συνθήκη) of the syzygy (συζυγία),⁹¹ showing that the nuptial imagery is not a mere rhetorical expedient, but rather the core of Justin's speculation.

In this chapter, I will explore in depth the feminine imagery of *Bar*. This analysis aims at shedding some light on this text by using the feminine imagery as a major indicator of its affiliation to Gnosticism.⁹² Being a highly syncretistic work, *Bar* should be understood as drawing elements not only from ancient religious and philosophical traditions, but also from different trends within Gnosticism. Against the predominant scholarly trend, which

⁹¹ In truth, the word συζυγία is not explicitly used by Hippolytus to indicate the union of Edem and Elohim. Nevertheless, the term σύζυγος is used several times to indicate both of them individually, hence making a συζυγία of the couple.

⁹² It is worth underlining that, given the polemical nature of the *El*, a certain caution is necessary in analysing the text of *Bar* in the form bequeathed by the author. Unfortunately, in the present case, Hippolytus' account is the only version available of the text. Regarding Hippolytus' trustworthiness as a source for Gnosticism, see Vallée (1981), 51-62. In addition, Buckley (1985a), 329 cleverly highlights that Hippolytus uses some key words when he wants to quote directly from a source, as he does in the case of *Bar*.

understands *Bar* as an Ophite/Sethian work,⁹³ this chapter will argue that this book might be better understood if it were read also in light of Valentinian doctrines, using the feminine and bridal imagery as primary focus. Therefore, I will systematically reference Valentinian sources to underline similar theologoumena and mythologoumena between Valentinianism and *Bar*. In order to prove my point, I will firstly discuss the identity of the author of *El*, thus suggesting that the text was circulating in Rome, where there was a prominent Valentinian circle. Secondly, I will investigate the role and functions of the female character Edem and of the syzygy. Lastly, I will explore the theological and eschatological consequences of the intra-divine fracture caused by the separation of the syzygy.

IV.2.1 The Identities of Hippolytus and Justin

It is not the purpose of this chapter to debate the *Hippolytusfrage*, but it is important to clarify those issues that have direct impact on my research, namely the *El*'s date of composition and its place of circulation.

Although many researches have dealt with this topic, the most exhaustive and conclusive work on the figure of Hippolytus is that by Simonetti.⁹⁴ He successfully used the cultural background and the ecclesiology of *El* to cast some light on the author's identity. First of all, he proposed to distinguish between Hippolytus, the oriental author of the *Against Noetus*, and Hippolytus, active in Rome at the beginning of the third century, who seems to be the

⁹³ I will mention here only the most significant contributors: Haenchen (1953); Grant (1954); Simonetti (1954) and (1999), 87-101; Van den Broek (1973) and (2003); Olander (1978); Buckley (1985a); Marcovich (1988a).

⁹⁴ See Simonetti (2011) and Loi – Simonetti (1977). Simonetti is hardly the first scholar to question the authorship of *El*, but he is certainly one of the most authoritative. The traditional attribution of the *El* to Hippolytus of Rome depends on a list of works found on a statue of Hippolytus discovered in the catacomb of Via Tiburtina in Rome in 1551; among the texts mentioned, the most famous was his *Against Noetus*. The first scholar to formulate the hypothesis of two Hippolytus living in Rome was Nautin (1953), thus rejecting Harnack's suggestion about the existence of only one Hippolytus, see Harnack (1855). A significant contribution to the *Hippolytusfrage* was also given by Brent, especially Brent (2011), who also explores archaeological evidence to support his hypothesis about the identity of the author. For an outline of the scholarship about the author of the *El*, see Cerrato (2002) and Aragione – Norelli (2011).

author of *El*.⁹⁵ Secondly, he concluded that the author of *El*, who might indeed have been named Hippolytus, corresponded to the one of the *Περὶ παντός* and *Συναγωγή χρόνων καὶ ἐτῶν*. These three works show indeed a similar interest in pagan philosophy, which constituted a peculiarity of Hippolytus' work.⁹⁶ Moreover, Simonetti's analysis highlighted how much the unknown author was close to the intellectual positions of the Alexandrian theologians, particularly Origen and Clement.⁹⁷ From his investigation, Simonetti deduced three main elements that could cast light on the author's identity: a) The author of *El* had a broad knowledge of pagan philosophies, whereas his education in the Scriptures was not equally advanced; b) it is likely that he was active in Rome, since he gave a detailed account of the ecclesiological discussions that inflamed the Roman elites; and c) his work was probably marginalised in the Roman community because of its ecclesiological perspective, as well as for the choice of the language, since using Greek was considered a proof of elitism and conservatism.⁹⁸

The identity of the Gnostic teacher Justin is no less of a mystery. One of the few attempts to reconstruct the identity of this author has been carried out by Van de Broek, who placed Justin in Alexandria, emphasising his syncretism and his Jewish Christian background.⁹⁹ His hypothesis is grounded on two main assumptions: a) the dependence of Justin's representation of Edem as a *μιξοπάρθενος* on Isis-Thermouthis, a half woman and half viper Egyptian goddess; b) the fact that Justin's strong syncretistic attitude and his knowledge

⁹⁵ See Simonetti (2000), 88-139 where he summarised his remarks on the *Hippolytusfrage*. He hypothesised the existence of three different figures: 1. The writer Hippolytus, author of *Against Noetus* (mentioned by Jerome and Eusebius), who was active in the oriental regions between the end of the second and the beginning of the third century; 2. The Roman Hippolytus, author of *El*, who was active during the first years of the third century and probably opposed both popes (Zephyrinus and Callistus); 3. The presbyter and martyr Hippolytus, who was worshipped in Rome and Porto.

⁹⁶ In this regard, see also Mansfeld (1992).

⁹⁷ Simonetti makes explicitly reference to the Logos theology, see Simonetti (2011), 262-267.

⁹⁸ See Simonetti (2011), 273, where he concluded: 'se coglie nel segno la nostra ipotesi circa il tentativo esperito dall'autore di *Elenchos* di prolungare o risuscitare, a fronte dell'ormai prevalente struttura gerarchica episcopale, quella presbiteriale di prima, potenziandone l'inevitabile tendenza centrifuga, questa caratteristica completa il quadro di una personalità di rilievo, la cui formazione culturale fuori dell'ordinario ebbe a tradursi in un'attività di pensiero e di azione non al passo con i rapidi mutamenti che allora modificavano a fondo quasi ogni aspetto della vita della comunità, e perciò destinata a esiti largamente fallimentari'.

⁹⁹ See Van Den Broek (1973), 42-44 and (2003), 282-287. The syncretistic nature of Justin's book has also been highlighted by Marchovich (1988).

of Greek mythology suited well the cultural elites of Alexandria. Notwithstanding that the cultural milieu of Alexandria might indeed be the ideal origin for the unusual mythology of *Bar*, Van den Broek's hypothesis cannot find additional corroboration due to the scarcity of information about Justin. Indeed, the book's mythology is the only source of information available and it does not provide definitive clues to help the historical investigation. Therefore, the social context in which *Bar* was circulating is equally indefinite. The author of *El* informs us that this book was held 'in high esteem' (ἐνδόξου)¹⁰⁰ by Justin's followers, who were described by him as an organised and structured group. Moreover, the author of *El* mentions some ritual practices; for instance, they were obliged to swear an oath in order to be introduced to the mysteries of the Good One, reproducing typologically the oath sworn by their Father Elohim when he entered the superior world. In addition, it is likely that this initiatory ritual included a baptismal moment in which the participants drank the 'pneumatic waters' in order to be purified.¹⁰¹ Concerning this ritual practice, it is worth noting that the ritual of baptism is a key element of Valentinianism, thus providing a first element of proximity between Justin's followers and this Gnostic school.¹⁰² In my attempt to provide a new interpretation of *Bar*, I will build on Simonetti's findings regarding the author of *El*, thus assuming that the works of the Gnostic teacher Justin were known in Rome at the beginning of the third century.

IV.2.2 Edem: the Double-Minded μιζοπάρενος

The unbegotten principles of everything are presented as follows:

This is what he says: there were three unborn principles in the universe; two male, and one female. One of the male principles is called "Good One". He alone is called this, and he foreknows all things. The other is called "Father" of generated beings. He does not foreknow, nor is he

¹⁰⁰ Hippolytus, *El* V, 24, 2.

¹⁰¹ Hippolytus, *El* V, 27, 1-4. Buckley (1985a), 337-338 conducts an interesting analysis of these ritual practices, identifying two ritual stages: firstly, the believer took the oath, then, they perform an 'inner baptism', drinking the pneumatic waters.

¹⁰² For the importance of baptism in Valentinianism, see Thomassen (2006), 333-414.

known or seen. The female principle does not foreknow, is irascible, double-minded, and double-bodied – in all respects like the girl in Herodotos’ story. She is like a young woman as far as the groin, but a viper below, as Justin says. She is called “Eden” and “Israel.” These, he says, are the principles of the universe, the roots and sources from which all existing reality came to be. There was nothing else at all.¹⁰³

The beginning of *Bar* presents an unusual “Trinity” quite different from any other Gnostic system. At a first glance, this pleromatic structure might be assimilated to the one of Irenaeus’ account of the Ophite system, which presents a First Man, a Second Man and a First Woman.¹⁰⁴ However, the comparison would be inaccurate for the roles and functions of *Bar*’s divine entities differ greatly from those of the pleromatic beings of Ophite accounts.¹⁰⁵ On the contrary, it is much more useful to compare it with Valentinian accounts. Firstly, while the First Man contributes to the generation of the Pleroma by emanating the Second Man, the Good One transcends utterly the creation and does not play any part in the generation of the world or of other pleromatic beings. Besides revealing a certain platonic concern for the transcendence of the highest divine entity, Justin’s reticence to involve the transcendent deity in the generation of the divine world might indicate the author’s awareness of the on-going Valentinian debate concerning the monadic or syzygial nature of the Pre-Father.¹⁰⁶ In this regard, Justin attempted to preserve the monadic and transcendent nature of the Father. Secondly, while the First Woman of the Ophite’s account, as presented by Irenaeus, was identified with the Holy Spirit and deemed consubstantial with the pneumatic First and Second Men, this is not the case of Edem. As a matter of fact, the female divine being of *Bar* does not belong to the same ontological nature of

¹⁰³ Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 1-2: Οὗτός φησιν· ἦσαν τρεῖς ἀρχαὶ τῶν ὅλων ἀγέννητοι, ἀρρενικαὶ δύο, θηλυκὴ μία. τῶν δὲ ἀρρενικῶν ἡ μὲν τις <ἀρχή> καλεῖται ἀγαθός, αὐτὸ μόνον οὕτως λεγόμενος, προγνωστικὸς τῶν ὅλων, ἡ δὲ ἑτέρα πατὴρ πάντων τῶν γεννητῶν, ἀπρόγνωστος <καὶ ἄγνωστος> καὶ ἀόρατος. ἡ δὲ θήλ(εια) ἀπρόγνωστος, ὀργίλη, διγνώμων, δισώμ<ατ>ος, κατὰ πάντα τῇ κατὰ τὸν Ἡροδότου μῦθον <κόρη> ἐμφορής, μέχρι βουβῶνος παρθένος, ἔχιδνα δὲ τὰ κάτω, ὥς φησιν Ἰουστίνος· καλεῖται δὲ Ἐδὲμ αὕτη ἡ κόρη καὶ Ἰσραήλ. αὗται, φησίν, <εἰσὶν> αἱ ἀρχαὶ τῶν ὅλων, ρίζαι καὶ πηγαὶ ἀφ’ ὧν τὰ ὄντα ἐγένετο· ἄλλο δὲ ἦν οὐδέν.

¹⁰⁴ In particular, Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 30, 1-2.

¹⁰⁵ See Simonetti (1954), 80-82.

¹⁰⁶ For the disagreements between Valentinian theologians, see Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 2, 4 and I, 11, 1; Hippolytus, *El* VI, 29, 2-3. This topic has already been addressed in *supra* III.2.

the male divinities, rather to an inferior one. Her inferiority is primarily deducible from her appearance, for her physical characteristics suggest an ambiguous nature: she is double-minded (διγνώμος) and, consequently, double-bodied (δισώματος) – that is, half a virgin and half a viper.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, the only feature that Edem and Elohim have in common is the deprivation of foreknowledge (ἀπρόγνωστος). Secondly, a further confirmation of her lowliness can be found in the Greek terminology used in reference to her throughout the book: while Elohim is endowed with πνεῦμα and therefore belongs to the lofty regions of heaven (τὰ ὑψηλὰ μέρη τοῦ οὐρανοῦ), Edem possesses only ψυχή, thus being classified as a soul-endowed being of psychic nature.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, having her some animal parts (θηριώδης μέρος), it seems reasonable to assume that she also partakes in the hylic nature. Thirdly, Edem possesses a proclivity towards passions – specifically ὀργίλη, ἐπιθυμία and λύπη¹⁰⁹ – which makes the contrast between her and the male beings even more noticeable.¹¹⁰ In this regard, it is worth noting some similarities between Edem and Sophia Achamot of the Valentinian myth, for the passions described by Justin are the same as the ones suffered by Sophia, the fallen female aeon, in other Valentinian accounts.¹¹¹ Just as Achamot, Edem is unable to restrain her passions and she is confined in the lower region of the cosmos. Nonetheless, it must be noted that the overlap between Edem and Achamot is not complete for they differ in two respects. On the one hand, Edem and Achamot have different natures since the former is a psychic being whilst the latter is a fallen pneumatic being. On the other hand, Edem is one of the unbegotten ‘roots and

¹⁰⁷ The unusual bodily composition of Edem has been discussed extensively within scholarship; see especially Haenchen, (1953), 125 and Van Den Broek (1973), 35-41. The former hypothesized that Edem’s body is derived from the depiction of the zodiacal sign of Virgo, whereas the latter highlighted the similarities between Edem and the Egyptian goddess Isis-Thermouthis. A third hypothesis was suggested by Marcovich (1988), 95-97 who claimed the most likely source for Edem’s representation is Herodotus’ μιζοπάρενος.

¹⁰⁸ Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 14.

¹⁰⁹ For the latter two passions, see Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 2-3 and V, 26, 19-20.

¹¹⁰ In this regard, it should be noted that Elohim is not entirely immune from passions since he experienced desire (ἐπιθυμία) towards Edem, see Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 2. Nonetheless, neither the intensity nor the variety of passions can be equated to those suffered by Edem.

¹¹¹ See *ApJohn* II, 13, 13-17; Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 4, 1. This proclivity towards passion suits perfectly the Valentinian myth, in which even the divine pneumatic nature is tainted by passions, albeit only in its lowest emanations. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that once the pneumatic nature has been tainted by passions, it cannot remain inside the Pleroma, but it must be expelled. This is indeed the reason for Sophia’s fall outside the Pleroma (Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 3-4). On the value of passions within Gnostic mythology, see Lettieri (1996).

sources from which all existing reality came to be' (ἀρχαὶ τῶν ὅλων, ῥίζαι καὶ πηγαὶ ἀφ' ὧν τὰ ὄντα ἐγένετο), whereas Ahamot resulted from Sophia Echmot being restricted in the Pleroma by the aeon named Limit. Lastly, I believe it is worth spending few words on the unbegotten nature of Edem. In most Gnostic accounts, female characters are born by generation or emission from a male being, usually the abyssal Father. On the contrary, Edem is here conceived as ἀγέννητος, thus becoming more similar to a pre-existent χώρα, a 'receptacle of all becoming' as in Plato's *Timaeus*.¹¹² Hence, every detail of this initial presentation of Edem suggests that she is a liminal being, dwelling with divine beings albeit she does not display any divine properties. In this respect, the name Ἰσραήλ is illuminating since it serves a double purpose: on the one hand, it identifies Edem with the bride of God; on the other hand, it implies she is the bride of God of the Old Testament that Gnostics considered inferior.

Nevertheless, Edem's ambiguous and liminal disposition does not prevent her from being the object of Elohim's desire (ἐπιθυμία); so much so that she is united with Elohim by mutual love (εἰς μίαν φιλίας εὐνοίαν), reciprocal desire and fertile love,¹¹³ and they constitute an eternal and unbreakable bond, a συζυγία.¹¹⁴ Before listing those elements that characterise this union as a syzygy, it is worth mentioning two important features which distinguish it from the usual Valentinian syzygy. On the one hand, Edem and Elohim constitute an impure syzygy since they belong to different natures, namely, the pneumatic and psychic ones. On the other hand, their union originated from a passion (ἐπιθυμία) and, as such, is tainted by irrationality. Despite these two elements, the syzygy maintains a strong normative value in *Bar*. Once again, the Greek text is revealing, for the choice of the word συνθήκη to describe the relation of the σύζυγοι clarifies the legal status of the union. Similarly, the comparison with the dowry suggests the legal pact constituted by the syzygy: as the law requires that women bring a dowry to their husbands, so Edem conferred all

¹¹² Plato, *Timaeus* 49 a5–6 or 52 a8–d3.

¹¹³ Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 2–3.

¹¹⁴ For the connection with the idea of ἱερὸς γάμος, see Marcovich (1988), 97–98.

her powers to Elohim when she married him.¹¹⁵ Indeed, the marriage between Edem and Elohim is τύπος of all human marriages, which imperfectly try to reproduce the rules established by the original marriage of these two divine entities.¹¹⁶ Hence, the syzygy constitutes an eternal and supreme law that regulates the generation of the entire cosmos and, insofar as Edem is united with Elohim in syzygy, her passions are restrained and she contributes actively to the creation, providing ψυχή to the creation.¹¹⁷ The celestial offspring of Elohim and Edem are twenty-four angels – twelve maternal angels and twelve paternal ones – and together they form the Garden of Heaven. Each of them is a tree: Baruch, third of the paternal angels, is the Tree of Life; whilst Naas, third of the maternal angels, is the Tree of Good and Evil. Both of them are extensions of their parents' powers, therefore they act in accordance with their will.¹¹⁸ After breaking of the syzygy, Baruch will be identified with the Redeemer, sent to free the trapped parts of Elohim's spirit; whereas Naas will be his antagonist, the evil angel who puts all his efforts in concealing the salvific message of Baruch. Edem's other angels are archontic figures that rule over the creation, being also responsible for evil times and diseases.¹¹⁹ However, before the intra-divine fracture caused by Elohim's decision to ascent, their dominion is harmoniously described as a circular dance (ἐν χορῶ κυκλικῶ).¹²⁰ The human offspring of the syzygy are Adam and Eve. Humankind occupies a special place in the world for it symbolises the unity and love between Edem and Elohim (σύμβολον τῆς ἐνότητος αὐτῶν καὶ εὐνοίας);¹²¹ they are seal (σφραγίς) and reminder (ὑπόμνημα) of the eternal

¹¹⁵ Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 10. The Greek text underlines the relation between divine event and human tradition by means of the words: θεῖον καὶ πατρικὸν νόμον.

¹¹⁶ I believe the use of a typological way of thinking is the main reason to classify this text as undoubtedly Gnostic. For the importance of typology within Gnosticism see Lettieri (2005) and (2011).

¹¹⁷ Moreover, she creates the beasts and the inferior beings that come from Edem's bestial part, see Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 7.

¹¹⁸ Simonetti even considers the actions of these angels as actions of Edem or Elohim themselves, Simonetti (1954).

¹¹⁹ See *Gen.* 2:9. For the angels as evil rulers of the world, see Daniélou (1970).

¹²⁰ Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 11-13. In the Greek philosophical tradition, the circular movement was generally used as symbol of the perfection and order of the κόσμος. In truth, the disposition of these angels is described as φειδωλός, but the passage is ambiguous since it could be interpreted that they act niggardly consequently to Elohim's betrayal.

¹²¹ Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 8. I would like to point out the multiple meanings of the word εὐνοία. It does not only give the idea of affection, but it has also a component of ontological goodness

union (αἰώνιος γάμος) between the spouses. Adam is εἰκὼν of Elohim, while Eve typologically represents Edem.¹²² As their “children”, they inherit something from each of their parents: from Elohim they receive the πνεῦμα, whereas from Edem they obtain the ψυχή. Once more, it is possible to observe that Edem’s contribution to humankind concerns her ἡμερος and ἀνθρωπέος parts; therefore, Adam and Eve inherited her nobler and better parts. Regarding the nature of humankind, Justin remarks twice that both Adam and Eve inherited ψυχή and πνεῦμα. As a consequence, Eve is paradoxically superior to her own mother, since she possesses the pneumatic nature of which Edem is devoid. Stating this, Justin explicitly equates the ontological status of the male and female sexes, recognising both as being potentially worthy of salvation.¹²³ The redeemable nature of the cosmos is confirmed by the Good One’s refusal to grant to Elohim the permission to destroy the world. After having experienced ‘what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived’ in the lofty regions of heaven,¹²⁴ Elohim wanted to destroy his creation for it was imperfect and his spirit, in the guise of men and women, was still trapped in it. However, when he asked the consent of the Good One, he denied him his permission, saying to Elohim: ‘You can do nothing harmful now that you are beside me, for from mutual pleasure you and Eden made the world. So let Eden have the creation as long as she wants. But you, remain by me’.¹²⁵ Since the world originated from the syzygial union, it has the potentiality to be redeemed and it cannot be destroyed.

Hence, the description of Edem up to the point of the creation of Adam and Eve seems to emphasise her mingled disposition, making her an ambivalent and paradoxical character. On the one hand, she is an unbegotten divine

in it. This word was especially used to refer to marriage and therefore it acquired a deeper meaning which is impossible to convey through the English word ‘love’.

¹²² Hippolytus, *El V*, 26, 9.

¹²³ See Hippolytus, *El V*, 26, 9 and *V*, 26, 25. It would certainly be interesting to investigate why Justin felt it necessary to reaffirm this idea twice, but I fear it would be more a mental exercise rather than a historical speculation. It is indeed probable such an elucidation was due to a common belief in the inferiority of the female sex. I fear it is an impossible task to determine whether it was used to contrast a peculiar or Gnostic tendency or common cultural belief.

¹²⁴ Hippolytus, *El V*, 26, 16.

¹²⁵ Hippolytus, *El V*, 26, 18: οὐδὲν δύνασαι κακοποιῆσαι παρ’ ἐμοὶ γενόμενος· ἐκ κοινῆς γὰρ εὐαρεστήσεως ἐποιήσατε τὸν κόσμον σύ τε καὶ ἡ Ἐδέμ· ἔασον οὖν τὴν Ἐδέμ ἔχειν τὴν κτίσιν μέχρι βούλεται.

principle who plays an essential role in the generation of the cosmos. On the other hand, she is a psychic being inclined to passions. In this regard, the identification of her angel Naas with both the Snake and the Tree of Good and Evil is revelatory, for it underlines the ambiguity of Edem. Therefore, Edem's role ought to be understood within the boundaries of the syzygy. Insofar as she is restrained by a male element, she actively contributes to the creation of the world by providing the psychic and material substratum of the cosmos and humans within it.

IV.2.3 Breaking the Syzygy: Celestial Disruption and Origin of Chaos

The role of Edem changes abruptly when an 'evil necessity' (ἀνάγκη τῆς κακίας) occurs:

The necessity of evil emerged from this type of cause. After he outfitted and fashioned the world from their mutual pleasure, Elohim decided to ascend to the heights of heaven and observe their contents, so that there might not be anything deficient among the beings of his creation. So, taking with him his own angels (he was naturally borne upward), he abandoned Eden below (for as earth, she did not want to accompany her spouse to the upper regions).¹²⁶

By deciding to move upwards, Elohim breaks the eternal law of the syzygy. In other Valentinian texts, this is formulated as: 'For this is the will of the Father: not to allow anything to happen in the Pleroma (πληρωμα) apart from a syzygy (συζυγος). Again, the will of the Father is: always produce and bear fruit (καρπος)' ¹²⁷ Being a mixed syzygy, Elohim and Edem cannot be part of the Pleroma and the syzygy has to break for the pneumatic nature to be reunited with the superior world, thus showing the paradoxical nature of an 'evil necessity'. Although the text does not explicitly mention this syzygial "law",

¹²⁶ Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 15: Γέγονε δὲ ἡ τῆς κακίας ἀνάγκη ἐκ τοιαύτης τινὸς αἰτίας· κατασκευάσας καὶ δημιουργήσας <ὁ> Ἐλωειμ ἐκ κοινῆς εὐαρεστήσεως τὸν κόσμον, ἀναβῆναι ἠθέλησεν εἰς τὰ ὑψηλὰ μέρη τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ θεάσασθαι μή τι γέγονε τῶν κατὰ τὴν κτίσιν ἐνδεές, συμπαραλαβὼν τοὺς ἰδίους ἀγγέλους μεθ' αὐτοῦ - ἦν γὰρ ἀνωφερής - <καὶ> καταλιπὼν τὴν Ἐδὲμ κάτω - γῆ γὰρ οὕσα ἐπακολουθεῖν ἄνω τῷ συζύγῳ ἐθέλουσα οὐκ <ἠδυνήθη>.

¹²⁷ *ExVal* XI, 36, 28-34.

Justin seems to be aware of the fact that breaking the syzygy constitutes an evil.¹²⁸ As in the previous case of the dowry, the commandment given to humankind to proliferate should be type of the events that happen in the superior world.¹²⁹ Nonetheless, such rupture is necessary for Elohim has to reunite with the superior world to which he belongs. Hence, this episode is indeed an ‘evil necessity’ that constitutes the beginning of evils in the world.¹³⁰

As in all Gnostic mythologies, the world is abandoned to an evil ruler; however, Justin seems to attribute Valentinian demiurgical features to both Elohim and Edem. The Gnostic teacher seems to suggest a correspondence between Elohim and the inferior God, the Demiurge, especially since Elohim discovered the existence of a higher divinity of whom he had previously ignored the existence as the Demiurge does in other Gnostic accounts. Furthermore, the monotheistic statement of Elohim resembles visibly the monotheistic claim of the Demiurge in other Gnostic accounts.¹³¹ Given these similarities, most scholars have identified Elohim with the Demiurge/Yaldabaoth.¹³² Nonetheless, I believe it is necessary to underline that, in *Bar*, the role usually attributed to the Demiurge is split between Elohim and Edem, who possesses the archontic dominion over the world. As Elohim, she is affected by ignorance and lack of foreknowledge: while Elohim did not recognise the existence of a superior God, Edem cannot know the pneumatic Elohim.¹³³ In addition, Edem and the Demiurge both belong to the psychic nature, which is indeed what prevents her from ascending towards the highest regions. In interpreting Edem’s inability to ascend, I am following Marcovich’s critical edition of the Greek text, thus amending both the English and Italian

¹²⁸ The idea that breaking the syzygy constitutes an evil is also expressed by Ptolemy’s rejection of the divorce in Ptolemy, *EpFl* in Epiphanius, *Pan* I, 33, 3, 5.

¹²⁹ Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 9.

¹³⁰ For the antinomian attitude of Gnostic texts, see Jonas (1963).

¹³¹ Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 15. For other accounts, see *ExTheod* 33; Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 5, 4; *ApJohn* II, 11, 20-22.

¹³² Simonetti is counted in this group, although he strongly stressed the differences with other representations of the Demiurge, see Simonetti (1954), 77-78.

¹³³ Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 37: “Israel has not known me,” he (Father) says, “for if she had known that I am with the Good, she would not have punished my spirit,” which is bound in humans on account of their Father’s ignorance.’

translations, where the verb δύναιμι is missing from the text.¹³⁴ This amendment adds in fact a very important element for the general understanding of Gnostic natures, which are here presented as consistent ontological categories, as some Valentinians did.¹³⁵

Consequently, I think that, in spite of her desire to be reunited with her spouse, Edem could not ascend to the lofty regions of heaven because of her psychic nature. Unable to reach her spouse upward and desperate because of his betrayal, Edem exercised her power over the earth as an evil demiurgic being. Having been left behind by Elohim and not being restrained by his presence, her mingled nature did not know any restraints and her actions were now driven by passions. She condemned Elohim's spirit that is in humans so that they would experience the same loss and betrayal that she felt when abandoned by Elohim; therefore, her angels unleashed evils over the earth, causing divorces, adulteries and pederasty. It is worth noting that the actions of her angel are a systematic subversion of the laws that regulate the union between men and women that had been established in the syzygial creation. Indeed, tainting (or attempting to taint) the purity of the creation by means of sexual crimes, as in the case of the illicit intercourse of Naas, is a typical feature of demiurgical will in Valentinian texts. Furthermore, the sexual nature of Edem's crimes resembles the archontic crimes described in *ApJohn* or *HypArch*,¹³⁶ where the archons try – more or less successfully – to defile many female characters, such as Eve or Norea. Moreover, the description of Edem's passionate and even lustful behaviour presents many similarities with female characters of Jewish and Gnostic apocalyptic literature.¹³⁷ The text associates her with a prostitute who distances herself from her spouse and wanders alone.¹³⁸ However, despite the fact that the prostitute-imagery is extremely common in Gnostic texts, this very image assumes here a unique meaning. One of the Nag Hammadi treatises, namely *ExSoul*, tells the story of a fallen pneumatic soul who has

¹³⁴ For the Italian translation, see Simonetti (1999), 93. For the English translation see Litwa (2016), 342-343.

¹³⁵ Concerning the three ontological natures in Valentinianism, see Simonetti (1966).

¹³⁶ See *ApJohn* I, 29, 16 – 30, 11; *HypArch* II, 89, 17-30 and 92, 19-32.

¹³⁷ To deepen the topic of apocalyptic literature in Valentinian and Sethian works, see Stroumsa (1984), 17-70; Attridge (2000); Lettieri (2017).

¹³⁸ Hippolytus, *El V*, 27, 4.

many lovers before she can finally be reunited with her rightful Spouse.¹³⁹ Contrariwise, in *Bar*, the imagery of prostitution is not used to describe the condition of the fallen pneumatic nature, rather the condition of a psychic primordial aeon. The psychic Edem, originally united in syzygy with her pneumatic match, is now abandoned to prostitute herself to her hylic side, thus further showing the crucial importance of the syzygy in this text. Hence, it would appear that Justin is attributing features and episodes usually referred to the Demiurge or Yaldabaoth in other Gnostic mythologies to Edem, and partly to Elohim.

Concerning the similarities with other Gnostic characters involved in the intra-divine rupture proper to Gnostic mythologies, Justin seems to draw an unusual comparison between Elohim and the Valentinian superior Sophia, namely the one who has been restored after the fall. In particular, Elohim could be associated with those accounts that identify Sophia's better self with Christ, such as the *ExVal* and *ExTheod* 32.¹⁴⁰ The peculiarity of these accounts consists in the fact that Christ is both Sophia's son and her better self. On the one hand, Elohim decided to ascend to the superior regions of heaven, abandoning Edem downward, just as Christ left his mother in the midst of shadows after she had brought him forth. On the other hand, Elohim has a lot in common also with the Sophia Echmot of the *GosPhil* and the *GN*.¹⁴¹ First, both Elohim and the Valentinian superior Sophia got involved in the generation of the inferior world because of their ignorance. As Elohim united with Edem because he was unaware of the Good One, some Valentinian accounts report that Sophia caused the rupture because she was ignorant of the Father.¹⁴² Secondly, they both contaminated their pneumatic nature with the inferior psychic nature: Elohim through his union with Edem and Sophia Echmot by generating the Demiurge. Thirdly, they both repented their actions and tried to amend their error; indeed, Sophia begged the Pleroma to rescue her whilst Elohim asked the

¹³⁹ This text will be analyzed in the following chapter, *infra* IV.3.

¹⁴⁰ *ExVal* XI, 33, 28 – 35, 37 and *ExTheod* 32, 1-3. This separation myth is also present in the *TriTrac*, where the character of Sophia is identified with the Logos, see *TriTrac* II, 77, 11 – 78, 20. For further information on the myth of separation in Valentinism, *supra* III.3.

¹⁴¹ *GosPhil* II, 60, 10-15 and Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 2, 2-5.

¹⁴² Some Valentinian accounts report that Sophia wanted to know the Abyssal Father, whilst other accounts claim that she was looking for a partner, see Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 3-4.

Good One to destroy the fruit of his union with Edem. Lastly, just as Sophia, Elohim was found culpable for the evils which occurred after his ascent. Although Elohim did not perform any evil deeds by ascending upwards where he belonged, his actions contributed – even though only indirectly – to generate evils that afflict humans. After he had broken the unbreakable law of the syzygy, Edem became *superbullientes*, to borrow Irenaeus' word.¹⁴³ Nonetheless, the reason for the intra-divine fracture is not found exclusively in Edem's disposition, for the text explains:

From this time on,¹⁴⁴ vices and virtues took hold of human beings. Both have a single source— the Father. For when he ascended to the Good One, the Father showed the way for those willing to rise, but when he separated from Eden, he initiated troubles for the spirit in human beings.¹⁴⁵

Edem's irascible behaviour is intrinsic to her psychic nature, but the responsibility of evil is found in Elohim's lack of foreknowledge and in his violation of the Father's will.¹⁴⁶ The Greek is once more extremely enlightening, since the verb that designates Elohim's decision is ἐθέλω, a verb that undoubtedly indicates his decision to ascend; such ascension was, however, a necessary decision which reunited him with him with the Good One with whom he shared the pneumatic nature.¹⁴⁷ When he indulged in his desire towards Edem, he was unaware of the results of his gesture and his actions originated greater evils for men and women. In this respect, *Bar* represents an *unicum* among Gnostic texts: while the fault of the intra-divine fracture is always attributed to a female aeon, usually named Sophia, this text describes it as an evil necessity that is originated from Elohim. Consequently, this passage

¹⁴³ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 30, 2. I am not equating the status of Edem and the First Woman, I am only alluding to a natural incontinence proper to certain Gnostic representation of the feminine.

¹⁴⁴ That is, the seduction of Adam and Eve by Naas.

¹⁴⁵ Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 23-24: ἀπὸ τότε <τε> ἐπεκράτησε τὰ κακὰ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις καὶ <κεχώρηκε> τὰ ἀγαθὰ, ἐκ μιᾶς ἀρχῆς γινόμενα, τῆς τοῦ πατρὸς· ἀναβὰς γὰρ πρὸς τὸν ἀγαθὸν ὁ πατὴρ ὁδὸν ἔδειξε τοῖς ἀναβαίνειν θέλουσιν, ἀποστὰς δὲ τῆς Ἑδέμ ἀρχὴν κακῶν ἐποίησε τῷ πνεύματι [τοῦ πατρὸς] τῷ ἐν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις.

¹⁴⁶ To a certain extent, he is the Gnostic Sophia whose ignorance is the cause of the rift within the Pleroma.

¹⁴⁷ Hippolytus, *El* V, 26,14: κατασκευάσας καὶ δημιουργήσας <ὁ> Ἐλωεῖμ ἐκ κοινῆς εὐαρεστήσεως τὸν κόσμον, ἀναβῆναι ἠθέλησεν εἰς τὰ ὑψηλὰ μέρη τοῦ οὐρανοῦ.

has puzzled scholarship, which is divided on whether Elohim or Edem must be found culpable of evil.¹⁴⁸ Despite being an unusual version of the Gnostic myth, the text is extremely clear regarding the fact that, had Elohim not broken the syzygial unity, no moral evil would have affected the spirit within humankind. Therefore, just as Edem is depicted as the perpetrator of evils, unleashing her unjust angel, so also Elohim is here called ἀρχή κακῶν. Both of them acted according to their natures – one pneumatic and one psychic – and both were unaware of the consequences of their actions. Nonetheless, Elohim seems culpable of contravening to the divine pact of the συζυγία, while Edem is guilty of being unable to restrain herself. In both cases, the events are classified as κακία ἀνάγκη, a necessary and inevitable evil, since both were compelled by their natures. Hence, the importance of sexual and nuptial imagery for *Bar*'s structure is made clear: while the sexual relationship that was regulated by the norms (συνθήκη) of the syzygy originated the entire creation, its opposite – namely, adultery and pederasty – determined the cosmic fall into chaos. Furthermore, this divorce represents the necessary and unavoidable fracture between the psychic and the pneumatic, since the break of the syzygy symbolises also the separation of two eschatological destinies. Just as Edem, once the psychic nature is separated from its consortium with the pneumatic spirit, it converts to its lower instincts and becomes similar to the hylic beasts. This fracture is incurable: as Elohim is unable to dwell again in the inferior region, equally the evil turn of Edem is irreversible. Hence, the separation of the two natures results in the abandonment of the psychic nature to its doom.

In this regard, the Good One's denial to destroy the creation needs further exploration since such a refusal might appear puzzling: why should not Elohim destroy what was generated in error?¹⁴⁹ The answer lies in the mingled disposition of creation. Since the world originated from the concoction of both pneumatic and psychic natures, it possesses a radical ambiguity that makes it potentially worthy of salvation. Furthermore, the Good One's denial reveals

¹⁴⁸ Buckley (1985a), 342-343 does not express a definitive opinion to this regard. On the contrary, Van den Broek, (1973), 41 denies that Edem is the origin of evils.

¹⁴⁹ Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 18.

that Justin's attitude towards the creation is less negative than most Gnostic movements. Gnostics tend to have an extremely negative conception of the created world, including humankind, which they believe to be *created* and ruled by the inferior Demiurge. By attributing the creation of the world to the mutual love of Elohim and Edem, Justin denied an evil foundation of the world that was rather originated by the pact of two divine entities. The συζυγία, which is the encounter of two natures, brought forth entities that resemble its assorted nature. Consequently, where most Gnostic myths envisage hidden pneumatic spirits trapped in a psychic and hylic creation,¹⁵⁰ Justin acknowledges the persistence of both pneumatic and psychic nature in all humans, thus making all humankind be endowed with the salvific πνεῦμα. Given that the creation possesses the salvific spirit, the fruit of the union between Edem and Elohim cannot be destroyed. Notwithstanding Justin's evaluation of the creation and his attribution of both pneumatic and psychic element to humankind, the psychic nature does not seem destined to be saved:

There was made a division, he explains, between water and water so that there is a water of the evil creation below the firmament, in which the psychic and hylic beings are washed, and a water of the Good above the firmament. This water is living, and in it are washed the living spiritual humans.¹⁵¹

Hence, the pneumatic waters will not be drunk by the psychics or hylics, who will not be saved. Indeed, the Redeemer Baruch was sent by his Father Elohim to show the way only to his pneumatic children,¹⁵² who will ascend to his presence in the lofty regions of heaven. Eventually, all humankind – both men and women endowed with πνεῦμα – will know the way upward and will be

¹⁵⁰ According to most Gnostic doctrines, not all humans will be eschatologically saved, but only Seth's offspring or the pneumatic nature will enter the nuptial chamber, see *ApJohn* II, 25, 16 – 27, 30; Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 7, 5.

¹⁵¹ Hippolytus, *El V*, 27, 3: διακεχώρισται γάρ, φησίν, ἀνὰ μέσον ὕδατος καὶ ὕδατος, καὶ ἔστιν ὕδωρ τὸ ὑποκάτω τοῦ στερεώματος τῆς πονηρᾶς κτίσεως, ἐν ᾧ λούονται οἱ χοῖκοι καὶ ψυχικοὶ ἄνθρωποι, καὶ ὕδωρ ἔστιν <τὸ> ὑπεράνω τοῦ στερεώματος τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, ἄνθρωποι, καὶ ὕδωρ ἔστιν <τὸ> ὑπεράνω τοῦ στερεώματος τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, ζῶν <ὄν>, ἐν ᾧ λούονται οἱ πνευματικοὶ ζῶντες ἄνθρωποι, <καὶ> ἐν ᾧ ἐλούσατο <ὁ> Ἐλωεὶμ καὶ λουσάμενος οὐ μετεμελήθη.

¹⁵² The name Baruch comes from the Hebrew tradition: בָּרַךְ is the past participle of the verb “to bless”. It is clear that the author is revoking the narrative of the Old Testament. However, the reasons behind this choice still need to be explored in depth.

received at the presence of the Good One, as their Father Elohim was before them. Baruch's message will spread throughout the earth thanks to a man, Jesus, who will be the first to render his body to Edem and his spirit to the Good One. Here, the Christology displayed by Justin works as additional confirmation of the different eschatological destinies reserved to psychic and pneumatic natures: since the body belongs to the lower psychic nature, it must be left behind to Edem, the psychic root of everything.¹⁵³ Although the destiny of Edem is not discussed openly by Justin, the text seems to suggest that she is excluded from redemption, insofar as she is not united in syzygy with Elohim. Therefore, while many Gnostic texts envisage a final return of the fallen female being to the Pleroma by means of union with the male pneumatic element, *Bar* poses a protological unity that is not restored at the eschatological time.

IV.2.4 Conclusion

Bar certainly stands out amongst Gnostic works for its peculiar structure and mythology, the originality of which is entirely conveyed by feminine and bridal imagery. This brief work presents an unusual and radically ambiguous female character, as well as a unique Gnostic syzygy.

The female character Edem is presented as one of the divine 'three principles of the universe', but she is also portrayed as double-minded and double-bodied virgin, inclined to passions and in need of being restrained by a pneumatic element. Although none of the other Gnostic myths presents such a paradoxical female character, Edem – to a certain extent – resembles all intra-pleromatic and fallen female characters. Insofar as her main function is generative, she resembles the highest female principles of Gnostic mythologies, namely Barbelo, Ennoia or Silence. However, whereas these latter characters are involved in the generation of pleromatic beings, Edem generates humankind with Elohim and provides psychic and hylic substratum for the world. Contrariwise, insofar as she is inclined to passions and subject to them when she is not united in syzygy, she resembles Sophia Achamot, the fallen female

¹⁵³ Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 32. Here, Justin's Christology seems to confirm his rigid separation between pneumatic and psychic element. See Orbe (1976), 377.

aeon who originated the intra-divine fracture. However, if in most Gnostic texts Sophia's yearning for knowledge is the cause of evil,¹⁵⁴ in *Bar Edem* is merely the executor of evils, but not their cause. The responsibility of the evil in the world seems to lie with Elohim, who broke the bond of the syzygy by abandoning Edem and ascending to the upper regions. Nonetheless, since Elohim possessed a pneumatic nature, he could neither remain confined within the limit of the creation nor be separated from his own Father, the Good One. Consequently, the fracture originated by the break of the syzygy is both an incurable and necessary evil. Although *Bar* has mostly been interpreted within the Ophite and Sethian tradition, its overall interpretation of the pleromatic and fallen feminine and the syzygy does not fit within these groups' theologoumena and mythologoumena. Notwithstanding that also most Ophite texts envisage a male redeemer, they present female characters playing a significant revealing or soteriological role, thus making them essential to the historical economy of salvation.¹⁵⁵ This is not the case of Edem. As the textual analysis has highlighted, Edem does not perform either salvific or revealing actions. Furthermore, the syzygy plays a fundamental role within Justin's system. Although the notion of the importance of the syzygy is present in many Gnostic movements, Justin's description of the functions and roles of the syzygy shares many similarities with the Valentinian tradition. In *ValEx*, *GosPhil* and in the Ptolemy's *EpFl*, the indissolubility of the syzygial union stands as the core of the Valentinian myth.¹⁵⁶ Similarly the role played by the female character of Edem must be understood within the boundaries of the syzygy as in Valentinianism, where a male element intervenes in restraining the female aeon who dwells in the material world. There is, however, one possible similarity with Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite texts, that is, the attribution of a pneumatic nature to Eve. In the previous sections,¹⁵⁷ I have shown that Eve has a pneumatic self only in *ApJohn*, *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*; on the contrary, she is valued mainly for being the female counterpart of the

¹⁵⁴ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 3-4.

¹⁵⁵ This is visible in the Nag Hammadi treatise *OrigWorld* and the final hymn is particularly indicative of this, see *OrigWorld* II, 114, 4-15. For more detail on this topic, *supra* II.3.4 and II.4.3.

¹⁵⁶ See *ExVal*. XI, 36, 28-34 and XI, 39, 13; *ExTheod* 32, 1; *GosPhil* II, 76, 6-17; Ptolemy, *EpFl* in Epiphanius, *Pan* I, 4, 4, 7.

¹⁵⁷ *Supra* II.4 and III. 4.

syzygy in Valentinian texts. In *Bar*, we find an unusual combination of the two traditions: on the one hand, Eve is superior to his mother Edem, because she possesses the pneumatic nature; on the other hand, Eve is valued mainly as syzygial counterpart of Adam. To sum up, the feminine imagery of *Bar* corresponds mainly to Valentinian texts in the case of the intra-pleromatic and fallen feminine, whereas it is an unusual mix of Ophite, Barbeloite and Valentinian mythologoumena and theologoumena when it comes to the case of the incarnated feminine.

Concerning the affiliation of *Bar* to the Ophite tradition, it is also interesting to note that the character of the Serpent, called Naas in *Bar*, differs substantially from its portrayal in Ophite texts. Frequently, in texts categorized as Sethian or Ophite, the Serpent is interpreted as a positive character – even a Redeemer – for he frees humans from the oppression of the ignorant Demiurge. Contrarily, in *Bar*, Naas causes evils among humans by hiding the pneumatic doctrines of Baruch. Hence, far from being an instrument of redemption, he is rather an instrument of oppression. To sum up, *Bar* displays two essential Valentinian theologoumena and mythologoumena: the indestructible nature of the syzygy and the rigidity of the three natures (pneumatic, psychic and hylic). Indeed, the evils Elohim caused to fall upon human beings are the result of the evil necessity that occurred when he broke the nuptial pact of the syzygy and ascended to the Good One to be reunited with the transcendent deity with whom he is consubstantial.

The textual analysis briefly presented in this chapter suggests that *Bar* must have been composed after the rise of Valentinianism, from which the text borrows many theologoumena, even if it would be a stretch to include this text among the Valentinian works. This conclusion is also supported by the researches on the author of *El* and the life of Justin. If one concedes that the author of the *El* was indeed that Hyppolitus who was part of the Roman elites at the beginning of the third century, it seems even more likely that Justin was himself familiar with the Valentinian school, which was very active in Rome in the second half of the second century. Moreover, if one envisions Justin as a Gnostic teacher who was famous only locally, collocating Justin in Rome

would also explain why his work did not survive in any other account. Nonetheless, I would like to underline that these remarks on Justin's identity and geographical and chronological collocations remain a speculative hypothesis, for no concrete evidence can be brought in this regard.

In conclusion, the syncretistic nature of Justin's work led to an unusual combination of Ophite and Valentinian mythologoumena and theologoumena, which represents an *unicum* in the Gnostic tradition. There is, however, one element that does not appear in any other Gnostic account and it is worth mentioning as proper to Justin: a fairly positive evaluation of humankind. Since both men and women were created from Elohim's and Edem's mutual pleasure, all humankind possesses pneumatic parts waiting to be reunited with their consubstantial Father. Therefore, Justin is displaying the idea of a potential universal salvation for humankind. Although Edem is, in the end, abandoned to its own destiny of destruction, this cannot be said of her offspring. As proven by the case of Jesus, they will render their psychic and hylic part to Edem, but their spiritual self will 'wash' in the 'waters above'. Contrarily to most Gnostic texts, the possession of a spiritual nature is naturally and ontologically granted to all humankind because of the original pneumatic and psychic union of Elohim and Edem. This notion represents probably the most original feature of Justin's mythology.

IV.3 A Feminine Tale in *The Exegesis on the Soul* (NHC II, 6)

The Coptic treatise entitled *The Exegesis on the Soul* is one of the most striking examples of the use of feminine imagery in early Christianity. The text narrates the journey of a soul towards redemption in terms of feminine imagery. Although the Gnostic affiliation of this treatise has been contested by some scholars, I believe that a thorough investigation of feminine imagery will clarify this unsettled question, providing new evidence regarding the Gnostic nature of the text. In particular, I will argue that this treatise presents all of the mythologoumena and theologoumena that are proper to Valentinian feminine imagery. Hence, the purpose of this chapter is twofold: on the one hand, it aims at offering a detailed analysis of the use of feminine imagery in *ExSoul*, contextualizing it within Gnosticism; on the other hand, it aims at proving the theological and mythological affinities between *ExSoul* and the Valentinian movement.

ExSoul is a short treatise, written in Greek probably between third and fourth century and then translated in Coptic.¹⁵⁸ Unlike other Nag Hammadi treatises, *ExSoul* presents a fairly good state of conservation, with only occasional *lacunae*.¹⁵⁹ Nevertheless, scholars working on this text agree on very little. One of the first causes of scholarly disagreements can be identified in the translation of the title ΤΕΞΗΓΗΤΙΚΟΝ ΕΠΙ ΤΗΨΥΧΗ and the literary genre of *ExSoul*.¹⁶⁰ Concerning the title, Kasser has dedicated an entire article to try to settle this scholarly dispute.¹⁶¹ In his opinion, none of the three English translations – that is, ‘The Exegesis on the Soul’,¹⁶² ‘The Expository Treatise concerning the Soul’¹⁶³ and ‘The Exegetical Treatise concerning the Soul’¹⁶⁴ – is accurate, for

¹⁵⁸ The date of composition can only be indicative, for it is impossible to narrow it down to a specific decade. Robinson (1989), 136 considered it written as early as the beginning of the third century CE, whereas Scopello (1985), 13 suggested a composition between third-fourth century.

¹⁵⁹ Brown (1975) and Layton (1977).

¹⁶⁰ For the Coptic texts and translation, I am using Robinson (1989).

¹⁶¹ Kasser (1997).

¹⁶² This title has been chosen by Wisse (1975). For the French equivalent see Scopello (1985), whilst for the German equivalent see Krause and Labib (1971).

¹⁶³ See Robinson (1989) and Layton (1977).

¹⁶⁴ Layton (1978).

the Hellenistic meaning of the term **ΤΕΞΗΓΗΤΙΚ** is closer to ‘history’ than our modern ‘exegesis’. Consequently, he has proposed to use the title ‘L’Histoire de l’Âme’.¹⁶⁵ Although I have chosen to use the English translation ‘The Exegesis of the Soul’, thus preferring a literal translation of the title, Kasser’s observations regarding the use of **ΤΕΞΗΓΗΤΙΚ** in the Hellenistic period are convincing and the word ‘exegesis’ should not be intended in a narrow sense. It seems indeed likely that use of the word **ΤΕΞΗΓΗΤΙΚ** was due to the author’s intent to make this treatise a narrative discourse about the journey of a soul towards redemption.

This brings the topic to the second cause of disagreement among scholars: the literary genre of *ExSoul*. Scopello has noted some similarities between *ExSoul* and the ancient Greek novels.¹⁶⁶ *ExSoul* follows the same narrative plot of Greco-Roman novels, usually centered on the tragic separation of two lovers and the obstacles to their love until their happy reunion.¹⁶⁷ Robinson has also highlighted how this treatise bears some similarities with philosophical treatises on the soul, although he concluded that it would be inaccurate to describe *ExSoul* as a purely philosophical work.¹⁶⁸ Another possibility has been more recently discussed by Dritsas Bizier, who has classified *ExSoul* as a hortative baptismal homily; nevertheless, his analysis has failed to account for the need of such a storyline in a baptismal homily.¹⁶⁹ An example of a similar literary structure might be found in the *Authentikos Logos*, another treatise of the Nag Hammadi library. Nevertheless, this treatise does not present the love story element as neatly as *ExSoul*, thus resulting in a text that is less similar to a novel than *ExSoul*.¹⁷⁰ The doubts surrounding the literary genre of *ExSoul* are further complicated by the possibility that the text underwent several redactions. This hypothesis was first formulated by Robinson, who believed that *ExSoul* had two different redactions: firstly, the text was written to narrate the story of the soul; at a later time, biblical and classical quotations were

¹⁶⁵ Kasser (1997), 80.

¹⁶⁶ Scopello (1985), 46-47; 50-51.

¹⁶⁷ In this regard, the book of Cueva (2004) is particularly interesting for it analyses the importance of mythological literary structure for Greek novels.

¹⁶⁸ Robinson (1996), 136.

¹⁶⁹ Dritsas Bizier (2010), 295-301.

¹⁷⁰ For a complete analysis of the *Authentikos Logos* see Tervahauta (2015).

inserted as a sort of ‘catchwords’.¹⁷¹ Robinson’s theory was contested a few years later by Wilson, who proved successfully that there are several biblical quotations embedded in the main body of the treatise which cannot be considered later additions.¹⁷² In this regard, my analysis will show that *ExSoul* is a unitary work, which was probably conceived in the author’s mind in a form very similar to the one bequeathed to us. Moreover, I do not think it is possible to classify *ExSoul* under any specific literary genre, since *ExSoul* eludes all rigid literary classifications, thus constituting a case in its own right.

The third and most important cause of disagreement among scholars lies in the affiliation of this treatise to Gnosticism. When this treatise was first published in German by Krause and Labib in the 1970s,¹⁷³ most scholars tended to admit its Gnostic background. Besides Krause, the most compelling cases were argued by Scopello, Ménard and Sevrin.¹⁷⁴ However, scholars disagreed on whether *ExSoul* presented Naassene or Valentinian mythologoumena and theologoumena.¹⁷⁵ While Robinson was a supporter of the Naassene’s dependence of *ExSoul*,¹⁷⁶ Scopello and Ménard claimed the Valentinian affiliation of this treatise.¹⁷⁷ By contrast with these views, Wisse first warned against what he called a kind of “guilt by association” – that is, the prejudice according to which all Nag Hammadi texts had to be Gnostic.¹⁷⁸ Wisse’s warnings have been embraced by other scholars – such as Kulawik, Lanzillotta, Dritsas Bizier and Fowler – for most works published in the last twenty years are inclined to deny the Gnostic affiliation of *ExSoul*.¹⁷⁹ Against these scholars, I will argue for a Valentinian affiliation of this text; nevertheless, I acknowledge that the greatest merit of these works consists in highlighting the extent to which this text can be defined as a syncretistic work. As a matter of

¹⁷¹ Robinson (1970).

¹⁷² Wilson (1975).

¹⁷³ Krause and Labib (1971).

¹⁷⁴ Sevrin (1983), Scopello (1977), Krause (1975a), Ménard (1975a).

¹⁷⁵ In this case, the Ophite are narrowed down to the ones described as Naassens in Hippolytus, *El V*, 7-9. I will discuss this argument shortly.

¹⁷⁶ It must be noted that he intended it not as Gnostic, but rather as a Neopythagorean philosophy. Robinson (1970), 116-117.

¹⁷⁷ Sevrin (1983), Scopello (1985).

¹⁷⁸ Wisse (1975), 68.

¹⁷⁹ Fowler (2017), Dritsas Bizier (2010), Lanzillotta (2010) and (2010a), Kulawik (2006).

fact, when considered individually, most elements proper to this text could be related to a specific Hellenistic tradition. For instance, Lanzillotta has argued that *ExSoul*'s dualism may be seen as a re-interpretation of Plato's dualism in the *Symposium*.¹⁸⁰ In addition, he has claimed that the opposition between an earthly and heavenly Father is typical also of Origen's and Dydimus' works.¹⁸¹ Moreover, Dritsas Bizier has discussed at length the similarities between *ExSoul* and the orthodox homilies for catechumens preparing for baptism.¹⁸² Among her many arguments, Kulawik has decided against the Gnostic affiliation of *ExSoul* because of its positive use of the Septuagint.¹⁸³ Recently, Fowler has associated *ExSoul*'s asceticism with the Pachomian monastic community.¹⁸⁴ Similarly, Lundhaug has also discussed the affiliation of this text to the nearby Pachomian monastery by claiming that Pachominan texts and this treatise use the Scripture in a like-minded way.¹⁸⁵

Notwithstanding the value of these analyses, I will argue that only a Valentinian affiliation of *ExSoul* can account for the coexistence of such diverse elements in a single text, for the affiliation of this treatise to Gnosticism is not a matter of a *single* striking and decisive element, rather it derives from the sum of many circumstantial evidences.

Given the highly syncretistic nature of *ExSoul*, it is not surprising that this treatise presents elements from different Gnostic traditions, such as Simonian, Ophite and Valentinian Gnosticism. Nevertheless, my analysis will show that the Valentinian mythologoumena and theologoumena are predominant in the text. Among the arguments which I will present to support this point, the majority are related to feminine imagery and can be summarized in six points:

- a) The feminine nature of the soul;
- b) The metaphorical opposition between virginity and prostitution;

¹⁸⁰ Particularly, Plato, *Symposium* 201d-212b. See Lanzillotta (2010), 405 and (2010a) .

¹⁸¹ Lanzillotta (2010), 416.

¹⁸² Dritsas Bizier (2010), 313-315.

¹⁸³ Kulawik (2006).

¹⁸⁴ Fowler (2017), 87-89.

¹⁸⁵ Lundhaug (2017).

- c) The deformity of children born out of an illicit relationship;
- d) The insistence on the theme of repentance;
- e) The use of nuptial imagery and the explicit mention of the bridal chamber as the eschatological reunion with God.
- f) The overlapping between the story of the soul and that of Sophia;

Consequently, my research will expand on studies – such as those of Scopello and Ménard – who already supported a Gnostic, particularly Valentinian, affiliation of *ExSoul*, but it will also contextualize it in the broader Gnostic tendency of employing feminine imagery to convey crucial theological doctrines. I believe that the analysis conducted thus far on feminine Gnostic imagery will allow the reader to acknowledge the many similarities between Valentinian imagery and *ExSoul*.

This chapter will be divided into three sections. In the first section, I will discuss the nature of the soul, explaining how each element of the feminine imagery conveys a specific anthropological doctrine (points a-b-c-d). In the second and third section, I will discuss respectively the last two of the abovementioned points (e-f), relating them to soteriological and eschatological doctrines found in the *ExSoul*.

VI.3.1 The Nature of the Soul

The first lines of *ExSoul* are striking in their blunt feminine imagery:

Wise men of old gave the soul a feminine name (ΑΝΘΡΩΠΟΣ ΕΤΨΟΟΠΙ ΖΗΤΗΝΕΖΗ ΑΥΤΗ ΟΝΟΜΑΣΙΑ ΕΤΨΥΧΗ ΝΗΝΟΥΡΑΝ ΝΕΖΙΜΕ). Indeed, she is female in her nature as well (ΟΝΤΩΣ ΟΝ ΖΗ ΤΕΣΦΥΣΙΣ ΟΥΖΙΜΕ). She even has her womb (ΟΥΝΤΑΣ ΝΗΜΑΥ ΖΩΩΣ ΝΗΤΕΣΜΗΤΡΑ). As long as she was alone with the Father, she was a virgin (ΟΥΠΑΡΘΕΝΟΣ) and in form androgynous (ΟΥΖΟΥΤΕΖΙΜΕ). But when she fell down into a body

(ἐκὼμα) and came to this life, then she fell into the hands of many robbers (ἄλαστοι).¹⁸⁶

The incipit of *ExSoul* presents four pivotal theologoumena and mythologoumena about the nature of the soul: 1) its female gender; 2) its virginity; 3) its androgyny; 4) its fall into a material world. These four elements are among the most controversial when it comes to the Gnostic affiliation of this text, for they can be traced back also to non-Gnostic traditions. However, the following analysis will show that, although each one of these elements finds antecedents in different Hellenistic, philosophical, literary or theological traditions, they can be found combined together only in the Gnostic feminine imagery, which I believe is employed in the incipit of *ExSoul*.

First, I believe it is necessary to devote a few more words to the initial reference to unnamed *auctoritates*, generally named ἄνκοφος, to whom the author of the *ExSoul* attributes the idea that the soul has a feminine nature. In spite of the author's intention, the tradition to which he is referring is not immediately evident. The female gender of the noun ψυχή makes the identification with a woman almost immediate, without pointing towards any specific theological or philosophical tradition. On the contrary, the subsequent reference to the soul's having a 'womb' is very specific. One of the few instances in which these elements are found together is Philo's *De Migratione Abrahami*, which employed the term τὰς μήτρας τῆς ψυχῆς allegorically.¹⁸⁷ This element confirms the influence of the Alexandrian cultural milieu on *ExSoul*, observed also by Scopello. In her analysis of the sources of *ExSoul*, Scopello successfully proved the influence of Alexandrian philosophers and theologians, particularly Clement and Origen, thus building a valid case for the

¹⁸⁶ *ExSoul* II, 127, 19-22.

¹⁸⁷ Philo, *De Migratione Abrahami* 33-34: 'For the offspring of the soul's own travail are for the most part poor abortions, things untimely born; but those which God waters with the snows of heaven come to the birth perfect, complete and peerless. I feel no shame in recording my own experience, a thing I know from its having happened to me a thousand times. On some occasions, after making up my mind to follow the usual course of writing on philosophical tenets, and knowing definitely the substance of what I was to set down, I have found my understanding incapable of giving birth to a single idea, and have given it up without accomplishing anything, reviling my understanding for its self-conceit, and filled with amazement at the might of Him that is to Whom is due the opening and closing of the soul-wombs (παρ' ὃν τὰς τῆς ψυχῆς ἀνοίγνυσθαι τε καὶ συγκλείεσθαι μήτρας συμβέβηκεν).'

Alexandrian placement of this treatise.¹⁸⁸ Nevertheless, I would like to underline that the use of such blunt sexual imagery is also a typical feature of Gnostic mythologies. In particular, my previous findings indicate that the use of the metaphor of the ‘womb’ is particularly common in Gnostic texts. This is indeed the case of Barbelo in *ApJohn* II, 4, 26 – 5, 11, as well as the one of Silence in Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 1, 1, but also Sophia in *AdHaer* I, 3, 4.¹⁸⁹ Although this parallel is not conclusive, it is important to underline the presence of a shared metaphorical language between *ExSoul* and other Gnostic texts. Hence, rather than identifying these ‘wise men’ only with Alexandrian intellectuals or with Homer and the Prophets, as Scopello did,¹⁹⁰ I would tend to interpret *ANCOΦOC* as a general reference to the previous philosophical and theological tradition of the late Hellenistic Egypt, thus opening to the possibility that this text might also be referring to Gnostic works.

Secondly, the imagery of a virginal soul is largely employed by second and third century theologians to symbolize spiritual purity. In particular, around the same time in which *ExSoul* was composed, the association between the soul and young virgins had been consolidated by Origen of Alexandria’s *Commentary* and *Homilies on the Song of Songs*. Following an exegetical Jewish tradition, Origen interpreted *Sos* allegorically as the love story between the soul and God, thus portraying the soul as the virgin bride waiting for her true and only bridegroom.¹⁹¹ From that moment onward, many other commentaries adopted a similar imagery. Although these traditions might have influenced *ExSoul*, it ought to be noted that virginity is one of the typical attributes of pleromatic female characters in Gnosticism, especially referred to as the spiritual Eve and the superior Sophia.¹⁹² In particular, the motif of virginity is found in Valentinian texts in reference to Sophia Echamot,

¹⁸⁸ Scopello (1985), 17-44 and Scopello (1977).

¹⁸⁹ Respectively, *supra* II.3.1; III.3.1.3; III.3.2.2.

¹⁹⁰ Scopello (1985), 120.

¹⁹¹ In both his *Commentarium in Cantica Canticorum* and his *Homilies in Cantica Canticorum*, Origen interpreted *Sos* as a love story between the soul and God. In his metaphorical interpretation, the wandering of the maid outside of her bedchamber was equated to prostitution. For the English translation see Lawson (1957).

¹⁹² *ApJohn* II, 23, 37 – 24, 15; *HypArch* II, 91, 34 – 92, 4; *OrigWorld* II, 114, 4-6.

especially in *GosPhil*.¹⁹³ Moreover, my previous research has highlighted how the opposition between virginity and prostitution is pivotal in Gnostic feminine imagery. The same opposition constitutes the narrative focus of *ExSoul*, thus marking a significant similarity between female characters in Gnostic mythologies and the soul in *ExSoul*'s narrative.¹⁹⁴

Thirdly, the author of *ExSoul* defines the soul **ΟΥΖΟΥΤΕΖΙΜΕ** (androgynous), thus considering this androgyny as the original status of humankind that has been lost in the fall into a material body. This way of interpreting androgyny finds its closest parallel in Gnostic texts. Besides being a very common notion among all Gnostic movements,¹⁹⁵ the notion of androgyny displayed by *ExSoul* resembles the one displayed by Valentinian texts closely, particularly *GosPhil* and *ExTheod*, where androgyny is strictly intertwined with the notion of the syzygy.¹⁹⁶ Interpreting the creation of humankind of *Gen.* 1:26-27 as an androgynous creation, Valentinian Gnostics believed sexual differentiation followed the original creation of humankind, so much so that it was often associated with the beginning of death for human beings. The Valentinian notion of an original androgynous creation was dictated by the idea of cosmological typology, according to which the human creation mirrored the syzygial structure of the Pleroma. Thus, the separation between Adam and Eve mirrored the one between Sophia and her partner.¹⁹⁷ Just as in these Valentinian texts, *ExSoul* interprets the fall of the soul downward as the cause of separation between the sexes and as the origin of the nuptial union. In this regard, it is not a coincidence that *ExSoul* uses Adam and Eve as an example of this original androgyny: 'For they were originally joined to one another when they were with the Father (**ΝΕΥΖΟΤΡ̅ ΓΑΡ ΕΝΟΥΕΡΗΥΣ ΝΨΟΡΠ ΖΑΖΤ̅ ΠΕΙΩΤ**) before the woman led astray the man, who is her brother'.¹⁹⁸ Moreover, the assimilation of the soul's androgyny with a spousal union between a male and a female element is made clear by affirming that the soul's mistake was that of leaving

¹⁹³ *GosPhil* II, 71, 3-21; *GosPhil* II, 55, 23-32;

¹⁹⁴ The prostitution of the soul will be discussed shortly, *infra* IV.3.2.

¹⁹⁵ For instance: *GosTh*, *Logion* 22 (II, 37, 25-35); *ApJohn* II, 20, 9-28; *OrigWorld* II, 113, 21-34.

¹⁹⁶ *GosPhil* II, 70, 10-22; *ExTheod* 21, 1-3.

¹⁹⁷ *GosPhil* II, 70, 10-22. For a detailed discussion see *supra* III.4.

¹⁹⁸ *ExSoul* II, 133, 4-6.

‘her perfect husband’ (ἄνθρωπος ἁπλοῦς καὶ ἁγνός).¹⁹⁹ Therefore, regarding the androgyny of the soul in *ExSoul*, I disagree with both Robinson and Lanzillotta, who considered this passage dependent instead on Plato’s *Symposium*.²⁰⁰ Even if the platonic myth had a certain influence on *ExSoul*, this had to be mediated by an allegorical interpretation of *Gen.* 1:26-27 since the lost androgyny was not only considered as the original status of humankind, but also as the cause of the fall from a heavenly condition. Besides Valentinian Gnostics, there were other theologians, such as Origen, who considered the creation of *Gen.* 1:26-27 as an asexual creation.²⁰¹ Nevertheless, Valentinian interpreters were the only ones to consider the sexual separation of human beings as the separation between a female-male couple, as *ExSoul* does. Consequently, the myth of the sexual separation as presented by Valentinian Gnostic is by far the most likely source for *ExSoul*’s interpretation of androgyny.

Fourthly, it is worth highlighting that *ExSoul* does not provide any information regarding the cause or the circumstances of the fall from the status of proximity to the Father. This virgin soul is said to have been with the Father in the beginning and to have had a status of androgyny – which may or may not be interpreted as a syzygial status – enjoying a state of perfection which has now been lost because of her fall into a material world, which is instead envisioned in very pejorative terms. At this stage in the analysis of *ExSoul*. I will draw the attention to two elements. On the one hand, *ExSoul* seems to display the feature of a cosmic dualism, marked by a manifest anti-cosmism, which is one of the most renowned features of Gnostic mythologies. On the other hand, it ought to be noticed that the fall of a virginal, androgynous, female being from a divine status to a lower and material one resembles – at least in its narrative outline – the myth of Sophia’s fall.²⁰²

¹⁹⁹ *ExSoul* II, 137, 6-7.

²⁰⁰ The notion of the creation of an androgynous human being are also present in Plato, *Symposium* 190B – 191C. Robinson (1970), 114-117 and Lanzillotta (2010a), 348-349.

²⁰¹ In particular, Origen, *De Principiis* I, 2, 2. For a detailed analysis, see Simonetti (2004a).

²⁰² This pattern recalls also Plotinus, *Enn* IV, 3, 15, in which he explains the differences among those souls who descended from the divine realm into the material world and are now unable to ascend to the superior world.

Hence, the similarities that I have listed between *ExSoul* and Gnostic texts of various traditions represent enough evidence to make a further investigation worth, especially considering that the affinity between Valentinian feminine imagery and that of the *ExSoul* becomes evident when one considers the events which took place after the fall from the heavenly condition. Therefore, this will be the focus of the next section.

IV.3.2 The Repentance of a Prostitute Soul

The loss of the pristine condition enjoyed by the soul while she was with the Father is metaphorically represented by means of a very explicit sexual imagery:

And in her body she prostituted herself (ΑΥΩ ΑΣΠΟΡΝΕΥΕ Ζἄ̅ ΠΕCCΩΜΑ) and gave herself to one and all, considering each one she was about to embrace to be her husband (ΠΕCΖΑΕΙ). [...] Some made use of her [by force] (Ζ[ἄ̅ΝΝΟΥΒΙ]Α), while others did so by seducing her with a gift (ἄ̅ΝΔΩΡΟΝ). [...] For from them she gained nothing except the defilements (ΑΝΧΩΖἄ̅) they gave her while they had sexual intercourse with her. And her offspring by the adulterers are dumb, blind, and sickly. They are feebleminded (ΑΥΩ ΝΕΝΤΑCΧΠΟΟΥ ΕΒΟΛ Ζἄ̅ ἄ̅ΝΜΟΙΧΟC ἄ̅ΝΚΩΦΟC ΝΕ ΑΥΩ Ζἄ̅Βἄ̅ΛΛΑΥ ΝΕ ΑΥΩ CΕΟ ἄ̅Ρἄ̅Μἄ̅ΛΑΧΛΕ' ΠΟΥΖΗΕΤ' ΠΟΨC).²⁰³

This passage illustrates very vividly the wretched conditions into which the soul has fallen. However, scholars have elaborated very different interpretations of the metaphor of the soul's prostitution. Assuming that *ExSoul* is a homily destined for newly converted Christians, Dritsas Bizier has identified the soul's lovers with the pagan gods, thus interpreting the soul's prostitution imagery as an anti-pagan exhortation.²⁰⁴ Although it is true that some theologians of the time employed the metaphor of prostitution to illustrate the risks of paganism, I disagree with Dritsas Bizier's interpretation

²⁰³ *ExSoul* II, 128, 1-26.

²⁰⁴ Dritsas Bizier (2010), 296-297. He brings the examples of Origen and John Chrysostom to prove the validity of his theory.

insofar as he has failed to provide any textual reference to idolatry or pagan gods in *ExSoul*. On the contrary, Lanzillotta has claimed that the soul's prostitution is a metaphor for the interaction of the soul with the sensible world, interpreting the soul's lovers who impose themselves on her by force or gifts as the material impressions which comes from senses and reason respectively.²⁰⁵ While I agree with him concerning the anti-materialistic implications of this prostitution metaphor,²⁰⁶ his hypothesis does not provide any explanation for the role of the soul's dumb offspring, which instead I believe is a key element of *ExSoul*'s description of the soul's prostitution. In *ExSoul*, just as in all the above-mentioned Gnostic occurrences of this kind, illicit sexual intercourse pollutes the women involved in it and makes them conceive defective offspring.²⁰⁷ Having dumb, blind and sickly offspring was indeed the case in *ApJohn*, *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*. In addition, the topic of the children's defectiveness as a result of the unilateral decision of Sophia is also proper to Valentinianism, since Sophia was unable to produce a well-formed offspring once she had fallen from her Father's plenitude. As a matter of fact, the parallel might be even more specific than what one can imagine since *ExSoul*'s passage mirrors closely *ExTheod* 68, when it is said that: 'as long we were children of the Woman, as if of a shameful union, we were incomplete, dumb, sickly and formless infants, brought forth like abortions.'²⁰⁸ The similitude with Valentinian texts is even more striking since *ExSoul* opposes this illicit and defective generation with the 'good children' that result from the union between the soul with her true bridegroom,²⁰⁹ stressing that 'since she is female, she is powerless to beget a child' by herself.²¹⁰ In both cases, the parallel with *GosPhil* is remarkable.²¹¹ In my opinion, all of these parallels seem to suggest that the author of *ExSoul* was aware of these

²⁰⁵ Lanzillotta (2010), 349-348.

²⁰⁶ Discussing the prostitution of the soul, the author of *ExSoul* stresses the role that the body plays in this defilement. As a matter of fact, *ExSoul* rejects form of fleshly pleasures very explicitly, thus assuming a very ascetic tone, which was proper to certain Gnostic movements.

²⁰⁷ *OrigWorld* II, 117, 15-29; *HypArch* II, 91, 12-30; *ApJohn* II, 30, 6-11.

²⁰⁸ *ExTheod* 68: Ἀχρι μὲν γὰρ ἡμεν τῆς Θελείας μόνης τέκνα, ὡς ἂν αἰσχροῦς συζυγίας, ἀτελῆ καὶ νήπια καὶ ἄφρονα καὶ ἀσθενῆ καὶ ἄμορφα, οἷον ἐκτρώματα προ[σ] ενεχθέντα, τῆς Γυναικὸς ἡμεν τέκνα· ὑπὸ δὲ τοῦ Σωτῆρος μορφωθέντες Ἄνδρὸς καὶ Νυμφῶνος γεγόναμεν τέκνα. It is worth reminding that this passage resembles also *GosPhil* II, 76, 6-9.

²⁰⁹ *ExSoul* II, 133, 31-134, 6.

²¹⁰ *ExSoul* II, 132, 6-7.

²¹¹ *GosPhil* II, 76, 6-9 and *ExTheod* 68.

mythologoumena and reproduced these structures in his work. It would therefore appear that the metaphor of the prostitution of the soul indicates the mingling of the soul with the sensible world,²¹² as Lanzillotta has highlighted; however, this platonic *topos* of the soul's descent into a body is mediated by Gnostic mythologoumena, such as the Sethian, Barbeloite and Ophite element of the archon's seduction and the Valentinian element of the generation of unformed offspring. In other words, against Lanzillotta's interpretation, I argue that *ExSoul* appears platonic only insofar as all Gnostic texts that describe the descent of the soul into a material world can be interpreted as platonic, since the specific features of the soul's descent displayed by *ExSoul* belong to the Gnostic tradition.

Another interesting element is the correspondence between the archons' seduction of Eve and the lovers' seduction of the soul.²¹³ When one examines more closely the mythologoumena displayed by this passage, the correspondence between the strategies of the seductions described in *ExSoul* and the ones employed by the archons in *ApJohn*, *HypArch* and *OrigWorld* becomes evident. According to *ExSoul*, the adulterers tried to seduce the soul either by force or by means of gifts. The former instance recalls the episode of the archons' attack on the carnal Eve in *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*, when they defile by force the inferior image of the spiritual Eve.²¹⁴ By contrast, the latter strategy resembles the myth of the daughters of men and the evil archons of *ApJohn*, where the evil archons bring gifts to humankind to seduce the daughters of men.²¹⁵ It is also worth noting – as Scopello does – that the author of *ExSoul* does not seem to “blame” the soul for her prostitution, since there is nothing she can do against the plots of the evil archons.²¹⁶ Such a conclusion would be in line with what this thesis has shown regarding the role of carnal women in Sethian, Ophite and Barbeloite texts, thus posing an interesting proximity between *ExSoul* and these mythologoumena and theologoumena.

²¹² This is further confirmed by *ExSoul*. 130, 20-28, where the author of *ExSoul* lists all material goods that the soul thinks she needs, but she truly does not.

²¹³ In this regard, I partly agree with Scopello (1985), 121-126, who also identified the adulterers with the archons.

²¹⁴ *HypArch* II, 90, 17-28 and *OrigWorld*. II, 116, 33 – 117, 15.

²¹⁵ *ApJohn* II, 29, 16 – 30, 11, particularly II, 29, 30-33.

²¹⁶ Scopello (1985), 64-65.

Further similarities with Gnostic texts can be noticed in the following passage about the soul's repentance:

But when the Father who is above (ΠΕΙΩΤ' ΕΤΗΠCΑ ΝΤΠΕ) visits her and looks down upon her and sees her sighing (ΕCΕΩ ΕΖΟΜ) – with suffering and in disgrace (ΝΕCΠΑΘΟC ἦΝ ΝΕCΧΗΜΟCΥΝΕ) – and repenting of the prostitution (ΕCΜΕΤΑΝΟΕΙ ΕΧἸΝ ΤΕCΠΟΡ'ΝΕΙΑ) in which she engaged, and she begins to call upon [his name] so that he might help her (ἸCΑΠΧΕΙἸΝ ΝῚΕΠΙΚΑΛΕΙ ΕΖΡΑΙ ΕΠ[ΕCΡ]ΑΝ ΑΤΡΕCῚΒΟΗΤΕΙ ΝΑC), [lacuna] all her heart, saying, “Save me, my Father, (ἸΜΟ[C ΧΕ ΜΑ]ΤΟΥΧΟΕΙ ΠΑΕΙΩΤ) for behold I will render an account [to thee, for I abandoned] my house and fled from my maiden's quarters ([ΧΕ ΑΖΙΚΩ] ἸCΩΕΙ ἸΠΑΝΕΙ ΑΥΩ' ΑΖΙΠΩΤ ΕΒΟΛ ἸΠΑΡΘΕΝΩΝ). Restore me to thyself again (ΠΑΛΙΝ ΤΚΤΟΕΙ ΨΑΡΟΚ'”) – when he sees her in such a state, then he will count her worthy of his mercy upon her, for many are the afflictions that have come upon her because she abandoned her house.²¹⁷

This quotation presents many elements which can be traced back to other Gnostic sources. First of all, there is the ambiguity of the expression ΠΕΙΩΤ' ΕΤΗΠCΑ ΝΤΠΕ. Although Scopello is right in identifying this periphrasis as a translation of the New Testament's expression πατήρ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς,²¹⁸ I believe that this expression ought to be put in connection with a passage which occurs later on in the text opposing the ‘earthly father’ (ἸΠΕΙΩΤ ἸΠΚΑΖ) to ‘the father who is in heaven’ (ἸΠΕCΕΙΩΤ ΕΤΖἸΝ ἸΠΗΥΕ).²¹⁹ The opposition between an earthly father and a heavenly Father suggests that the author of *ExSoul* is working within a dualistic paradigm which opposes two main divinities, each one ruling over a different realm.²²⁰ In this regard, I disagree with both

²¹⁷ *ExSoul* II, 128, 26 – 129, 5.

²¹⁸ For instance, *Mt* 5:16: οὕτως λαμψάτω τὸ φῶς ὑμῶν ἔμπροσθεν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, ὥπως ἴδωσιν ὑμῶν τὰ καλὰ ἔργα καὶ δοξάσωσιν τὸν πατέρα ὑμῶν τὸν ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς. See Scopello (1985), 127, who nonetheless believe these passages refer to Sophia's story.

²¹⁹ *ExSoul* II, 133, 20-28: ‘For he requires her to turn her face from her people and the multitude of her adulterers, in whose midst she once was, to devote herself only to her king, her real lord and to forget the house of the earthly father, with whom things went badly for her, but to remember her Father who is in heaven’.

²²⁰ Both Scopello (1985), 144 and Sevrin (1983), 106 seem to identify the ἸΠΕΙΩΤ ἸΠΚΑΖ with the Demiurge.

Lanzillotta and Kulawik. While Kulawik believes that a single mention of the ‘earthly father’ does not justify the assumption of the existence of a Demiurge, Lanzillotta expresses the opinion that a Demiurge is ‘hardly necessary’ since other theologians, such as Origen of Alexandria, interpreted the ‘earthly father’ as the devil.²²¹ Although their hypotheses appear plausible if the passage is considered out of context, their claims hardly fit within the overall framework of this passage – or of *ExSoul* in general – for they do not explain the presence of the virginity-prostitution imagery together with the theme of repentance (μετάνοια). This is indeed the main pivotal concern of *ExSoul*: the narration of a story of fall, repentance and restoration of a soul to her original pristine condition. When observed in this light, it is hard to miss the similarities with the Gnostic myth of Sophia’s fall, prostitution, repentance and restoration to the Father’s house.

To further confirm the association between the soul and Sophia, especially as presented in the Valentinian accounts, it is necessary to explore two further issues: first, the nature of the soul’s repentance and, secondly, the meaning of her restoration to her original condition. Regarding the soul’s μετάνοια, *ExSoul* specifies that ‘the beginning of salvation is repentance’ for ‘repentance takes place in distress and grief’ (ΤΜΕΤΑΝΟΙΑ ΔΕ ΨΑCΨΩΠΕ ΖΝ ΟΥ ΛΥΠΗ ΜΗ ΟΥ ΜΗΚΑΖ ΝΖΗΤ).²²² Moreover,

It is fitting to pray to the Father and to call on him with our soul (ΨΩΕ ΘΕ ΕΨΗΛ ΕΠΕΙΩΤ ΝΤΗΜΟΥ ΤΕ ΕΖΡΑΙ ΕΡΟΨ ΖΝ ΤΗΨΥΧΗ ΤΗΡC) [...] repenting for the life we lived (ΕΝΡΜΕΤΑΝΟΕΙ ΕΧΜ ΠΒΙΟC ΝΤΑΖΝΝΑΑΨ); confessing our sins; perceiving the empty deception we were in, and the empty zeal; weeping over how we were in darkness and in the wave (ΕΝΡΙΜΕ ΝΘΕ ΝΕΝΨΟΟΠ ΖΜ ΠΚΑΚΕ ΜΗ ΦΟΕΙΜ); mourning for ourselves, that he might have pity on us (ΟΥΑΑΝ ΧΕΚΑΑC ΕΨΝΑΝΑ ΝΑΝ ΕΗΜΟCΤΕ)²²³

²²¹ See Lanzillotta (2010a), 411 and 416; Kulawik (2006), 204.

²²² *ExSoul* II, 135, 21-22 and 25-26.

²²³ *ExSoul* II, 135, 4-14. These emotions recur also at the end of the treatise in reference to Helena, stressing their importance for the access to the ‘Father’s house’, see *ExSoul* II, 137, 5-11.

It is possible to detect many parallels between this passage and the Gnostic descriptions of Sophia's repentance.²²⁴ First of all, both *ExSoul* and Valentinian texts stress the role of emotions, namely grief and distress, as these are those emotions which appear after Sophia's repentance in both *GN* and *ExTheod*.²²⁵ Moreover, Sophia's appeal to her Father for help is almost a *topos* of Gnostic literature, for it is widely present in Gnostic works.²²⁶ Secondly, the soul's weeping over the darkness of *ExSoul* seems to correspond almost literally to *ApJohn*'s passage when the mother weeps because of the 'garment of darkness' (ΑΤΖΒCΩ ΜΠΚΑΚΕ) which clothed her because her consort had not agreed with her.²²⁷ Furthermore, it is also interesting to note that Sophia's sufferings are assimilated to a proper Passion, for they become the true existence of the soul for 'she exists suffering' (CΩOON` ZΛ ΠACXΛ). Overall, this representation of the soul's μετάνοια resembles the idea of Sophia's ἐπιστροφή as described by Gnostic myths,²²⁸ for it exhorts the soul to escape from a condition of materiality resulting from her poor judgment by converting and returning to the Father, which is indeed the final goal of the soul.

Besides being associated with Sophia, the soul is also identified with Helena:

Again Helena <...> saying "[My hearth] turned itself from me. It is to my house that I want to return. (ΠΑΖΗΤ` ΛΦΚΤΟC ΝΤΟΟΤ` ΠΑΛΙ(Ν) ΕΕΙΟΥΩΩ ΒΩΚ` ΕΠΑΗΕΙ)" For she sighed (ΝΕCΑΩ ΕΖΟΗ) saying "It is Aphrodite who deceived me and brought me out of my village. My only daughter I left behind me, and my good, understanding and faithful husband.""²²⁹

²²⁴ *ApJohn* II, 13, 32 – 14, 1; *AdHaer* I, 4, 2; *Val. Ex.* 34, 23-38.

²²⁵ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 4, 2 and *ExTheod* 48, 2-4. Interestingly, it is also a passion proper to Error in *GosTruth* II, 26, 19-23.

²²⁶ See the abovementioned textual *loci* in *ApJohn*, *GN* and *ExVal*.

²²⁷ *ApJohn* II, 13, 33.

²²⁸ Sophia's conversion is specifically described as an ἐπιστροφή in *AdHaer* I, 2, 3 and I, 4, 1-2.

²²⁹ *ExSoul* II, 136, 35 – 137, 5.

In the chapter on the Simonian gnosis, the centrality of the character of Helena has been extensively proved.²³⁰ According to the available sources, Helena was a prostitute whom Simon Magus had taken as a wife. Regardless of whether the character of Helena has been fabricated by the heresiologist or not, it is certain that it became as a primary marker of Simonian gnosis in the third and fourth centuries. Moreover, the character of Helena was perceived as alternative to that of Sophia, for they both underwent the same journey from divine beings to fallen entity and, finally, to redeemed beings. In this regard, both Helena and Sophia would be a perfect match for the character of the soul in *ExSoul*, since they were associated with the element of prostitution. Therefore, it would be odd – to say the least – that the author of *ExSoul* chose a similar example to exemplify his theory about the soul's journey towards the Father's house without having in mind such a clear and renown Gnostic antecedent. Since, in all probability, this is a reference to the so-called Simonian tradition, it must also be considered as an additional proof of the Gnostic background of *ExSoul*.

I would like to underline that a reference to Sophia does not diminish the parenetic purpose of these passages. On the contrary, it would appear that *ExSoul* is bringing the Valentinian ecclesiological role of Sophia to its extreme consequences: if Sophia is not only an aeon, but the totality of the spiritual seed that will be redeemed, then it is only logical that each spiritual soul will undergo what Sophia underwent.²³¹ In *ExSoul*, the story of Sophia has been universalised to the extent that all those who are born out of the 'seed that is the life-giving spirit' have the same destiny as Sophia, thus eventually stressing the hortatory function of this treatise.

VI.3.3 The Redemption of the Soul

According to *ExSoul*, the reunion with the Father happens in two subsequent steps. At first, the soul needs to regain her feminine nature, which she has apparently lost because of her prostitution. Secondly, by regaining the lost

²³⁰ *Supra* IV.1.

²³¹ A similar association was also developed by Origen in his *Commentary and Homilies on the Song of Songs*, where the bride represents both the Church – that is, the totality of the λογικοί – and the individual soul (λογικός). See Origen, *CCc* IV, 1, 1-27.

feminine nature, the soul becomes a bride and she can marry her true bridegroom. The first step is described in the following manner:

But when she perceives the straits she is in and weeps (Ἰσπιδε) before the father and repents (Ἰσμετανοει), then the father will have mercy on her and he will make her womb turn from the external domain and will turn it again inward (Ἰκτο Ἰτεσμητρα εβολ 2Ἰ να πσα νβολ παλι(ν) Ἰκτος εζουν), so that the soul will regain her proper character. For it is not so with a woman. For the womb of the body is inside the body like the other internal organs (Ἰμητρα γαρ Ἰπσωμα ευψοοῖ Ἰφοῦν Ἰπσωμα Ἰθε νγκεμα2τ), but the womb of the soul is around the outside like the male genitalia, which are external (Ἰμητρα Ἰτοῦ Ἰτφυχη εκωτε Ἰπσα νβολ Ἰθε ἸἸφυσικον Ἰφοοῦτ ευψοοῖ Ἰπβολ). So when the womb of the soul (Ἰμητρα θε Ἰτφυχη), by the will of the father, turns itself inward, it is baptized (ψαρεσβαπτιζε) and is immediately cleansed of the external pollution.²³²

Once again, *ExSoul* uses blunt sexual imagery to describe the vicissitudes of the soul. The text is here probably describing the sacrament of baptism as the restoration of her womb from the outside to the inside, through which the soul will reach the status of purification required to enjoy the Father's proximity.²³³ Metaphorically, the turn of the womb to the inside and, consequently, the soul's re-gaining of a feminine nature represent the restoration of her lost virginity, the one she had protologically while she was with her Father. The implications of this metaphor are pivotal for understanding this treatise and they imply both liturgical and mythological aspects. From a liturgical perspective, *ExSoul* is clear regarding the priority and necessity of baptism over the mystery of the bridal chamber.²³⁴ From a mythological and allegorical perspective, *ExSoul* stresses that the soul needs to be feminine in order to be restored to the Father's house. In this regard, the first passage appears as an exception concerning the Gnostic use of gender categories, for it implies that

²³² *ExSoul* II, 131, 16-30.

²³³ For *ExSoul*'s sacramental theology, see Krause (1975a).

²³⁴ The discussion of the sacramental theology of *ExSoul* falls beyond the scope of my dissertation. For more information on Valentinian sacramental theology see Thomassen (2006), 333-416.

the female gender is superior to the male one.²³⁵ In this instance, the male gender is associated with prostitution, since it is equated to the soul's womb being exposed to the world like an indecent proposal, thus contradicting the statements of *GosTh* and *ExTheod*, where the soul has to become "male" to access the bridal chamber.²³⁶ By contrast, in *ExSoul* the soul needs to turn from male to female to re-gain the access to the Father's house. Notwithstanding the apparent contradiction, I am convinced that the solution to this conundrum can be found in the Valentinian myth of the angels and the spiritual seed. According to this Valentinian mythologoumenon, the soul of the elect has a female gender, for it is countered by Sophia's male emission – that is, the angels – to whom these female souls will be eschatologically married. In this perspective, it makes sense that the true and original nature of the soul is feminine, since she had originally been assigned a female gender and is eschatologically destined to be reunited with her counterpart, that is, a male angel. Moreover, such interpretation of the soul's femaleness would also explain better the overlapping between the soul and Sophia, for the fallen female aeon and her female emission – that is, those who are born out of the 'seed that is the life-giving spirit' (ΠΕΣΠΕΡΜΑ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΗΤΟΟΤῚ ΕΤΕ ΠΠΝᾶ)²³⁷ – have the same eschatological destiny of Sophia. Hence, as in Valentinianism the eschatological syzygies are composed by a female spiritual element and male angelic elements, in *ExSoul* the soul needs to regain her female nature to marry her true male bridegroom. Nevertheless, it is worth stressing that the use of the masculine imagery in a pejorative sense represents a *unicum* among Gnostic texts, thus diverging from the use of gender categories noted in the majority of Gnostic texts.

²³⁵ This oddity had already been underlined by Scopello, (1985), 134, who, however, does not pose it in relation to the Valentinian mythologoumenon and theologoumenon of the female spiritual seed and the male angelic seed, as I will explain shortly.

²³⁶ See *GosTh*, Logion 114 (51:18 – 51:26) and *ExTheod* 21. A similar concept can be also observed in Heracleon's fragment in Origen, *ComJn* VI, 20, 1.

²³⁷ *ExSoul* II, 133, 31-134, 6: 'And when she had intercourse with him, she got from him the seed that is the life- giving spirit, so that by him she bears good children and rears them. For this is the great, perfect marvel of birth. And so this marriage is made perfect by the will of the Father'. In this regard, I strongly disagree with Lanzillotta (2010), 418 who dismisses the presence of *pneuma* as the 'Aristotelian conception of the extrinsic intellect'. Lanzillotta's argument is indeed build on the affirmation of the dualistic anthropology (body/soul) of *ExSoul*, rejecting the *pneuma* as the third element of the human being.

Following the sacrament of baptism – which is antecedent to the union between the bridegroom and the bride in the bridal chamber – *ExSoul* resorts to the nuptial imagery which we have observed in many Gnostic texts, especially Valentinian ones:

From heaven the father sent her her man, who is her brother, the firstborn (ΑΠΕΙΩΤ' ΤΗΝΑΥ ΝΑΣ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΗ ΤΠΕ ΗΠΕCΖΟΟΥΤ' ΕΤΕ ΠΕCCON ΠΕ ΠΦΟΡΠ' ΗΜΙCΕ). Then the bridegroom came down to the bride (ΤΟΤΕ ΑΠΡΗΨΕΛΕΕΤ' ΕΙ ΑΠΙΤΗ ΨΑΧΕΛΕΕΤ'). She gave up her former prostitution (ΗΤΕCΠΟΡΝΙΑ) and cleansed herself of the pollutions of the adulterers, and she was renewed so as to be a bride (ΑCΡ ΒΡΡΕ ΔΕ ΑΥΗΝΤΨΕΛΕΕΤ). She cleansed herself in the bridal chamber (ΑCΤΟΥΒΟC ΖΗ <Π>ΜΑ ΗΨΕΛΕΕΤ); she filled it with perfume (ΗCΤΗΝΟΥCΕ); she sat in it waiting for the true bridegroom.²³⁸

This passage has a very strong Valentinian connotation, for it displays those features that are proper to the Valentinian theologoumenon of the bridal chamber.²³⁹ First of all, both *ExSoul* and *GosPhil* believe that the soul's prostitution will end only when she will be reunited with her true bridegroom. Just as in *ExSoul*, *GosPhil* claimed that: 'If a marriage is open to the public, it has become prostitution (ΟΥΓΑΜΟC ΕCΨΑΚΩΚΑΖΗΥ ΑCΨΩΠΕ ΗΠΟΡΝΕΙΑ), and the bride becomes the harlot [...] when she is impregnated by another man'.²⁴⁰ Therefore, the condition of the prostitute-bride of *GosPhil* resembles closely that of the prostitute soul and bride in *ExSoul*, since both brides prostitute themselves and have children with the adulterers while waiting for their true husbands. Secondly, both *ExSoul* and *GosPhil* employ the same terminology to describe the bridegroom. The idea that the bridegroom is the soul's brother mirrors the idea that he is Sophia's brother in other Gnostic texts;²⁴¹ in addition, many Valentinian texts, especially *ExTheod*, named Sophia's bridegroom the

²³⁸ *ExSoul* II, 132, 9-15.

²³⁹ For my analysis of the bridal chamber in Valentinian texts, see *supra* III.4.2. For the value of the bridal chamber in *ExSoul* and *GosPhil*, see also Ménard (1975a).

²⁴⁰ *GosPhil* II, 82, 10-12.

²⁴¹ For instance, Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 30, 12. For a detailed study of this metaphor, see Orbe (1974).

πρωτοτόκος.²⁴² Thirdly, *ExSoul*'s description of the descent of the bridegroom to make the soul 'renewed as to become a bride' resembles closely the theologoumena of the second coming of Christ that gives Sophia the formation κατὰ γνῶσιν, since such action is necessary to make respectively Sophia and the soul lawful brides, worthy of being united with the bridegroom.²⁴³ Lastly, just as in *GosPhil*, *ExSoul* resorts to the metaphor of the perfume to describe the waiting for the bridegroom and the spiritual love.²⁴⁴ Hence, both *ExSoul* and *GosPhil* employ nuptial imagery to discuss the coming of the bridegroom and the eschatological destiny of the souls.

In the case of *GosPhil*, I have underlined how the nuptial imagery has been borrowed from the *Sos*.²⁴⁵ Could it not be the same for *ExSoul*? Could these similarities be traced back to *Sos* independently, thus eliminating the need of assuming a shared Valentinian affiliation? I do not think this is the case for the following reasons. First of all, it is worth mentioning that *ExSoul* does not quote *Sos* explicitly, but it recalls it only implicitly. For instance, the soul's prostitution in the market resembles closely the description of the bride's wandering in the city searching for the bridegroom and being attacked by the city's guards in *Sos* 5:6-8.²⁴⁶ Moreover, a further example can be identified in the perfume that fills the bridal chamber, as in the case of *Sos* 4:10-11. Nevertheless, if this was a direct quotation from the *Sos*, it would be difficult to understand why the author of *ExSoul*, who quotes both Old and New Testaments numerous times, did not acknowledge this quotation from *Sos*. However, not only does *ExSoul* resort to nuptial imagery, but it also assumes that the bridal chamber represents the eschatological destiny of the soul. In this regard, the similarity with Valentinian theologoumena is complete, especially considering that both *GosPhil* and *ExSoul* portray the bridal chamber's union between the bride and the bridegroom in a similar manner:

²⁴² *ExTheod* 7,3-4. See also, *AdHaer* I, 2, 6, he is described as the τέλειον καρπὸν of the Pleroma.

²⁴³ *AdHaer* I, 4, 1.

²⁴⁴ *GosPhil* II, 77, 35- 78, 7 and II, 82, 19-23.

²⁴⁵ *Supra* III.3.2.1.

²⁴⁶ *ExSoul* II, 132, 15-19.

For since that marriage (ΕΠΓΑΜΟΣ) is not like the carnal marriage (ΜΠΓΑΜΟΣ ΝΣΑΡΚΙΚΟΣ), those who are to have intercourse with one another will be satisfied with that intercourse. And as if it were a burden they leave behind them the annoyance of physical desire and they [turn their faces from] each other. But this marriage [*lacuna*] But [once] they unite [with one another], they become a single life (ΑΛΛΑ ΕΥΨΑΝ[Π]ΖΝΖΩΤΡ̄ ΑΝ[Ο]Υ[ΕΡΗ]Υ ΨΑΥΨΩΠΕ ΑΥΩΝΖ ΟΥΩΤ).²⁴⁷

This passage from *ExSoul* suggests that the author interpretes the nuptial imagery according to the Valentinian theologoumenon of the syzygy, for this passage matches *GosPhil* where it is written: ‘If there is a hidden quality in the marriage of defilement (ΠΓΑΜΟΣ ΜΠΧΩΖΜ̄), how much more is the undefiled marriage (ΠΓΑΜΟΣ ΝΑΤΧΩΖΜ̄) a true mystery! It is not fleshly but pure. It belongs not to desire but to the will (ΕΦΗΠ ΑΝ ΑΤΕΠΘΥΜΙΑ ΑΛΛΑ ΕΠΟΥΩΨ).’²⁴⁸ As a matter of fact, both Nag Hammadi treatises contrast the earthly marriage with the heavenly one: while the former is driven by physical desire, the other is pure and spiritual. Furthermore, both understand the bridal chamber as the eschatological place where the original unity between male and female will be finally restored. This is indeed the primary theologoumenon displayed by *ExSoul*: the restoration in the bridal chamber of the original unity between a female and a male element, for this will grant the soul access to the Father’s house. According to the terms in which it is expressed and the imagery which is employed, it is reasonable to conclude that, in this instance, *ExSoul* has borrowed various Valentinian mythologoumena and theologoumena.

IV.3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has shown how the study of feminine imagery can cast light on some understudied texts, such as *ExSoul*. By comparing feminine imagery in this treatise with that in other Gnostic texts, it has been possible to isolate some shared mythologoumena and theologoumena, which strongly support the hypothesis of a Valentinian affiliation of *ExSoul*.

²⁴⁷ *ExSoul* II, 132, 27-35

²⁴⁸ *GosPhil* II, 82, 4-6.

The analysis of the condition of the female soul while she was with the Father has shown that the author of *ExSoul* identifies the souls with an androgynous virgin that fell away from her Father, thus abandoning her true husband.²⁴⁹ In the description of these events, *ExSoul* displays mainly features proper to Alexandrian Platonism and Valentinianism. In particular, I have underlined the similarities with Origen, *ExTheod* and *GosPhil*. Moreover, I have stressed that the soul's androgyny resembles closely the Valentinian syzygy, for *ExSoul* assumes that the male/female couple represents both the protological and the eschatological condition of the soul. Nevertheless, the similarities between *ExSoul* and other Gnostic texts have become more evident in my investigation of the fallen condition of the soul. First of all, *ExSoul*'s assimilation of the soul with a prostitute finds many parallels in all Gnostic traditions. In particular, I have highlighted how the seduction strategies of the soul's lovers correspond to the seduction strategies of the evil archons in the Sethian, Barbeloite and Ophite texts. In addition, I have underlined how the classical reference to Helena of Troy may suggest a bridge between *ExSoul* and the so-called Simonian gnosis. Secondly, I have listed and analysed numerous examples concerning the similarities between the soul's μετάνοια and Sophia's repentance, stressing particularly the similarities between the emotions manifested by the soul and Sophia. Lastly, I have also proved the correspondence between the nuptial imagery in *ExSoul* and in Valentinian texts. By comparing the bridal chamber in *ExSoul* and *GosPhil*, I have shown that both texts attribute the same functions to the bridal chamber, since they believe that it represents the eschatological marriage between the soul and her true bridegroom, the "First-born". This union will be possible after the soul has undergone a journey of purification, which *ExSoul* depicts as the soul regaining her female nature. Unlike the majority of Gnostic texts, *ExSoul* employs the metaphor of male sex (the outward womb) to describe the status of prostitution, whilst it assimilates the female sex (the inward womb) to a condition of purity. Nevertheless, I believe that this unusual gender imagery can be explained by means of the Valentinian myth of *ExTheod*, according to which human souls

²⁴⁹ Although this information is not explicitly stated in the text, it is deducible from *ExSoul* II, 133, 4-10.

need to be female to marry male angels. After having regained her femaleness, the soul is ready to marry the bridegroom, thus re-establishing the syzygial union that she had broken in the beginning.

In conclusion, this analysis has highlighted many similarities and correspondences between *ExSoul* and the Gnostic mythologoumena and theologoumena, especially the Valentinian ones. Hence, it would appear that the syncretism proper to this text not only implies that the author resorted to various non-Christian traditions, such as classical or Jewish literature, but also to various Gnostic texts. However, the Gnostic elements shape *ExSoul*'s narrative and theology to such an extent that they indicate far more than a mere Gnostic influence or a possible Gnostic reading, as Lanzillotta and Dritsas Bizier have implied.²⁵⁰ Gnostic mythologoumena and theologoumena, conveyed through feminine imagery, are pivotal in *ExSoul*, thus constituting the main message of the treatise. It is reasonable to conclude that *ExSoul* seems closer to Valentinianism than to any other Gnostic movement, for *ExSoul*'s feminine imagery encompasses all three aspects which are proper to Valentinian feminine imagery.

²⁵⁰ Lanzillotta (2010) and (2010a), XXX; Dritsas Bizier (2010), 313.

Conclusion

It is now time to get back to the question that drives my research: what does Gnostic feminine imagery say about God? First, I have shown that all three aspects of Gnostic feminine imagery, which are strictly related to each other through the mechanism of *typological resemblance*, are an essential part of the Gnostic representation of the divine. Therefore, I have proved that the interest for the feminine should not be taken as a cultural super-imposition of modern concerns over Gnostic texts, but as a genuine concern for Gnostic theologians. Secondly, I have presented some compelling arguments to claim that feminine imagery conveys the most original doctrines of Gnostic theologies, which resorted to mythological feminine imagery to discuss those aspects of the Godhead that they considered ambiguous and paradoxical. Overall, this work has achieved results in two respects. On the one hand, I have improved the understanding of how feminine imagery is employed and what it says about the divine through a detailed hermeneutical work on Gnostic texts that present Ophite, Sethian, Barbeloite and Valentinian mythologoumena and theologoumena. On the other hand, I have proved the worth of these findings by using them to analyse three Gnostic female characters which do not fit within the usual Gnostic paradigms – namely, Helena of Tyre, Edem and the feminine soul of *ExSoul*.

My research is grounded on the *working definition* of Gnosticism that I have illustrated in Part I. Expanding on the definition agreed during the Gnostic Colloquium in Messina, I have proposed to identify Gnosticism as a Christian dualistic movement, which started around the second century CE, and presented a mythological and cosmological structure organised according to the principle of *typological resemblance*. I have reached this conclusion after having observed that each level of reality in Gnostic cosmology is but an imperfect reproduction of the superior level. Typological resemblance is especially visible among female characters, since both the incarnated feminine and the fallen feminine are often imperfect copies of the intra-pleromatic feminine. In addition, I have explained that heresiological classifications of

Gnostic movements – such as those of Ophitism, Sethianism, Barbeloism and Valentinianism – are useful for the purpose of historical and theological investigations of Gnosticism, but that they do not reveal the historical reality of these groups. On the contrary, I have warned that these categories are employed as mere historiographical categories, for they have proven helpful in organising the variegated Gnostic material.

In Part II, I have analysed how the feminine is employed in the description of God in *ApJohn*, *HypArch*, *OrigWorld* and *AdHaer* I, 29 and I, 30. These texts, which present a majority of Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite mythologoumena and theologoumena, stand out because they attribute Trinitarian, soteriological and revealing functions to female characters. The Trinitarian functions of the feminine are particularly visible in *ApJohn*, where Barbelo is identified as the female third element of the Gnostic Trinity (Father-Mother-Son). In this treatise, which presents mainly Barbeloite features, Barbelo put into action the Father's will to generate the entire Pleroma, thus stressing how the generative function of God is exemplified by introducing a female person into the Trinity. Therefore, the analysis of *ApJohn*'s intra-pleromatic feminine has shown that this treatise conceives the Trinitarian Holy Spirit as a Mother, whose primary function is that of actualising the Father's will to generate the Pleroma. This Barbeloite feature is also present in Irenaeus' account (*AdHaer* I, 29), thus showing that this Gnostic innovation was well known among non-Gnostic Christian theologians and perceived as a threat. Besides the Trinitarian functions of the feminine, the authors of these texts attribute also key soteriological and revealing functions to the feminine. In this regard, it is worth remembering that revealing and soteriological functions often coincide within Gnosticism, since this movement is based on the belief that knowledge (*gnosis*) is the way to salvation. This overlapping of roles is confirmed in all three aspects of the Gnostic feminine. In *HypArch*, the intra-pleromatic character of Incorruptibility is the divine luminous being which reveals herself in the waters below during the theophany above the waters, thus functioning both as the revealing agent and as the revealed divine being. The author of *HypArch* goes even further, making her the 'likeness' according to which all human beings have been created, thus reinterpreting the human creation in *Gen* 1:26-27 as the

creation into the likeness of a female divine being. Similar soteriological functions are even held by fallen female beings, thus showing to what extent feminine imagery is ambiguous and paradoxical.

In the case of the fallen feminine, the ambiguity and paradox of Gnostic feminine imagery in Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite movements become evident. Sophia, the fallen aeon of most gnostic mythologies, personifies both the defectiveness of God – that is, the will of an inferior divine being to act like the supreme God – and a soteriological and revealing agent. In *OrigWorld*, Sophia is both the fallen aeon, who generates the evil ruler Yaldabaoth, and the virgin who reveals her image in the waters and purifies the earth through her blood. Likewise, the paradoxical nature of the feminine is visible in the case of the incarnated feminine, since Eve performs both the role of the instructor and that of the perpetrator of Yaldabaoth's plan in *ApJohn*, *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*. While the spiritual Eve awakens Adam from his condition of ignorant sleep, the carnal Eve is subjugated by evil archons and generates sons to Yaldabaoth. In this case, I have shown that these Gnostic theologians separate the two Eves because of the difficulties of conceiving the existence of a divine nature within human beings. The impossibility of making human and divine coexist in the same character is such that they separate the two characters. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that the vast majority of Gnostic texts present a docetic Christology, thus leaving one wondering if the theological reasons behind the separation of the two Eves could not be traced back to a docetistic issue, especially considering that the spiritual Eve is one of the major soteriological agents of Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite mythology.

In Part III, where I have investigated Valentinian feminine imagery, I have encountered equally ambiguous and paradoxical female characters, but I have also observed a significant shift in the theological doctrines conveyed through feminine imagery. First, the significance of the pleromatic feminine is reduced compared to *ApJohn*, *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*. Both *ExVal* and *GN* conceive Silence – that is, the female syzygial counterpart of the Abyss – as a passive recipient for the male power. In Valentinian theology, the generative role that other Gnostic theologians envision as belonging to the Trinitarian Mother is

reduced to that of mere provider of divine substratum to which the male element of the syzygy gives form. Nevertheless, Valentinian theology attributes great significance to the fallen feminine for the character of Sophia conveys the great originality of this Gnostic movement. First of all, the myth of the fallen feminine is represented by means of the so-called ‘myth of separation’, that is, the hypostatisation of Sophia in two characters: one representing her better self and one her worst self. While in *ExVal* and *ExTheod* 1-42 Sophia’s separation is envisioned by means of filiation since her better self is identified with Christ, in *GosPhil*, *GN* and *ExTheod* 43-65 she separates into two female characters named pleromatic-Sophia/Sophia-Echamot and Sophia-Echmot/Achamot. If in the case of Eve, her separation into two characters is due to the paradox of conceiving divinity and humanity together, Sophia’s separation is instead the result of the impossibility of conceiving a suffering God. In *ExTheod* and *GN*, Sophia – more precisely, Sophia Achamot in *GN* – is conceived as the visible and suffering part of God. However, while in *ExTheod*, Sophia is explicitly acknowledged as the Logos’ σαρκίον,¹ in *GN* Sophia’s passion is envisioned as the pleromatic archetype of Christ’s Passion. Hence, the fallen feminine is acknowledged as the defective part of God that is able to suffer passions. Nevertheless, Sophia is also conceived as the totality of the spiritual seed, the elected Church, thus assuming a prominently ecclesiological feature. As such, she is also the bride that awaits the coming of the bridegroom who will save her and reunite with her in the bridal chamber. In particular, *GosPhil* highlights that the mystery of the bridal chamber coincides with the creation of Adam and Eve in syzygy, whereas the separation between sexes is identified with the coming of death. Just as Sophia’s actions outside of the boundaries of the syzygy disrupt the divine order, so Eve’s separation from Adam is the beginning of death among humans. Therefore, just as Sophia’s reunion with the Saviour will result in the redemption of the entire spiritual Church, so the union between Adam and Eve will be achieved once again through the sacrament of the bridal chamber. Unlike the texts analyzed in Part II, Valentinian theologians conceive female characters as subordinated to male characters, especially considering that all

¹ *ExTheod* 1, 1-2.

female characters necessitate the intervention of a male being to redeem them. However, feminine imagery still says a great deal about the way in which Valentinian theologians understand God and the divine nature, for it is used to indicate the Christian mystery of a suffering God that redeems human beings by reuniting them with him.

My findings concerning feminine imagery in these Gnostic traditions have also been useful in identifying similar patterns in three other Gnostic works: the Simonian portrayal of Helena of Tyre, the character of Edem in *Bar* and the fallen soul in *ExSoul*. These three works present a significant feminine imagery, but their importance for the study of Gnosticism has been often underestimated, since they present unique mythologies. In the study of Helena of Tyre, the companion of Simon Magus, I have noticed that the three different aspects of the Gnostic feminine have been grouped in a single character. Although the sources about Simon Magus are hardly conclusive regarding the affiliation of Simon Magus to Gnosticism, the portrayal of Helena as a Gnostic divine being is difficult to be denied. Helena is at once the Ennoia of Simon First-God, the fallen divine being trapped into a material world and the prostitute rescued by Simon Magus. The correspondence between the portrayal of Helena and the female characters of Gnostic mythologies is striking to such an extent that it seems likely that her character – if she ever really existed – was refashioned by the heresiologists to match Gnostic feminine imagery. Whether Helena existed or not and whether Simon was indeed a Gnostic teacher, the portrayal offered by the polemical sources makes Helena a symbol of the inescapability and importance of feminine imagery, since her character was fashioned to make Simon a credible gnostic teacher. The second female character that I have analyzed is Edem, the psychic divine entity of *Bar*. This text has not been studied much since it is known only through the mediation of Hippolytus and, in addition, it presents a unique gnostic mythology. Nevertheless, I have identified several similarities between Edem and Ophite, Barbeloite and Valentinian feminine imagery. First of all, just as Barbelo, Edem is inserted in a sort of Trinity composed by her, Elohim and the Good One. Within this Trinity, she performs a generative role. Moreover, just as in the case of Valentinian intra-pleromatic characters, her power needs to be

limited by a male figure; however, unlike other pleromatic female beings in all other Gnostic mythologies, she is a psychic rather than a pneumatic being. When she is abandoned by her companion Elohim and her power is no longer restrained by him, she turns into a fallen evil being that originates evil for human beings. In this case, the description of her depravity is quite similar to the description of Sophia's defectiveness in Ophite mythologies, since both borrow several elements from Jewish apocalyptic texts. Another peculiarity of *Bar* is the superiority of Eve to Edem, since the former possesses the spiritual nature that the latter lacks. Therefore, the character of Eve in *Bar* is fairly similar to the spiritual Eve in Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite texts concerning the superiority of Eve on Sophia. Nevertheless, as in Valentinian texts, Eve does not have any soteriological role and the goal of humanity is identified with the restoration of the syzygial condition of unity between the female and male element. It would therefore appear that, although the mythological plot of *Bar* is unique, the feminine imagery proposed by this unknown Gnostic teacher is a combination of various Barbeloite, Ophite and Valentinian mythologoumena and theologoumena. In *ExSoul*, the last case study I have presented, the story is entirely centered on the female personification of the soul. This feminine soul is portrayed as a virgin who abandoned her Father's house and gave herself to prostitution. In the course of my work, I have underlined several times the importance of the metaphor of the prostitute and the bride in a Gnostic framework, especially with regard to the fallen and incarnated feminine. Therefore, the presence of such opposition in *ExSoul* is already a good indicator of the possible Gnostic affiliation of this text. Moreover, given the proximity between the myth of Sophia in Valentinianism with the myth of the fallen soul in *ExSoul*, I have hypothesized that this is indeed a Gnostic work, one with significant Valentinian influences. First of all, the reason for the fall of the soul from her pristine condition of androgynous virginity is identified by the author of *ExSoul* with her violation of the Father's will, just as it happens in the majority of Valentinian myths. Moreover, the fact that her original condition was androgynous seems to suggest that she was united in syzygy, which she abandoned for her other lovers. Secondly, her condition of prostitution is accompanied by violent passions – especially that of regret – like it was in the case of Sophia. Lastly, the goal of the prostitute

soul is to be restored to her original condition and to marry her true husband in the bridal chamber. Overall, I believe that *ExSoul's* feminine imagery corresponds to a large extent to Valentinian feminine imagery, thus confirming a Valentinian affiliation of the texts.

In conclusion, the study of Gnostic feminine imagery has proven to be particularly fruitful for the identification of the key elements of the Gnostic description of God. In Gnosticism, feminine imagery was not only a powerful rhetorical and mythological tool, but it was also an effective way to convey theological doctrines and teachings. I can only hope that these preliminary findings will stimulate further research into Gnostic feminine imagery for much needs yet to be done in this field.

Abbreviations

ACW	<i>Ancient Christian Writers</i>
ActPt	<i>Acts of Peter</i>
AdHaer	<i>Adversus Haereses</i>
AdVal	<i>Adversus Valentinianos</i>
All	<i>Allogenes</i>
ApAd	<i>The Apocalypse of Adam</i>
ApJohn	<i>Apocryphon of John</i>
ApPr	<i>Apologia Prima</i>
Bar	<i>Book of Baruch</i>
BASP	<i>The Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists</i>
BCNH	<i>Bibliothèque Copte de Nag Hammadi</i>
BETHL	<i>Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium</i>
BWatch	<i>Book of Watchers</i>
CCc	<i>Commentary on the Song of Songs</i>
CC	<i>Corpus Christianorum Serie Graeca</i>
CCSL	<i>Corpus Christianorum Serie Latina</i>
ClHom	<i>Clementine Homilies</i>
ClRec	<i>Clementine Recognitiones</i>
ComJn	<i>Commentary on the Gospel of John</i>
DialTryph	<i>Dialogue with Trypho</i>
El	<i>Elenchos</i>
EnI	<i>Enoch 1</i>
Enn	<i>Enneads</i>
EpFl	<i>Letter to Flora</i>
Eug	<i>Eugnostos</i>
EV	<i>Estudios Valentinianos</i>
ExSoul	<i>Exegesis of the Soul</i>
ExTheod	<i>Excerpta ex Theodoto</i>
ExVal	<i>Valentinian Exposition</i>
GCS	<i>Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller</i>
GosEg	<i>Gospel of the Egyptians</i>

<i>GosMary</i>	<i>Gospel of Mary</i>
<i>GosPhil</i>	<i>Gospel of Philip</i>
<i>GosTruth</i>	<i>Gospel of Truth</i>
<i>HypArch</i>	<i>Hypostasis of Archons</i>
HTR	<i>The Harvard Theological Review</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JECS	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
LCL	<i>Loeb Classical Library</i>
LM	<i>Le Muséon</i>
<i>Mar</i>	<i>Marsanes</i>
<i>Mel</i>	<i>Melchizedek</i>
NHMS	<i>Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies</i>
NHS	<i>Nag Hammadi Studies</i>
NT	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
NU	<i>Numen</i>
<i>OrigWord</i>	<i>On the Origin of the World</i>
<i>Pan</i>	<i>Panarion</i>
<i>Ref</i>	<i>Refutatio Omnium Haeresiarum</i>
SBL	<i>Society of Biblical Literature</i>
SC	<i>Sources Chrétiennes</i>

SHR	<i>Studies in the History of Religions</i>
<i>SophJesChr</i>	<i>Sophia of Jesus Christ</i>
Sos	<i>Song of Songs</i>
SP	<i>Studia Pastristica</i>
<i>Strom</i>	<i>Stromata</i>
<i>StSeth</i>	<i>Three Steles of Seth</i>
<i>TestTruth</i>	<i>Testimony of Truth</i>
<i>ThNor</i>	<i>The Thought of Norea</i>
<i>TriProt</i>	<i>Trimorphic Protennoia</i>
<i>TReub</i>	<i>Testament of Reuben</i>
<i>TriTrac</i>	<i>Tripartite Tractate</i>
VC	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
VCh	<i>Vetera Christianorum</i>
WUZT	<i>Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament</i>
ZAC	<i>Zeitschrift Für Antikes Christentum</i>
Zos	<i>Zostrianos</i>

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Declaration

This work has been submitted to the University of Nottingham in accordance with the regulations for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. It is my own work, and none of it has been previously submitted to the University of Nottingham or any other university for a degree.

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Introduction

Feminine imagery has permeated Christian texts since the first centuries of Christianity. Female characters and feminine metaphors are largely present in ancient Israel's texts, early Jewish works, as well as in nascent and developing early Christian literature. In the last fifty years there has been a growing interest in the study of women and gender which has interested all disciplines, including Early Christian Studies. Consequently, numerous works have been produced on the role of women in the Christian communities and in the gospels,¹ as well as numerous feminist readings of the history of Christianity.² Notwithstanding, much work needs yet to be done about philosophical and theological meaning of feminine imagery. In particular, my work arises from the need to investigate further *why and how a historically patriarchal society employed feminine imagery to describe God*. This question could be asked beyond the border of early Christianity, for also other religions and philosophies employed feminine imagery.³ Nevertheless, I believe it is a crucial question in the case of early Christian theology, since feminine imagery was progressively dismissed by Christian theologians without ever disappearing completely. Therefore, this work intends to expand on previous scholarship and *take on the challenge of explaining the extent to which feminine imagery was employed by early Christian theologians to describe God, focusing particularly on the Gnostic movements*.⁴

The choice of focusing my research on Gnosticism has been dictated by several reasons. First and foremost, Gnostics are the first Christian theologians to dedicate systematic attention to the feminine, constructing their core mythologies on the fall of a female divine being. Since Christian Gnosticism conveys its doctrines by means of mythologies, it is also the Christian

¹ See particularly the works of Tervahauta (2017); Schenk (2017); Haines-Eitzen (2012); Bauckham (2002); Clark (1990); Pagels (1974).

² For this line of investigation, see Soskice (2008); King – Beattie (2004); Corley (2002); Burrus (1995); Schüssler Fiorenza (1994).

³ An excellent survey of these texts can be found in Ruether (2005).

⁴ For a discussion and definition of the term 'Gnosticism' and its relationship with Christianity, *infra* I.1.

movement in which the role of feminine imagery – in the form of female mythological characters – stands out the most. Secondly, far from being a marginal phenomenon, Gnosticism had a great impact on Christian theology. Even at a superficial glance, its relevance for the history of Christianity is proven *in primis* by the large attention reserved to it by Christian heresiologists and *in secundis* by the significant effect that it had on contemporary or subsequent Christian theologians, such as Clement and Origen of Alexandria.⁵

The importance of feminine imagery in Gnosticism has not gone unnoticed in contemporary scholarship. Thus far, researches on this topic have mainly taken two directions.

On the one hand, the investigation of Gnostic female deities has been relegated to the study of the social status of women in Gnostic circles, especially through the study of the character of Mary Magdalene.⁶ This approach to feminine imagery has been extremely fruitful, since it has integrated the scarce information about the social structures of Gnostic communities and the role of women in them.⁷ A perfect example of this scholarly trend is the work of Karen King. In 1985, she organized a colloquium entitled ‘Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism’ and, in the Foreword of Acts, she claimed that ‘Gnostic mythology and gender imagery often affirm patriarchy and patriarchal gender roles.’⁸ In this case, King’s investigation about Gnostic feminine imagery was limited to the investigation of the balance of power between genders, thus overlooking the questions about what Gnostic authors wanted to convey through the use of feminine imagery to describe God. In other words, the focus on social history led to eyes being taken off theology, thus leaving

⁵ On the relation between Origen and Gnosticism, see Strutwolf (1993); Simonetti (2004); Lettieri (2005) and Lettieri (2008). On the relation between Clement and Gnosticism, see Lilla (1971); Kovacs (2001).

⁶ For instance, Malachi (2006); De Boer (2004); King (2003a); Marjanen (1996).

⁷ For instance, this is the case of some of Pagels’ work on Gnosticism, where she begins by acknowledging the importance and peculiarity of Gnostic feminine imagery to the point of claiming that women in Gnostic groups enjoyed a higher social consideration than in orthodox circles, despite the evidences on the social and communitarian rules of Gnostic groups are scarce. To deepen her argument, see Pagels (1976) and (1979). For a discussion regarding her methodology and her conclusion, see Hoffman (1994). See also Buckley (1986) and King (2003a).

⁸ King (2000), xvii.

aside the question concerning the mythological and theological implications of describing God through feminine imagery.

On the other hand, feminist scholars have found in Gnostic feminine imagery the proof of the existence of an alternative version of Christianity in which female spiritual power was laying claim on male power.⁹ The research of Rosemary Radford Ruether on divine feminine concluded that in Gnosticism ‘the emphasis on feminine spiritual power reflects yet another instance in which Gnostic religious creativity expressed itself in dramatic reversals of social order and religious traditions’ for ‘in the redemptive work of the higher world counteracting the lower world, female spiritual power is often envisioned as subverting and overcoming male material/psychic power.’¹⁰ Besides linking feminine imagery to the social condition of women, Ruether took a step forward and understood the importance of Gnostic feminine imagery as the “victory” of divine feminine over male power. Although the feminist approach has the undisputed merit of bringing due attention to this field of study, it still says little about the *historical theological* reasons behind the use of feminine imagery in Gnostic theology.

If these previous researches used feminine imagery as a means to an end – that is, as a means to cast light on the status of women or to affirm the balance of power between genders – my research aims to investigate how feminine imagery has been employed to convey aspects of the Godhead. In other words, I intend to explore why feminine imagery was important and what Gnostic theologians wanted to convey by using it. By a thorough analysis of Gnostic texts, my research will prove that Gnostic theologians employed feminine imagery to describe the ambiguity of God. Feminine imagery represented both the divine force of disruption and chaos, which altered the cosmic order, and those aspects of God that they perceived as ambiguous, paradoxical and, even, irrational. In particular, the Christian mystery of a God that generates, creates life, descends into the human world, suffers and, yet, reveals himself and redeems human beings. Hence, my research combines studies on female

⁹ For instance, Schüssler Fiorenza et al. (1993).

¹⁰ Ruether (2005), 112-113.

gender with a historical, philosophical and philological investigation. As for the gender studies, it is worth clarifying that the feminine is here understood as an intellectual category, that is, as a means of representing ideas about theological discourses.¹¹ While there are very few examples of such an approach in Early Christian Studies, this methodology has been fruitfully applied to historical philosophical studies. In her study on Plato, Bianchi described her task as that of ‘undertaking a re-examination of the notion of the receptacle/*chora* in Plato Timaeus, asking what its value may be [...] to understand the topology of the feminine in Western philosophy. As the source of cosmic motion as well as restless figurality, labile and polyvocal, the receptacle/*chora* offers a fecund zone of destabilization that allows for an immanent critique of ancient metaphysics’.¹² Although Bianchi works within a feminist framework and I am using a historical perspective, I believe her approach can also apply to an historical-theological investigation of the feminine, insofar as this method uses the feminine as a lens through which pursuing a critical investigation of western intellectual history. The method employed in my research shall be very similar. Nevertheless, insofar as historians of early Christianity ought to be considered ‘practitioners of a species of intellectual history’, as Clark said,¹³ my investigation of the feminine will be conducted within the boundaries of a historical-theological investigation, contextualising Gnostic Christian works within their geographical, chronological and cultural boundaries. Thus, I will conduct a thorough identification, study and comparison of the key exegetical passages regarding feminine imagery in these texts, confronting the different understandings of feminine imagery. This will help me to define possible cross-references and to better contextualize Gnostic Christian works within his cultural milieu. To achieve this goal, I will also conduct a strict philological investigation of the Greek, Latin and Coptic texts. By using this combined and interdisciplinary methodologies to investigate Gnostic theology, this work

¹¹ This definition is borrowed from Scott, J.W. (1988) *Gender and the Politics of History*, New York, 162 and adjusted to historical theological purposes, whereas Scott talked about gender in reference to social historical investigations as ‘a means of representing ideas about social order and social organization.’

¹² Bianchi (2006), 124.

¹³ Clark (2001), 394.

intends to deepen the scholarly understanding of a key element of the history of early Christianity.

Given the extent of the Gnostic production and the variety of aspects conveyed through feminine imagery in these works, I had to narrow down the field of investigation by following the subsequent criteria. First, I have decided to focus exclusively on the theological doctrines conveyed through feminine imagery, thus leaving aside social implications. Therefore, my investigation of Gnostic feminine imagery is primarily an investigation on the nature of the divine in Gnosticism, which highlights how some of the soteriological and generative functions of God are performed by female characters in Gnostic mythologies. Secondly, the selection of Gnostic texts from the vast Gnostic corpus has been operated to provide the most comprehensive representation possible of the mythologoumena and theologoumena of the major Gnostic movements.¹⁴ Therefore, my selection of Gnostic texts will privilege those which present feminine imagery linked to Ophite, Sethian, Barbeloite, Valentinian and Simonian mythologoumena and theologoumena.¹⁵ The selection of texts with these specific mythologoumena and theologoumena has been motivated either by the importance that they had in early Christian theology – for instance, this is the case of the *Apocryphon of John* – or for the significative presence of feminine imagery – as in the case of Justin’s *Book of Baruch* and the Nag Hammadi treatise known as *The Exegesis of the Soul*.¹⁶ Moreover, each of these texts represents a specific moment in the development and reception of feminine motifs in early Christianity, proving the widespread Gnostic interest in this topic. Thirdly, I have identified three main aspects of Gnostic feminine imagery: the feminine as part of the Godhead (or also intra-pleromatic feminine), the feminine as a fallen divine entity, and the feminine as represented in humankind. The first aspect concerns the presence and role of female characters within Gnostic Godhead, thus analysing characters such as

¹⁴ I shall employ the terms ‘mythologoumenon’ and ‘theologoumenon’ to describe the core theological doctrines of Gnostic movements. In particular, I have decided to use this terminology for it underlines the mythological way in which Gnostic theologians expressed their theological doctrines.

¹⁵ For a discussion of the different denomination of Gnostic movements, *infra* I.3.

¹⁶ A detailed explanation of the criteria employed for the selection of the texts will be provided in each part of this work, *infra* II.1; III.1; IV.

Barbelo-First Woman, Incorruptibility and Silence. The second aspect, namely the fallen feminine, includes those female divine beings which fall out of divine world into the material world. In this respect, it is worth underlining that the use of the term “fallen” has a specific biblical and theological connotation, for it is meant to recall the “fall” of the first chapters of Genesis. Sophia (the fallen aeon common to so many Gnostic mythologies) is certainly the most important character present in this category. The third aspect is the incarnated feminine and it concerns the feminine imagery employed in the description of biblical or mythological characters dwelling in the material world. These three aspects have been selected because they clarify how female beings permeate all levels of the Gnostic dualistic cosmos, thus better highlighting the roles and functions of each female character. In the following chapters, I will provide an explanation of these three aspects of feminine imagery in each of the texts that I have chosen, thus showing the theological meanings attributed to the feminine in different texts.

This work is divided into four parts. Part I is dedicated to the definition of ‘Gnosticism’ as a religious phenomenon and it is divided into three chapters. The first one provides a brief story of the scholarly debate concerning the definition of Gnosticism, since a universally agreed definition has not been found yet. In this regard, it is worth anticipating that my research is based on the *working definition* of Gnosticism agreed at the Colloquium of Messina in 1966.¹⁷ Briefly summarising, the terms “Gnostic” and “Gnosticism” will be here employed to indicate some Christian movements that started around the second century CE. These movements were in different geographical locations, used different languages and often had different community regulations. Nonetheless, they were associated by their theology, which is characterised by the notions of an ontological affinity between a specific class of humans and

¹⁷ Bianchi (1970). It is worth underlining that Gnosticism has always been considered a heretical group opposed to an alleged “orthodox church”. The faults of this categorisation has been largely investigated by Bauer (1971). Despite this, I will occasionally use this terminology to describe the opposition between Gnostic groups and heresiologists – such as Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Clement or Origen. However, the category of “heresy” and “orthodoxy” should not be interpreted rigidly and, most of all, they should not be intended as “moral” judgments. The use of this terminology will simply serve the purpose of illustrating the perceptions of ancient writers, but it does not express any verdict on the value of these doctrines.

divine beings, by a radical cosmic dualism, and by the idea of a devolution of the divine nature into the material world. I have made few additions to the Messina's *working definition* of Gnosticism, stressing particularly how all Gnostic texts present a mythological and cosmological structure based on *typological resemblance*. In the second chapter, I will illustrate the heterogenous nature of the Gnostic corpus, which is composed by both original Gnostic sources and heresiological accounts, explaining what problems arise from the use of polemical sources. Lastly, the third chapter will discuss the classification of Gnosticism in groups (such as Ophite, Sethian, Valentinian, etc...), highlighting how these denominations are extremely useful for historical research despite the doubts concerning their historical accuracy. For the sake of clarity, I will also briefly list the most important mythologoumena and theologoumena of each movement.

Part II analyses feminine imagery in Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite texts. Attention will be focused particularly on the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, *On the Origin of the World* and Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* I, 29 and I, 30. In the first chapter, I will illustrate the criteria used to select these texts. In brief, these texts have been selected from among those with Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite mythologoumena and theologoumena because they attribute to the feminine a unique role in the history of salvation. In the second chapter, I will expound the intra-pleromatic representation of the feminine in each text. In the third chapter, I will compare the various portrayals of Sophia, the liminal aeon who falls out of the Pleroma originating the inferior word. In the fourth chapter, I will analyse the differences between the spiritual Eve and the carnal Eve, showing how the former is the main soteriological and revealing agent in these Nag Hammadi treatises. Although each text presents a specific plot, all of them seem to attribute soteriological and revealing functions to female characters, while the extent of these functions varies from texts to texts. My analysis will prove that the attribution of such a soteriological role to the feminine is a trait proper – if not exclusive – to Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite movements. Hence, the feminine imagery is highly ambiguous – even paradoxical – for it represents both the defective and

fallen element and one of the major soteriological and revealing agents of these Gnostic theologies.

Part III deals with one of the most structured and well-known Gnostic movements, namely Valentinianism. The *Gospel of Philip*, the *Excerpta ex Theodoto* and Irenaeus' *Great News* on Ptolemy's doctrines (*Adversus Haereses* I, 1-8) are here used as major Valentinian sources. As in Part II, the first chapter will illustrate the sources of Valentinianism, explaining the selection criteria that I have used. This Gnostic movement has probably received the largest attention in the field of contemporary Gnostic studies, especially due to the heresiological insistence on its refutation. In Valentinian myths, the three aspects of Gnostic feminine imagery are perfectly recognisable: the female counterpart of the supreme Abyss, the male Pre-Father, is named Silence; the fallen feminine is always named Sophia, being both she who disrupts the perfection of the Pleroma with her sin and the totality of the spiritual seed; the incarnated feminine is represented by Eve, a fallen image of her fallen mother (Sophia). Each one of these three aspects will be discussed in one chapter. Contrarily to Ophite, Barbeloite and Sethian representations of the feminine, the Valentinians present female characters who do not perform any soteriological action. However, they still convey very important aspects of God. In particular, these chapters will illustrate that Valentinian feminine imagery represents the suffering and revealing God. Although the *paradoxical* aspect of the feminine is not stressed as much as it is in texts with Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite features, Valentinian feminine imagery conserves a certain *ambiguity* since it represents both the defective aeon that violates the rules of the syzygy and the spiritual being worthy of being reunited with the bridegroom in the "bridal chamber".

Part IV is divided into three chapters and its structure differs from that of the two previous sections. It is a collection of three case-studies: Helena of Tyre in Simonian gnosis, the *Book of Baruch* and *The Exegesis of the Soul*. These Gnostic texts have yet to find a classification under a specific Gnostic movement. Therefore, I will use my previous findings about feminine imagery in different Gnostic movements to contextualise and analyse these texts, thus

reaching some new conclusion concerning their mythology and theology. The first chapter will analyse the peculiar presence of feminine imagery in the so-called Simonian gnosis, that is, the role and functions of Simon's partner, Helen of Tyre. The study of this mysterious woman – if she ever existed – has been largely neglected by scholarship, which has rather chased the historical Simon. The available sources describe Helen in a threefold manner: as the *Ennoia* of Simon First-God, as a fallen divine feminine entity in need of redemption and as the actual historical woman who went about with Simon the Magician. If so, Helen groups in herself all three major aspects of Gnostic feminine imagery: the divine female entity, the fallen divine trapped into a material world and a carnal woman. Contrarily to previous researches, my work will emphasise the importance of the character of Helen both *per se* and as a key element to understand Simon's portrait as a Gnostic teacher. As a matter of fact, my research will claim that it is the way in which the character of Helen has been fashioned by the heresiologists that makes Simon a credible Gnostic teacher in the eyes of his opponents. Hence, this case has been selected for it shows the crucial importance of feminine imagery within Gnosticism. The second chapter will investigate the peculiar case of the *Book of Baruch* of the Gnostic teacher Justin. The importance of this document for the study of Gnostic feminine imagery is due to both the mystery surrounding its author and the unique myth narrated in the book. Edem is a female psychic being who is united in syzygy with Elohim, the male and supreme God, and she is abandoned in the lower regions of the cosmos when Elohim discovers his true pneumatic nature. The characterisation of Edem and the centrality attributed by the author to the syzygy portray a feminine imagery that is a unique combination of Ophite and Valentinian traits. Despite its brevity and its uncertain origin, this short myth represents an interesting case-study for the cross-contamination of different Gnostic representations of the feminine. The third chapter will analyse the use of feminine imagery in a short, but rich, Nag Hammadi treatise entitled *The Exegesis of the Soul*. This treatise has been largely overlooked by scholarship, probably because of its origin and date of composition are difficult – if not impossible – to determine. The mythology presented in this text is utterly centred on feminine imagery, identifying the soul with a vivid female character. The journey of the soul is interpreted as a

passing from one lover to another until the true lover is finally found. The explicit feminine imagery makes this text pivotal in the understanding Gnostic feminine imagery. My investigation will show how this text seems largely influenced by Valentinian feminine imagery, thus suggesting that this treatise should be listed among late Valentinian works.

Scholarship has dedicated great attention to Gnosticism. It would be impossible to examine here the scholarly debate concerning this movement; therefore, a detailed discussion of the scholarship will be conducted in each part of this work. Nonetheless, I believe it is important to highlight that no one has ever produced a monograph on Gnostic feminine imagery and that my research aims to fill this gap.

I. Methodological Problems in the Study of Gnosticism

The ancient religious phenomenon known as Gnosticism has been defined in various way by contemporary scholars.¹ The term Gnosticism was invented by modern scholars to indicate a second century heresy, which they knew mostly through the descriptions of its adversaries.² Before the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library in 1945,³ the information about Gnosticism was mostly limited to the heresiological accounts of its opponents,⁴ whose reports need to be examined critically by contemporary scholars because of their polemical intent. Although the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library brought new Gnostic texts to our attention, it did not solve the issue of defining and dating Gnostic movements. Contrariwise, the issue of defining Gnosticism became more urgent. The Nag Hammadi treatises are Coptic translations of originally Greek works, often poorly conserved and almost impossible to date. Consequently, the heterogeneity of Gnostic works and the polemical nature of heresiological sources induced scholars to question the category of Gnosticism *per se*. Up to nowadays, scholarship has not yet reached a universal agreement on the definition of Gnosticism. For these reasons, I deem it necessary to clarify some preliminary issues regarding the definition and internal articulations of Gnosticism, thus establishing some solid ground on which I intend to build my research.⁵

¹ See *infra* I.3.

² Lewis (2017), 23-25.

³ For more details about this discovery, see *infra* I.2.

⁴ With the exception of the *GosMary*, the *ApJohn* and the *SophJesChr*, which were already known thanks to the Berlin Codex.

⁵ The following overview of the methodological problems of Gnostic studies will not engage in the debate concerning the origins of Gnosticism, for it falls beyond the scope of this work to identify the origin of Gnostic movements. As I have explained in the Introduction, the texts analyzed in this work are mostly classified as Christian texts, despite the fact that they present substantial borrowings from other religious and philosophical traditions. Furthermore, when the affiliation to Christianity of some texts is not acknowledged by the scholarship, I will provide evidences in support of such affiliation. For further readings on this topic see Bianchi (1970) and Simonetti (1991).

I.1 Reaching an Agreement: the Rugged Way Towards a Definition of Gnosticism

The definition of Gnosticism has troubled scholars for many decades now, but no universally acknowledged definition has yet been agreed.⁶

The first scholar to take a decisive stand in this regard was Adolf von Harnack,⁷ who was also one of the first to dedicate due attention to Gnosticism. He defined Gnosticism as ‘the acute secularising or Hellenising of Christianity, with the rejection of the Old Testament’, which developed in opposition to the ‘catholic Church’.⁸ Harnack’s definition shaped the study of Gnosticism for almost fifty years until another German scholar, Hans Jonas, researched this topic extensively, concluding that Gnosticism was the ‘organising force’ or the ‘underlying unity’ of the syncretistic wave which hit the East at the beginning of the Christian era.⁹ It is worth mentioning that Jonas was the first to connect the problem of the essence of Gnosticism with its origins and syncretistic nature. However, Jonas formulated a rather loose definition of Gnosticism, classifying it as ‘a collective heading for a manifoldness of sectarian doctrines appearing within and around Christianity during its critical first centuries’.¹⁰ In spite of the many chronological and historical differences between these movements, Jonas believed that they presented some similarities in their theology, cosmology, anthropology, eschatology and morality.¹¹ Besides Harnack’s and Jonas’ efforts to define Gnosticism, an additional attempt was made by Robert Grant, who proposed to classify Gnostic movements according to their geographical locations, discussing also the possibility that the social dynamics which followed the Jewish revolts of the first century played a

⁶ The following overview of the scholarly debate that led to the modern questioning of the category of Gnosticism is hardly comprehensive enough to explain the complexity of the problem. While specific scholarly positions will be explained and discussed later on in this work, this paragraph aims at providing a general overview in order to allow the reader to better engage with the complex matter at hand. For a complete story of the bibliography on Nag Hammadi see the two volumes of Robinson (1997) and (2014).

⁷ For the story of the scholarship before Harnack, see Rudolph (1987), 30-32.

⁸ Harnack (1894), 227.

⁹ Jonas (1963), 26-27.

¹⁰ Jonas (1963), 32.

¹¹ Jonas (1963), 42-47.

primary role in the construction of Gnosticism.¹² Although his research had the undisputed merit of highlighting the connection between Jewish texts and Gnosticism,¹³ his findings failed to reach a wide consensus in the academic community.

With the edition and publication of the Nag Hammadi library between the 1950s and 1970s,¹⁴ the problem of defining Gnosticism became more pressing and the international community of scholars organised a Colloquium in the city of Messina in 1966. Major Gnostic scholars gathered together with the intent of establishing a universal definition of Gnosticism and investigating its origins.¹⁵ Notwithstanding all the difficulties and disagreements during the Colloquium, scholars agreed the following definition:

The Gnosticism of the second century sects involves a coherent series of characteristics that can be summarised in the idea of a divine spark in man, deriving from the divine realm, fallen into this world of fate, birth and death, and needing to be awakened by the divine counterpart of the self in order to be finally re-integrated. Compared with other conceptions of a "devolution" of the divine, this idea is based ontologically on the conception of a downward movement of the divine whose periphery (often called Sophia [Wisdom] or Ennoia [Thought])¹⁶ had to submit to

¹² Grant (1961), 16.

¹³ Grant (1959).

¹⁴ It is worth remembering that, despite the library was discovered in 1945, the process of editing the codices was difficult and most documents were released only in 1970s'.

¹⁵ Many prominent scholars attended the Colloquium, including Ugo Bianchi, Jean Daniélou, Robert M. Grant, Yvonne Janssens, Hans Jonas, George W. Mac Rae, Giulia Sfameni-Gasparro, Robert McL Wilson, Gilles Quispel, Kurt Rudolph.

¹⁶ Notwithstanding the existence of several versions of Sophia's story, it is useful to provide here a general outline of this myth, since this will help the reader to understand subsequent references to it. In Gnostic mythologies, Sophia is the name attributed to the last production of the Pleroma, the superior world. She is a female aeon, who is considered part of the divine pantheon although she is not united in syzygy with a male partner. The story begins when, being aware of her loneliness, Sophia becomes restless and begins searching a suitable companion. During her quest, she oversteps the limits of her pleromatic conditions and leaps out of the Pleroma into the lower world. In falling outside of the Pleroma because of her uncontrolled desire, she gives birth to an abortion – often called Yaldabaoth or Demiurge – who does not resemble his mother and is ignorant of the world above. Being however extremely powerful, Yaldabaoth becomes lord (chief archon) over the inferior world, generating also several archons to help him in governing his realm. In doing so, he typologically and unwillingly reproduces the structure of the world above. Seeing the evils she has brought into the world, Sophia regrets her decisions and appeals to the good grace of the Virginal Spirit, the Father. At this point, the Pleroma takes pity on her and sends down its

the fate of entering into a crisis and producing — even if only indirectly — this world, upon which it cannot turn its back, since it is necessary for it to recover the pneuma — a dualistic conception on a monistic background, expressed in a double movement of devolution and reintegration. The type of gnosis involved in Gnosticism is conditioned by the ontological, theological, and anthropological foundations indicated above. Not every gnosis is Gnosticism, but only that which involves in this perspective the idea of the divine consubstantiality of the spark that is in need of being awakened and reintegrated. This gnosis of Gnosticism involves the divine identity of the knower (the Gnostic), the known (the divine substance of one's transcendent self), and the means by which one knows (gnosis as an implicit divine faculty is to be awakened and actualised. This gnosis is a revelation tradition of a different type from the Biblical and Islamic revelation tradition).¹⁷

Hence, the Messina Colloquium represented a keystone in Gnostic scholarship for it proposed a definition of Gnosticism. Notwithstanding that such a description is a scholarly reconstruction, it provided historians with a way of coping with the variety of documents grouped under this umbrella definition. Considering that scholarship needs *a working definition* of Gnosticism to make sense of the numerous ancient information that have been bequeathed to us about these groups, the Messina's formula is the most valid and comprehensive one produced up to present time, in spite of its faults.¹⁸ In my opinion, the

perfect fruit, Christ, to rescue her. Christ is not only her saviour but also her rightful companion, with whom she will ascend again to the Pleroma.

¹⁷ Bianchi (1970), XXVI-XXVII.

¹⁸ However, the Messina definition should not be intended in a strict sense. In fact, it recognises the complex syncretistic process that led to the genesis of Gnosticism, and it identifies some significant antecedents to Gnostic movements. In Bianchi (1970), XXVII, it is specified that: 'The question arises on whether this "classical" Gnosticism was preceded by proto-Gnosticism or only by pre-Gnosticism. If it is a matter of pre-Gnosticism one can investigate the pre-existence of different themes and motifs constituting such a "pre-" but not yet involving Gnosticism. But if it is a matter of proto-Gnosticism, one can think to find the essence of Gnosticism already in the centuries preceding the Second Century CE, as well as outside the Christian Gnosticism of the Second Century.' These two additions proposed at Messina go into different directions. On the one hand, the category of pre-Gnosticism adheres more strictly to the idea that Gnosticism was a second century heresy, albeit admitting that there were liminal movements that possess *in nuce* some elements of Gnosticism. On the other hand, the definition of proto-Gnosticism intends Gnosticism more loosely, therefore it may include some Iranian or Indian religious movements that presented similar form of *gnosis* in geographical and chronological moments that can also be very distant from the ones of "classic" Gnosticism.

Messina's definition has three main merits. First, it provides a way of distinguishing the philosophical and theological notion of *gnosis* – that is, the idea that knowledge is the key to reach the divine, or even to be deified – from *Gnosticism* – that is, a particular set of doctrines proper to specific historical religious movements from the second century onward.¹⁹ Secondly, this definition allows us to account for the doctrinal unity which emerges from these unusual texts by acknowledging the existence of shared mythologoumena and theologoumena. Thirdly, by setting the boundaries of Gnosticism, it gives the possibility of identifying better the internal differences and similarities between Gnostic movements.²⁰ I will use the Messina's definition as a *working definition*, that is, a historical paradigm deduced from the texts rather than imposed on it. Such a definition will be shaped according to what emerges from the texts, thus accounting for the different texts and not the other way around.²¹

Notwithstanding its usefulness, this definition is not exempt from problems. One of these was first spotted by Jonas, who claimed that its intrinsic fault lied in assuming the idea of Gnosticism as a unitary religious group in its origin and then using such concept to identify the category of Gnosticism.²² Building on Jonas' critique, Kurt Rudolph violently criticised the distinction between gnosis and Gnosticism, defining the category of Gnosticism as 'a modern, deprecatory expression, a theologizing neologism'.²³ In particular, he criticised the limitations that the Messina's definition had brought upon the idea of

¹⁹ The significance of the Messina's definition and its significance for my research will be discussed shortly.

²⁰ For more information, see Simonetti (1999).

²¹ For a similar definition of Gnosticism, see Sfameni Gasparro (2013).

²² Jonas (1970), 90 explains it in the following manner: 'Delimiting a phenomenon that exists as a manifold of diverse individuals involves the well-known circle of using the presumed unity of the many for the designation of a common name, and then using the meaning of that name to define the unity of the manifold – and hence to decide over the inclusion or exclusion of individuals. It is the paradox, first, the evidence of prescribing to us – persuasively; and, then, our concept prescribing to the evidence – normatively. In our case this means that we must have some historical delimitation first as to arrive at a typological one, and again the typological one to re-assess the historical one.' Unfortunately, as Jonas pointed out, we need to 'assume a measure of consensus on the existence of such an entity as the Gnostic phenomenon' in order to discuss about it.

²³ In his work, he seemed to use 'gnosis' and 'Gnosticism' interchangeably. Such use of the two terms is indeed typical of German scholarship; see Rudolph (1987), 54-59 and Marksches (2003), 16-17.

gnosis and Gnosticism. In other words, both Jonas' and Rudolph's refusals of the Messina's definition was caused by their understanding of Gnosticism as a widespread 'worldview', which interested different geographical locations and historical periods which the Messina's definition had instead excluded from the umbrella term of Gnosticism. More recently, a different critique to the Messina definition was raised by Michael Williams.²⁴ Contrariwise to Rudolph's concerns, Williams' worries regarding the use of the category of Gnosticism had a very practical reason: within the academic community and beyond, the term Gnosticism has been borrowed by so many academic fields and for so many different purposes that it has lost its original scientific connotation of a second-century historical movement. In addition, he strongly criticised the use of general categories (e.g. anti-cosmism and revolutionary spirit) to define the essence of Gnosticism, since they add very little to our historical knowledge of this religious phenomenon. In other words, Williams suggested that since the category of Gnosticism has failed to achieve its original purpose, it ought to be replaced by a new category. He proposed to adopt the category 'biblical demiurgical', a term which would indicate a system where the superior deity is distinguished by the inferior creator of the world.²⁵ In this case, the emphasis would be on the "biblical" nature of Gnosticism, which would distinguish it from the Platonic demiurgic tradition.²⁶ However, his proposal has not been embraced by the academic community for such a vague definition generates even more confusion than previous ones. A different approach to the problem has been experimented by Marksches who has criticised the Messina definition of the term gnosis, rather than the one of Gnosticism.²⁷ His argument

²⁴ Williams (1996).

²⁵ Williams (1996), 265-266: 'The category "biblical demiurgical" could be fairly clearly defined. It would include all sources that made a distinction between the creator(s) and controllers of the material world and the most transcendent divine being, and that in so doing made use of Jewish or Christian scriptural traditions. This category would not simply be a new name for "Gnosticism," however, since it would not precisely correspond to the grouping included in most anthologies of "Gnostic" sources or discussions of this subject. There would indeed be considerable overlap, since the largest number of sources normally called "Gnostic" also happen to contain or assume some biblical demiurgical myth. And in fact, there are scholars who would consider what I have called biblical demiurgy to be, in the final analysis, the only genuinely defining feature of "Gnosticism." Nevertheless, there are some sources that many would want to call "Gnostic" on the basis of other features in them, such as an orientation toward esoteric knowledge.'

²⁶ Williams (1996), 52.

²⁷ Marksches (2003), 13-16.

is composed of two parts: on the one hand, he has remarked that Gnostic teachers called themselves ‘Gnostics’ and not ‘Gnosticists’; on the other hand, he has underlined that gnosis is defined quite loosely by the Messina statement, reducing it to a ‘general attitude of mind’.²⁸ Nonetheless, I believe it is worth noting that, although he has criticised the Messina definition of gnosis, Marksches has always employed a definition of Gnosticism which has mostly been grounded on the Messina definition.²⁹

This contemporary scepticism towards the definition of Gnosticism as recognizable historical movements leads to a general caution when presenting new researches on Gnostic material or discoveries.³⁰ Nonetheless, many scholars – such as Pagels, Pétrement, Simonetti, Lettieri, and Thomassen³¹ – abide by the definition agreed at Messina, albeit to different degrees. To a certain extent, contemporary scholarship has overcome some of the problems outlined above. On the one hand, recent studies have stressed the differences between the numerous Gnostic movements, such as Sethianism, Ophitism and Valentianism. Scholars such as Hans-Martin Schenke, John Turner, Einar Thomassen and Karen King have largely investigated specificity of each Gnostic movement, thus opening up new research horizons.³² Yet, these researches have also revealed an underlying unity, a theological core common to all these movements. Notwithstanding its many variants, this theological and mythological core corresponds roughly to that described by the Messina’s definition, especially when considering the Gnostic accounts here analysed.

²⁸ Marksches (2003), 14.

²⁹ Marksches (2003), 16-17. He has identified seven main points which characterize the movement known as gnosis: 1) the presence and experience of an otherworldly God; 2) the multiplication of this otherworldly divine entity in numerous entities which separate the supreme beings from some lower divinities closer to humans; 3) the notion of matter as evil; 4) the introduction of a deity who is the creator of the world; 5) the presence of a mythological drama which presents the fall of a divine being; 6) the concept that knowledge – that is, gnosis – can be gained through a redeemer; 7) the presence of a divine spark in humans; 8) a tendency towards dualism. As it is possible to observe, most of these elements – if not all – are already outlined in the Messina definition of Gnosticism.

³⁰ See King (2009) and (2003).

³¹ To name a few see Pagels (1979); Pétrement (1984); Simonetti (1999); Lettieri (1996); Thomassen (2006).

³² For instance, Schenke (1962); Turner (2001); King (2003); Thomassen (2006).

For the sake of clarity, I believe it is worth summarising once again the main points of the Messina's definition with which I agree:

- 1) Gnosticism is a religious phenomenon which starts around the second century CE, within which several movements are identifiable;
- 2) Gnosticism is a dualist system in which the inferior deity is the result of an internal crisis within the superior divine world. Such a crisis is caused by a female divine entity, often called Sophia;
- 3) The cosmos is dominated by a double movement of devolution and reintegration. Humankind is inserted in this movement, but some human beings retain a special position among created beings since they possess a divine nature, which makes them consubstantial with the divine;
- 4) The Gnostic gnosis aims at reuniting the divine nature, which is in the human, with the divine fullness (often called Pleroma). Such reunion is achieved thanks to the identity between knower (the Gnostic) and known (the divine substance of one's transcendent self), which is the distinctive marker of Gnostic gnosis.

Once having established all these features, I think that it is necessary to add two further elements:

- 5) Gnosticism, as it has been described above, is a primarily Christian movement, although it is a highly syncretistic form of Christianity, thus borrowing from other religions and philosophies (especially Jewish apocalyptic texts, Platonic and Middle-Platonic philosophies).
- 6) The Gnostic cosmos – including all its inhabitants, whether these are deities or creatures – is organised in hierarchical levels, where the inferior level bears a *typological resemblance* towards the upper level – that is to say, the inferior level is τύπος (lit. impression, mold; fig. symbol) of the superior level.³³ This typological resemblance also plays

³³ The addition of this characteristics to the Gnostic system is largely based on the works of Sagnard (1947), Simonetti (1999), Orbe (1996), Marksches (2003), Lettieri (2008) and (2005).

a significant part in the process of re-discovery of the divine self, for it provides hints of truth to the ones searching for it.

In regard to the fifth point, it ought to be said that the scholarly debate about the definition of Gnosticism is inextricably intertwined with the question concerning its origin. It is impossible to discuss such a thorny issue in detail here; nonetheless, it is necessary to devote a few words in order to illustrate where my research stands on this matter, thus locating it within contemporary scholarship. However, it is important to keep in mind that it is *not* the main purpose of my research to determine whether Gnosticism was originally a Christian movement, but rather it aims at illustrating the historical theological importance of Gnostic feminine imagery, thus dealing with the issue of the origin of Gnosticism only tangentially.

The scholarly hypotheses can be briefly summarised according to three main positions. The first group of scholars, whose main representative can be found in Jonas,³⁴ tends to believe that Gnosticism developed out of oriental religions, especially Iranian ones, and that it was a pre-Christian religious phenomenon.³⁵ The second group is composed of scholars who promoted the idea of the Jewish origins of Gnosticism, thus interpreting the Gnostic phenomenon as a revolt against the dominant Judaic group.³⁶ The third group includes those scholars who acknowledge a primarily Christian origin of Gnosticism.³⁷ My research shares the same conclusions as the latter group. Against those who claim a parallel development of Gnosticism and Christianity or a progressive christianisation of Gnosticism,³⁸ I believe that Gnosticism developed within Christianity, although it was strongly influenced by Platonism, Middle and Neo Platonism, Judaism (in particular, Jewish apocalypticism) and oriental religions.³⁹ In this regard, I believe it is essential to stress the importance of recent works on the ‘inadequacy of any monolithic model that seeks to theorize

³⁴ See Jonas (1963).

³⁵ Yamauchi (1997), (1973) and (1970).

³⁶ Among them Rudolph (1987), Stroumsa (1984), Schenke (1962), Grant (1959).

³⁷ Among them Simonetti (1991), Orbe (1995), Pétrement (1984).

³⁸ Wilson (1970) and Schenke (1962).

³⁹ To deepen the discussion such influences, see respectively Turner (2006) and (2001); Berno (2018) Reed (2005); Jonas (1963).

the relationships between Judaism and Christianity'.⁴⁰ As many researches have proved,⁴¹ there were extensive interactions between Christian and Jews in second and third centuries, and it is reasonable to assume that Gnostic texts were the natural product of such a mingled environment. Nevertheless, I have observed that the Christian influence is predominant over the Jewish one. In particular, my research intends to build on Orbe's work, which explains in detail how Gnostic mythologies derive from the interpretation of Christ's stories,⁴² and Simonetti's research, which envisions a progressive de-christianisation of Gnosticism following the "orthodox" rejection of this religious movement.⁴³ The evidence which Simonetti brings to support his thesis is rather compelling. First of all, he underlines that it would be inaccurate to ignore the fact that ancient writers, both pagan and Christian, understood Gnosticism as part of Christianity, corroborating his claims with evidence from Celsus and Porphyry.⁴⁴ Secondly, he highlights how it is possible to find Christian elements in Nag Hammadi treatises that are usually categorised as non-Christian, for instance the *Eugnostos*. Thirdly, he explains how such an unusual dualistic form of Christianity developed already during the first centuries CE, since the opposition between a superior God and an inferior one was certainly not exclusive to Gnosticism since it can be found also in Marcionism.⁴⁵ Obviously, the dissemination of these ideas happened in different ways and times, as well as to different degrees. For instance, due to the absence of a radical opposition between superior/inferior deities and the use of Greek names to indicate the female divine entity, Simonetti hypothesizes that Simon Magus' teachings were more influenced by pagan ideas than by Jewish texts. Contrariwise, other Christian Gnostics of Syrian origins would have taken a more anti-Jewish perspective, stressing the opposition between the superior and inferior God. Hence, although sharing some of Simonetti's

⁴⁰ Although I do not share the theory about the "ways that never parted" to the fullest extent, I do believe it is important to avoid extreme opposition between Judaism and Christianity Becker – Reed (2007), x.

⁴¹ See also Kessler – Wenborn (2005); Iricinschi – Zellentin (2008).

⁴² Orbe (1976).

⁴³ Simonetti (1999), xix-xxvii and Simonetti (1991).

⁴⁴ Besides Christian heresiologists, he points also towards Celsus (Origen, *Contra Celsum* VI, 25, 27-34) and Plotinus (Porphyry, *Enneas* II, 9).

⁴⁵ It is worth underlining that, according to the Messina's definition, Marcionism cannot be listed as a form of Gnosticism for it does not present any reference to an intra-divine fracture. For more information on Marcionism, see Lieu (2017); Vinzent (2014).

conclusions, my research hopes also to add further elements to his analysis by using the feminine as test case, thus showing how Gnostic feminine imagery shapes Christian Trinitarian theology and Christian soteriology.

In addition to Christianity, Gnosticism is highly influenced by Judaism, Platonism, Middle Platonism and few oriental religions. Numerous studies have been conducted on this topic and it is here impossible to summarise their findings.⁴⁶ At this stage, I aim at providing only a general overview of the influence that these philosophies and religions had on Gnostic feminine imagery, whilst I will offer more detail in the textual analyses of Gnostic texts.

The influence of Judaism is visible in the entire Gnostic production. Among biblical texts, Genesis⁴⁷ and Song of Songs⁴⁸ are particularly relevant for Gnostic feminine imagery. On the one hand, Gen. is important because female characters in Gnosticism are often a reinterpretation of Eve and of the events which lead to the fall. On the other, *Sos* is important for Gnosticism since it describes the relation between God and his creatures in terms of nuptial and feminine imagery. In the following chapters, I will stress this dependence on several occasions, thus highlighting how these texts are used by Gnostic theologians. In addition, Gnosticism is largely influenced by Jewish apocalyptic literature. Here, feminine imagery takes the form of an opposition between the characters of the bride and the prostitute.⁴⁹ As I will illustrate at length in my work, the opposition between lawful bride and illicit lover plays an essential role in Gnostic feminine imagery. Lastly, it is also worth stressing the importance of Jewish Wisdom theology, where God's Wisdom is personified in a female character or it presents female traits. In particular, this

⁴⁶ For the relation between Platonism and Gnosticism, see especially Turner – Majercik (2000) and Turner (2001). For the influence of Middle Platonism, see Turner (2006). For Gnosticism and Jewish apocalypticism, see Quispel (2008), 539-566 and Lettieri (2017).

⁴⁷ See Luttikhuisen (2006).

⁴⁸ See Meloni (1975); Young (2001); Lettieri (2016). Despite its controversial history, this text had a huge impact on Christian speculation; indeed, many commentaries and homilies were written by religious writers – both Christian and Jewish – to explain its erotic and feminine language.

⁴⁹ This theme has also been inherited by *Rev* 17-18.

tradition influenced the representation of the character of Sophia, which often shares the features of the Jewish Wisdom.⁵⁰

The influence of Platonism and Middle-Platonism is visible particularly in two aspects of Gnostic feminine imagery: a) the process of emanation and reintegration of female characters;⁵¹ b) the Valentinian representation of female characters as material.⁵² Generally speaking, in Platonic and Middle-Platonic philosophies, the feminine is associated both with unformed and raw matter and with the entity entrusted with generation. In this regard, the Platonic depiction of the *χώρα* in Plato's *Timaeus* gives a good insight into the Platonic notion of the feminine.⁵³ Among Platonists, a prominent place is occupied by Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish Platonist philosopher. In particular, his philosophical use of gender categories resembles that of some Gnostic teachers, especially Valentinian ones.⁵⁴ Beside the Platonic influence, some scholars detect also an Aristotelian influence on Gnosticism.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, I have identified only rare occurrences in which Gnostic feminine imagery presents Aristotelian traits.⁵⁶ In addition to these major influences, Gnostic texts present traces of oriental religious mythologies – such as the Egyptian or Manichean cults⁵⁷ – and Greek literature.⁵⁸ Overall, I believe that the presence of so many external influences on Gnostic feminine imagery confirms once again the syncretistic nature of these Gnostic movements.

Concerning the sixth point, the idea of *typological resemblance* as a constitutive element of Gnosticism takes the moves from Sagnard's, Orbe's and Lettieri's works.⁵⁹ Whereas Sagnard employed the term 'exemplarisme

⁵⁰ For a detailed analysis of this dependence, see Stead (1969).

⁵¹ This issue will be explored in the chapters on *ApJohn*, especially *infra* II.2.1.

⁵² This will be further explored in the chapters on the Valentinian Sophia, especially *infra* III.3.

⁵³ See Plato, *Timaeus* 48e-52a. On the features of the feminine in Platonic philosophies, see Bianchi (2006).

⁵⁴ For his use of feminine imagery in Philo, see Baer (1970).

⁵⁵ For instance, Luttikhuisen (2006).

⁵⁶ For instance, this is the case of Aristotle's theory of conception in Valentinian texts, *infra* III.2. For an investigation of the feminine in Aristotelian philosophy, see Bianchi (2014).

⁵⁷ For instance, Egyptian influences have been detected in the *Book of Baruch*, *infra* IV.2.

⁵⁸ For instance, this is the case of the identification of Helena, the companion of Simon Magus, with Helena of Troy, *infra* IV.1.

⁵⁹ See respectively Sagnard (1947), 570-572; Orbe (1976); Lettieri (1995).

inversé', thus making an explicit reference to Plato's repeatability between ideas and their worldly instances,⁶⁰ Orbe and Lettieri took a more textual approach, showing how the Gnostic myth is organized as a projection of biblical and evangelical stories.⁶¹ It is indeed for the exegetical value of the term typology that I have preferred this term to Sagnard's exemplarisme.⁶² Although I am borrowing the term from ancient Christian exegetes, who used it to indicate a specific exegetical device,⁶³ I am here employing it in its cosmological and historical sense to indicate the similarities between levels of reality in which the inferior cosmological level replicates the superior one. Therefore, while I acknowledge that exegetical typology was theorised and employed by Gnostic and non-Gnostic writers alike,⁶⁴ I claim that cosmological and historical typology is a proper feature of Christian Gnostic systems.⁶⁵ Within Gnosticism, typology assumes more than a simple exegetical value, becoming the fundamental principle according to which the entire cosmos is ordained and the different levels of reality are organised. As a matter of fact, the Gnostic cosmos is divided into ontological levels, which maintain a certain similarity between themselves. A clear example of this can be found in the ordination of the inferior cosmos, which is created by Yaldabaoth/Demiurge as an imperfect copy of the pleromatic world.⁶⁶ It is worth noting that, since the cosmos is dominated by a movement of devolution and reintegration (see Point 3), the Gnostic cosmological typology often

⁶⁰ Sagnard (1947), 239-255.

⁶¹ Orbe (1976), 622-632.

⁶² Unlike the Platonic principle of the *exemplarisme inverse*, I believe that the term *typological resemblance* conveys better the idea of an historical development which is proper to Gnostic cosmologies. Although the Platonic model of idea/copy is an important part of the Gnostic worldview, it does not encompass it, since it does not account for the unfolding of the pleromatic and historical events as intertwined and linked to one another.

⁶³ Typology is a widely recognised hermeneutical and exegetical device, usually employed by Christian exegetes to interpret the relation between Old and New Testament. According to this mechanism, characters or events from the Old Testament could be interpreted as τύπος of the New Testament characters or events. On this topic see, Simonetti (2004a) and (1985); Young (1997).

⁶⁴ For examples of the use of exegetical typology among "orthodox" theologians, see Origen, *De Principiis* IV, 1. For a detailed study of Origen's exegesis, see Dawson (2002) and Dively-Lauro (2005).

⁶⁵ Its importance for Gnostic feminine imagery has also been implicitly outlined by Orbe (1995), 149-152. This topic will be however extensively discussed in the course of my research.

⁶⁶ The mythologoumenon of Yaldabaoth/Demiurge creating the inferior world as a faded copy of the superior world is visible in many Gnostic traditions, see for instance *ApJohn* II, 14, 14 – 15, 13; *HypArch* II, 87, 8-11; *OrigWorld* II, 102, 1-7; *GosPhil* 75, 3-9; *AdHaer* I, 5, 3.

implies a loss of perfection. Furthermore, it ought to be highlighted that Gnostics understand the typological unfolding of the cosmos – that is, the subsequent progression of aeons that culminates in the creation of the inferior world – as a historical event, so much so that, according to them, typology becomes also the driving principle of historical developments. Given the importance of this principle, I believe it is fair to conclude that the typological resemblance becomes the lens through which Gnostics understand not only the world, but also the historical events that concern them and even their very historical existence.⁶⁷ Therefore, Gnostic cosmological and historical use of typology has some extremely significant consequences, which are proper only to Gnostic systems. On the one hand, by acknowledging the correspondence between upper and lower levels of reality, it becomes clearer how historical developments happen in accordance with the celestial and eternal events concerning the divine. On the other hand, the typological resemblance becomes also a way of understanding reality, helping to fill the gap between knower and known.⁶⁸ Hence, the *typological resemblance* is also visible among Gnostic characters, especially female characters, who are often presented according to a hierarchical order. With regard to the analysis of the feminine within Gnosticism, the typological resemblance is essential to explain the link between female characters at different levels of reality.⁶⁹ As I will prove throughout my work, the higher manifestations of the feminine are inextricably intertwined with the lowest female manifestations primarily due to this typological resemblance that governs the Gnostic cosmos. Only by acknowledging the existence of a link between different ontological levels – and, consequently, between characters within these levels – the significance of feminine imagery in Gnostic mythologies becomes clear.

⁶⁷ For a more comprehensive discussion of the role of typology in Gnosticism, see my article Cerioni, L. (2019) 'Tempo tipologico. La nozione di tempo nel Valentinismo', in *XLVI Incontro di Studiosi dell'Antichità Cristiana*, SEA 155, p. 495-502.

⁶⁸ This feature of Gnosticism had already been acknowledged by Irenaeus, who explained how the Gnostic cosmos was organised typologically since 'they believe all things below are images of the those above.' (Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 7, 2: πάντα γὰρ ταῦτα τύπος ἐκείνων εἶναι λέγουσι.) Although Irenaeus was here referring to Valentinianism, where this typological structure is more evident, I believe this typological resemblance is traceable in all Gnostic movements that I will take here into consideration. More examples will be provided later in the following chapters.

⁶⁹ One of the major complexities of Gnostic typological resemblance lies indeed in the identification of the different levels involved, for they vary from movement to movement.

In conclusion, this brief section – far from being an exhaustive discussion of all scholarly positions – has aimed at establishing a *working definition* and at situating my definition of Gnosticism within the ongoing scholarly debate. My addition to the Messina definition and my position concerning the origin of Gnosticism are indeed the result of my investigation of the feminine within Gnosticism and one which I shall prove in more detail in the following chapters.

I.2 The Heterogeneous Nature of Gnostic Texts

The second significant issue scholars face when approaching Gnosticism is the heterogeneousness of the sources. In order to bring some clarity to the numerous Gnostic sources, I offer here a brief overview of the main sources which I will discuss in this work.

Before 1945, the most significant source for Gnostic movements was represented by heresiological accounts.⁷⁰ Among early Christian authors, the polemic against the Gnostic heresy was present in many heresiological works, especially that of Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Epiphanius.⁷¹ Irenaeus of Lyon was one of the first witnesses to the spread of the Gnostic movements in the West. His major work is entitled *Adversus haereses* and it was written in five books around the second half of the second century. The first and second book are dedicated to the refutation of the Gnostic heresy, in its many forms and groups. Greater attention is dedicated to the confutation of the Valentinian heresy, especially the school of Rome, which was very well known to him. Nonetheless, he seemed also to possess extensive information on other Gnostic groups, such as the Ophites. The reliability of his *AdHaer* is still debated among scholars; therefore, it will be evaluated in each instance in which I will resort to his works.⁷² Hippolytus of Rome's account represents a mystery in many regards. Firstly, the identity of the author is still uncertain and the *Hippolytusfrage* remains a captivating question for modern scholars.⁷³ Secondly, the reliability of his portrayal of Gnostic heresy is under strict scrutiny because of its clear philosophical intent: he wished to derive each heresy from a different philosophical movement. Following Irenaeus' example, he wrote a work entitled *Elenchos* – mostly known with the Latin name of *Refutatio omnium haeresium* – in which he discussed most heretical

⁷⁰ As a consequence, the researches produced before the editions of the Nag Hammadi codices need to be considered very carefully, since they present a partial and, often, outdated description of Gnosticism.

⁷¹ I am here mentioning only those heresiologists who wrote comprehensive refutations of Gnosticism. For a more detailed overview of their heresiological activity, see Van den Broek (2013), 126-136. Nonetheless, in the following chapter, I will resort to other authors, who focused on specific Gnostic groups, such as Justin, Origen and Tertullian.

⁷² For a general overview, see Wisse (1971) and Vallée (1981).

⁷³ For more information, *infra* IV.2.

movements of the first two centuries of Christianity, connecting each heresy with an ancient or Hellenistic philosophy. Nevertheless, his account also bequeathed valuable texts, as in the case of the *Book of Baruch* written by the Gnostic teacher Justin, which would be otherwise unknown. Epiphanius' *Panarion*, written about two centuries after Irenaeus' *AdHaer* – thus, over two centuries after the flourishing of Gnostic movements – is probably the least reliable source among the three heresiologists. His accounts are often exaggerated and biased; nonetheless, it can be a useful source of validation for information found in other sources.⁷⁴

Since the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library, the study of Gnosticism has known a thrilling injection of new sources that have partially challenged and enriched previous conclusions. The Nag Hammadi library is a miscellany of different texts and authors, not all of them ascribable to the category of Gnosticism. This collection is composed of thirteen codices,⁷⁵ containing forty-one different works, some of which survived in several versions.⁷⁶ Each codex contains a different number of books: some are extant in their entirety, whilst others present extensive *lacunae*. All books are transmitted in Coptic translations of Greek texts, which largely complicates any philological investigation.⁷⁷ In addition, very little is known about the community that assembled this collection, even less about their reasons to group these texts together.⁷⁸ It has been suggested, most recently by Lundhaug, Jennot and King, that the codices were property of the nearby Pachomian monastery of

⁷⁴ Williams (2009), xxiii.

⁷⁵ Some scholars, such as Waldstein – Wisse (1995), list only twelve codices. However, it is more correct to refer to thirteen codices. For the story of the codices and the discussion concerning Codex XIII, see Robinson (2014), 20-41. For a complete list of the works included in the codices, see Robinson et al. (1996).

⁷⁶ For instance, *ApJohn* is known in four versions, three of which had been found in the Nag Hammadi archaeological site, whilst the other one is attested in the BG (*Papyrus Berolinensis* 8502).

⁷⁷ Among the many Nag Hammadi treatises, I will investigate only the *ApJohn*, *HypArch*, *OrigWorld*, *ExVal*, *GosPhil*, *ExSoul*. More detailed information about the individual treatises and the criteria employed to select them will be provided in each one of the following chapters.

⁷⁸ For more details see Robinson et al. (1996), 1-26. For more information about the Nag Hammadi collection see Robinson (2014); Van den Broek (2013), 19-22; Rudolph (1987), 34-52.

Chenoboskian.⁷⁹ The supporters of this hypothesis based their observation mainly on the study of the cartonnage of some codices, claiming that it bore evidence which suggested that it was produced in the Pachomian monastery. However, Robinson, Denzey and Blount have proved that these hypotheses are inconclusive, for all of the evidence is circumstantial and several alternative explanations are possible.⁸⁰

The unearthing of the Nag Hammadi library certainly represented a rare opportunity for scholarly research to cast new light on Gnosticism, since it not only made available new Gnostic sources, but it allowed a comparison between original Gnostic texts and polemical heresiological accounts.⁸¹ Despite years of study in this field, there is still much to explore concerning the relationship between the heresiologists and their sources. Unfortunately, the enthusiasm for the Nag Hammadi texts resulted also in the abandonment and discrediting of the study of heresiological sources, which were often judged as utterly unreliable and therefore quickly dismissed.⁸² This tendency was partially due to the discrepancies between Nag Hammadi texts and the heresiological accounts, but also to a harsh evaluation of the heresiologists' work. In this regard, I believe that, while it is undeniable that modern scholars should look suspiciously at the rhetorical and polemical works of the heresiologists, these works still represent a valuable source of information that could help the interpreter to unravel the obscurities of the Nag Hammadi treatises.

The trickiest issue of contemporary scholarship on Gnosticism remains, therefore, the complex relation between heresiological sources and Gnostic accounts. To what extent are the heresiological sources reliable? What is the value of the Nag Hammadi treatises for Gnosticism as a complex religious

⁷⁹ Lundhaug – Jennot (2015) and King (2009), 20-21. In particular, these scholars claim that the Nag Hammadi copies of *ApJohn* were owned by the monastery of Chenoboskian.

⁸⁰ Against the idea of a Pachomian origin of the codices, see Robinson (2014), 1125. For a list of alternative hypotheses, see Denzey – Blount (2014).

⁸¹ For a comprehensive study of the impact of the Nag Hammadi discovery on several fields, see also Robinson (1997), Turner – McGuire (1997).

⁸² For instance, this is the general attitude of King (2003) and DeConick – Adamson (2013), who discredited the heresiological sources in the attempt of proposing a new narrative of the development of Gnosticism, which she conceived in need of being released from the Christian paradigm of the opposition between heresy and orthodoxy.

phenomenon? Is it possible to integrate the two sources? These are indeed only some of the many questions which are still waiting for an answer, if any can be given. At the present state of research, the problem could still be summarised by Desjardin's words: 'so, in effect, the "primary sources" are only primary insofar as one accepts the claims made in the "secondary sources".'⁸³ In other words, the heresiological accounts still represent the baseline for the interpretation of Gnosticism, even if these accounts are polemical and biased against the Gnostic movements they contested. It is indeed undeniable that Gnostic scholars still classify Nag Hammadi treatises according to categories – such as the ones of Sethianism, Ophitisim, Valentinianism, etc.⁸⁴ – which are elaborated on the basis of heresiological accounts. In my opinion, as long as one is aware of the origin of these categories and uses them as *working categories*, they can be useful tools for the study of Gnosticism. Studying Gnosticism without combining the information available in both the heresiological accounts and the original Gnostic sources is neither possible nor academically solid. Hence, I will use some heresiological categories, being aware that these are *working categories*, which are valid for the sake of historical research. In conclusion, where possible, I will integrate the information deducible from the original Gnostic texts with the information of the heresiologists and vice versa. Working with both sources should give quite a complete view of the feminine in Gnostic movements, both compensating for the physical *lacunae* of the Nag Hammadi texts and allowing the interpreter to distinguish between genuine and polemical heresiological material.

⁸³ Desjardins (1986), 343.

⁸⁴ These definitions will be discussed later in this chapter, *infra* I.3.

I.3 Denominations of Individual Gnostic Movements

The denomination of Gnostic groups has been a problem since this religious phenomenon first appeared. In his *Strom*, Clement of Alexandria explains that:

Of the heresies, some receive their appellation from a [person's] name, as that which is called after Valentinus, and that after Marcion, and that after Basilides, although they boast of adducing the opinion of Matthew [without truth]; for as the teaching, so also the tradition of the apostles was one. Some take their designation from a place, as the Peratici; some from a nation, as the [heresy] of the Phrygians; some from an action, as that of the Encratites; and some from peculiar dogmas, as that of the Docetæ; and that of the Hærmatites; and some from suppositions, and from individuals they have honoured, as those called Cainists, and the Ophians; and some from nefarious practices and enormities, as those of the Simonians called Entychites.⁸⁵

Since these denominations were not agreed, different heresiologists used different names to describe the same movement.⁸⁶ While the circulation of these denominations among heresiologists is attested,⁸⁷ it is unclear whether Gnostics used them to refer to themselves. It must be noted that most contemporary scholars would agree that Gnostics never used such names.⁸⁸ Indeed, thanks to the Nag Hammadi codices, it has been noted that some of them, like Valentinian Gnostics, preferred to call themselves simply ‘Christians’.⁸⁹ For the purpose of my historical investigation, although I am aware of their artificiality, I have chosen to maintain these denominations since

⁸⁵ Clemens of Alexandria, *Strom* 7, 17(108), 1-2: Ταυτὶ μὲν οὖν καὶ εἰς ὕστερον. τῶν δ’ αἱρέσεων αἱ μὲν ἀπὸ ὀνόματος προσαγορεύονται, ὥς ἡ ἀπὸ Οὐαλεντίνου καὶ Μαρκίωνος καὶ Βασιλείδου, κἄν τὴν Μαθίου ἀρχῶσι προσάγεσθαι δόξαν· μία γὰρ ἡ πάντων γέγονε τῶν ἀποστόλων ὥσπερ διδασκαλία, οὕτως δὲ καὶ ἡ παράδοσις· αἱ δὲ ἀπὸ τόπου, ὥς οἱ Περαιτικοί, αἱ δὲ ἀπὸ ἔθνους, ὥς ἡ τῶν Φρυγῶν, αἱ δὲ ἀπὸ ἐνεργείας, ὥς ἡ τῶν Ἐγκρατητῶν, αἱ δὲ ἀπὸ δογμάτων ἰδιαζόντων, ὥς ἡ τῶν Δοκητῶν καὶ ἡ τῶν Αἱματιτῶν, αἱ δὲ ἀπὸ ὑποθέσεων καὶ ὧν τετιμήκασιν, ὥς Καϊανισταὶ τε καὶ οἱ Ὀφιοῖνοι προσαγορευόμενοι, αἱ δὲ ἀφ’ ὧν παρανόμως ἐπετήδευσάν τε καὶ ἐτόλμησαν, ὥς τῶν Σιμωνιανῶν οἱ Ἐντυχῖται καλούμενοι.

⁸⁶ For instance, the Ophites are called ‘Naasens’ in Hippolytus, *El* V, 7-9.

⁸⁷ Hippolytus, *Ref* V, 11 even claims that Gnostics used these denominations to refer to themselves.

⁸⁸ Wisse (1971), 209-212; Thomassen (2006), 4.

⁸⁹ For instance, this is the case of the *GosPhil* II, 52, 21-25.

their use has proven to be extremely effective in illustrating the structure and development of the complex phenomenon known as Gnosticism. Nevertheless, these denominations will be used with the sole purpose of indicating a collection of mythologoumena and theologoumena that belonged to specific Gnostic movements.

In using these denominations in such manner, I acknowledge the current impossibility (due to a lack of historical evidence) in identifying with reasonable certainty the geographical, historical and social developments of these Gnostic groups, while admitting that the theological and philosophical material available allows contemporary scholars to postulate the existence of several Gnostic movements having different theologies. Hence, the different Gnostic movements will be distinguished by means of their core mythologoumena and theologoumena, leaving aside the questions of their geographical location and their social structure.⁹⁰ In my research, I intend to focus mainly on those theological and mythological doctrines that are relevant for and related to the Gnostic feminine imagery, expanding on previous scholarship to isolate the feminine imagery of individual Gnostic movements. Furthermore, it is worth underlining that by identifying Gnostic feminine mythologoumena and theologoumena, I do not intend to draw any conclusions regarding the actual structures and organisations of these historical Gnostic groups, since my research focuses only on the theological significance of Gnostic feminine imagery in the representation of the Godhead.

For the sake of clarity, it is therefore worth providing a brief overview of the theologoumena and mythologoumena specific of each Gnostic movement discussed in the following parts of this work – namely: a) Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite movements, b) Valentinian movement, c) Simonian movement – thus expanding on the very brief sketch given in the Introduction.

⁹⁰ In this regard, it is worth underlining that identifying the core mythologoumena and theologoumena of each Gnostic movement falls beyond the scope of my work. Consequently, the definition I will offer shortly expands on the definitions offered by other Gnostic scholars.

The identification of the mythologoumena and theologoumena of Sethianism, Barbeloism and Ophitism have proven to be especially problematic for contemporary scholarship.⁹¹ While the term Ophites is attested in heresiological literature,⁹² those of Barbelo-Gnostics⁹³ and Sethians are not found in heresiological literature. Before the Nag Hammadi discovery, scholars tended to underline the importance of Ophite texts, so much so that Ophitism was regarded as one of the oldest forms of Gnosticism.⁹⁴ Contrariwise, following the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library, the category of Ophitism was mostly viewed as a heresiological construction, whilst that of Sethianism began to gain ground.⁹⁵ Sethian Gnosticism was systematised in 1981 by the German scholar Martin Schenke, who listed ten main criteria to determine the affinity of a text to Sethianism. Among them, the most important criterion was certainly the presence of references to Seth, Adam's and Eve's son as the redeemer or father of the spiritual seed.⁹⁶ Despite his insightful research, Schenke was forced to allow an excessive degree of fluidity to his classification, for he encountered numerous exceptions; so much so, that he also admitted that not all Sethian texts match the most fundamental criteria, such as the identification of Seth with a salvific figure.⁹⁷ In addition, having minimised the influence of Christianity on Sethianism to the point of saying that 'in the domain of Sethianism there is no Christian gnosis worthy of the name', he failed to explain the presence of numerous Christian features that he

⁹¹ The following digression on the terminology is merely an overview. For a detailed analysis of the scholarly debate, see Rasimus (2009), 9-62.

⁹² For instance, see Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 30 and Pseudo Tertullian, *Libellus adversus omnes haereses* II.

⁹³ The Latin translation of Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 29 is quite problematic for it does not employ this terminology. Epiphanius, however, employs the term *Barbelites* in *Pan* 26 to describe a Gnostic system very similar to the Ophite one.

⁹⁴ Some contemporary scholars still value such a hypothesis; see Rasimus (2009), 28.

⁹⁵ So much so that Turner (2001), 54 regards this as the earliest form of Gnosticism.

⁹⁶ Other important criteria are: 1. The presence of Seth, both as the redeemer or father of a superior seed; 2. The presence of a special prayer; 3. A specific development of negative theology; 4. The presence of the triad Kalyptos, Protophanes and Autogenes; 5. A specific philosophical terminology; 6. Obvious secondary Christianisation; 7. The presupposition of a second tetrad alongside the four lightgivers; 8. The designation in Coptic of Adam as 'Pigeradamas'; 9. The concept of Eleleth as cause of the terrestrial world; 10. The name and the figure of Mirothea/Mirotheos. For a more detailed analysis, see Schenke (1981), 593-594.

⁹⁷ Schenke (1981), 593: 'The group of Sethian documents is held together not simply by the role that Seth plays in them, but rather by the role of Seth plus the fundamental identity of the system. Accordingly, it is possible to identify a given writing as Sethian, even if Seth (for whatever reason) does not appear in it at all'.

detected in some of these texts, such as the *ApJohn* or *HypArch*.⁹⁸ A certain scepticism regarding Schenke's theory was already shown by Wisse at the same colloquium in which Schenke presented his research. Wisse underlined that the themes identified by his colleague were not part of a Gnostic system but rather "free-floating" groups of myths and doctrines.⁹⁹ Although Schenke's research was an admirable attempt of systematisation of Sethianism, I deem his analysis to have two major faults: on the one hand, it failed to account for the presence of extra-Sethian themes and motifs in texts that he classified as such; on the other hand, he was overconfident in the stability, fixity and historicity of this Gnostic movement. Indeed, he addressed Sethianism as a historical, well defined and recognisable group, of which he even listed specific cultic practices and rituals. However, given the complex and multifaceted nature of the listed Sethian works, a more cautious approach would have been preferable, for there was very little uncontested evidence regarding this Gnostic movement. A comprehensive criticism to Schenke's definition and classification of Sethian texts has been recently developed by Rasimus. He has identified three major mythological trends, which he has called Barbeloite, Sethian and Ophite traditions.¹⁰⁰ According to him, the core of the Barbeloite mythology consists in conceiving a divine primordial triad (Father, Mother-Barbelo, Son-Autogenes) and depending heavily on Neopythagorean, Middle and Neo-Platonic speculations. Contrarily, the Sethian mythology is focused on the seed of Seth, that is, those believers who will be saved because of their lineage from the third son of Adam and Eve. Therefore, Sethian mythology is more based on biblical mythology than Barbeloite mythology. Lastly, the Ophite mythology originates from a reverse exegesis of Genesis' stories in which the True God is an androgynous projection of Adam and Eve.¹⁰¹ In other words, one could say that Rasimus has identified three different traditions of mythologoumena and theologoumena which, although they maintain distinct individualities, also present many similarities one with the other. This is also

⁹⁸ Schenke (1981), 607-612. The problem of the existence of a non-Christian gnosis has already been addressed in previous chapter; *supra* Part I.1.

⁹⁹ Wisse (1981), 575-576.

¹⁰⁰ See particularly Rasimus (2009), 9-62. It is worth noting that other scholars, such as Turner (2001), consider all these movements under the label of Sethianism.

¹⁰¹ A very clear and visual explanation of these three mythologies and their overlaps can be found in Rasimus (2009), 62.

the reason that led me to discuss these three traditions in a single section of the present work.¹⁰² Although each one of these three blocks of myths and doctrines have an internal and separated coherency, they are often so strictly intertwined that feminine imagery is more easily understood if one compares the three traditions. The proximity between these three groups is such that Rasimus has even proposed to adopt the definition of ‘Classical Gnosticism’ in order to indicate these three trends of mythologoumena and theologoumena, thus creating a new category that accounts for both the differences and similarities between texts usually considered Sethian. Rasimus’ research has thus showed some frailties of previous definitions and it has also defined in detail the domains of the three different traditions (Sethianism, Barbeloitis and Ophitism). Nevertheless, his proposal of using ‘Classical Gnosticism’ to indicate all three groups will not be embraced here. As a matter of fact, I believe that the use of the adjective ‘Classical’ somehow delegitimises other forms of Gnosticism, suggesting not only the idea of a chronological precedence but also the theological primacy of these movements over the others – all assumptions that need to be proved further. Hence, although I recognise the validity of his research, I will rather employ these three categories as *theoretical constructs*, without necessarily linking them to specific historical groups nor specific texts. For instance, in my analysis I will often resort to statement such as ‘these texts combine Sethian and Ophite elements’, without implying that the text at hand was produced or redacted by a specific historical and identifiable group or groups.¹⁰³

Among Gnostic movements, Valentinianism stands out in many regards. First, it ought to be said that Valentinianism is the most widely documented forms of Gnosticism, especially in heresiological literature. The name ‘Valentinians’ has a heresiological origin and it is attested for the first time in Justin.¹⁰⁴ Notwithstanding, a similar term appears also in *TestTruth*, where the author mentions the ‘disciples of Valentinus’, thus suggesting the existence of a

¹⁰² See *infra* Part II.

¹⁰³ For this very reason, it is therefore superfluous to provide here a list of all works which fall under each definition of Sethian, Barbeloite or Ophite. For a classification, see Turner (2001), 60-62.

¹⁰⁴ Justin, *DialTryph* 35, 6.

Gnostic movement which recognised Valentinus as its founder.¹⁰⁵ In spite of the denomination chosen in this research, it ought to be noted that the author of *GosPhil*, a Valentinian gospel, refers to his fellow Valentinian readers as ‘Christians’ (ΧΡΙΣΤΙΑΝΟΣ) on numerous occasions, thus suggesting that they also employed this term to define themselves.¹⁰⁶ Secondly, unlike the abovementioned Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite Gnostics, the Valentinian Gnostics were organised as a philosophical school of the Antiquity – that is, an organised group with a line of teachers and disciples.¹⁰⁷ As the name suggests, the founder of the Valentinian school was Valentinus, who was supposedly active in Rome around the second half of the second century. The relevance of Valentinus’ teachings for the Valentinian school was questioned in the early 1990s by Marksches. He advanced the hypothesis that Valentinus’ disciples were the true founders of Valentinianism, claiming that Valentinus’ teachings did not show any Valentinian imprint.¹⁰⁸ While Marksches’ proposal gained great attention from the scholarly community, it did not also gain its consensus. In fact, most recent studies have proved the founding role played by Valentinus within the Valentinian school.¹⁰⁹ As usual in many philosophical schools of the antiquity, Valentinian school sprang from Valentinus’ disciples as well as from the disciples of his immediate disciples. Within Valentinianism, there were two main ramifications – the western school and the eastern one¹¹⁰ – which took different stands concerning the soteriological destiny reserved for the psychic nature.¹¹¹ In truth, even Marksches admitted that these distinctions should be taken with a grain of salt, for some eastern elements are present in the western schools and vice versa. The main representatives of the western school were Ptolemy and Heracleon, who were probably active respectively in Rome and Alexandria; whilst Theodotus and the author of *GosPhil* could be identified as

¹⁰⁵ *TestTruth* XI, 56, 1-5.

¹⁰⁶ *GospPhil*. II, 52, 21-25; 62, 26-32; 64, 22-31; 67, 19-27; 74, 13.

¹⁰⁷ For a complete overview of numerous reasons why the Valentinians can be rightfully called a school, see Layton (1980) and Marksches (1997).

¹⁰⁸ Marksches (1992).

¹⁰⁹ Chiapparini (2012) and (2014); Thomassen (2006); Dunderberg (2008); Quispel (1996) and (1947).

¹¹⁰ For an investigation of the differences, see Thomassen (2006) and Kaestli (1980). Against this classification, see Kalvesmaki (2008).

¹¹¹ This is attested widely in heresiological sources, see Hippolytus, *Ref* VI, 35, 5-7 and Tertullian, *AdVal* IV, 1-3.

the main representatives of the eastern school. A good summary of the Valentinian beliefs shared by both schools has been proposed by Thomassen. He has listed three elements: a) belief in the historical appearance of the Saviour; b) a protological speculation about the origins of the divine plurality; c) a ritually enacted redemption.¹¹² In addition to Thomassen's list, I would also underline the importance of three other elements: d) the belief in a cosmological and anthropological hierarchy of three natures: pneumatic (spiritual), psychic (soul) and hylic (material) natures;¹¹³ e) the separation of Sophia, which is one of the peculiarities of the Valentinian feminine imagery; f) the ritual of the bridal chamber as the eschatological restoration of the lost syzygial unity.¹¹⁴ Within the Nag Hammadi library, there are at least four Nag Hammadi treatises – *TriTrac*, *GosTruth*, *GosPhil* and *ExVal* – which are widely acknowledged as Valentinian texts. Likewise, the information available in the heresiological literature is more extensive than for any other Gnostic movement. In addition to Justin, Irenaeus, Hippolytus and Epiphanius, the Valentinian gnosis is also the polemical object of Tertullian's *AdVal*. Moreover, quite exceptionally, some fragments and works of Valentinian teachers are extant in polemical sources: there are six fragments of Valentinus reported by Clement of Alexandria;¹¹⁵ forty-eight fragments of Heracleon's lost *Commentary on the Gospel of John* can be found in Origen's own *ComJn*; Ptolemy's *EpFl* has been entirely reported in Epiphanius;¹¹⁶ and fragments from Theodotus survived in Clement of Alexandria *ExTheod*.

The category of Simonian gnosis has often been overshadowed by the uncertainty regarding the historical Simon, thus also raising many suspicions regarding the existence of a so-called Simonian gnosis. The term 'Simonians'¹¹⁷ is first attested in Irenaeus, although Justin is the first one to

¹¹² Thomassen (2006), 2-3.

¹¹³ There are however two conflicting anthropologies in Valentinian doctrines, *infra* III.4.1.

¹¹⁴ Marksches (2003), 89-94 has already noted the importance of this feature within Valentinian speculation.

¹¹⁵ Clement of Alexandria, *Strom* II, 36, 2-4; II, 114, 3-6; III, 59, 3; IV, 89, 1-3; IV, 89, 6 – 90, 1; VI, 52, 3-4.

¹¹⁶ Epiphanius, *Pan* I, 33, 3-7.

¹¹⁷ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 23, 4 (lat. *Simoniani*). For a detailed overview of the ancient sources on Simon Magus, *infra* III.1.

name Simon's disciples.¹¹⁸ From a scholarly perspective, the teachings of Simonian gnosis have not been the subject of many studies; nonetheless, some scholars have tried to identify the core teachings of Simon and his disciples.¹¹⁹ In particular, Haar has focused his research on the Gnostic affiliation of Simon Magus. Although Haar has concluded that an absolute answer on Simon's identity is impossible, his research has highlighted an essential theologoumenon of the so-called Simonian gnosis: the identification between Simon and a redeeming First God, whose divine nature is proven by the ability to perform wonders. This is indeed the founding stone on which Simon and his disciple allegedly built their message. In addition to it, I believe it is worth underlining another element of Simonian gnosis, one that is directly related – albeit not exclusively – to feminine imagery. Within this Gnostic system, all three feminine aspects (that is, the feminine in the Godhead, the fallen feminine and the incarnated feminine) come together in a single character, Helena of Tyre. In the last section of my work, I will express my doubts regarding the existence of this Gnostic movement.¹²⁰ Nevertheless, I will also show that the representation of Helena is crucial to understand better how this Gnostic movement gained such a prominent role in heresiological literature.

Although these classifications are very useful for the purpose of historical research, they should not be understood rigidly. To use Thomassen's words, one should rather assume 'a decentralised proliferation of groups and teachers, each of them producing their own version of the [...] system based on a common pattern'.¹²¹ Although he was referring to Valentinianism, I believe his observation applies also to the development of Gnosticism as a whole. Hence, in analysing Gnostic texts, one has always to account for a certain degree of fluidity. Although this does not compromise the identification of specific movements, it can certainly not be underestimated. The fluidity of individual mythologoumena and theologoumena is particularly visible in the late Gnostic production, which I will analyse in IV.2 and IV.3. As a matter of fact, the groups of mythologoumena and theologoumena outlined thus far will be also

¹¹⁸ Justin, *ApPr* I, 26.

¹¹⁹ See Haar (2003), Lüdemann (1987) and Wilson (1979).

¹²⁰ *Infra* IV.1.

¹²¹ Thomassen (2006), 494.

used as the interpretative key of the other two texts considered in my research, the *Bar* and the *ExSoul*. These texts display elements from more than one movement, thus testifying the fluidity of Gnostic features.

I.4 Concluding Remarks on Methodology

In this first Part, I have provided a general overview of the issues faced by scholars who undertake research on Gnosticism.

First, I have proposed a *working definition* of Gnosticism. Expanding on the Messina definition, I have clarified that I use the term Gnosticism to indicate Christian dualistic theologies which developed around the second century. Gnostic theologies were mostly expressed in a mythological form, whence the use of the terms mythologoumenon and theologoumenon to indicate Gnostic doctrines. Furthermore, I have stressed that Gnostic mythologies varied from movement to movement, although they were all structured according to the principle of typological resemblance – that is, the idea according to which each level of reality resembles the level above. Lastly, I have underlined that Gnostic movements were highly syncretistic and deeply influenced by both Platonic philosophies and Judaism.

Secondly, I have discussed the issues involved in studying the Gnostic textual sources. Prior to the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library in 1945, Gnosticism was mainly known through polemical heresiological sources. Only after the publications of the Nag Hammadi treatises, it has been possible to compare the heresiological accounts with some original Gnostic works. Both the heresiological sources and the Nag Hammadi treatises are not exempt from problems. On the one hand, the heresiological sources are polemical and, often, misrepresent Gnostic theologies. On the other hand, Nag Hammadi treatises are Coptic translations of originally Greek texts, thus presenting several problems concerning the translation and the use of language. As long as one acknowledges the limits of both heresiological and Nag Hammadi evidence, these sources ought to be considered valid tools for the study of the representation of the Gnostic feminine imagery.

Thirdly, I have illustrated the main mythologoumena and theologoumena of the Gnostic movements which will be employed in this work. In addition, I have

clarified that I will employ these categories as working categories for the sake of historical research, without investigating whether these categories corresponded to identifiable Gnostic groups.

Having outlined some general methodological grounds for the investigation of Gnosticism, it is now time to move on to the investigation of the role and functions of feminine imagery within different Gnostic movements.

II. The Soteriological Feminine in Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite Texts

This part of my work investigates the Gnostic feminine imagery as presented in *ApJohn*, *HypArch* and *OrigWorld* and two accounts of Irenaeus, namely *AdHaer* I, 29 and I,30. These texts, which present a majority of Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite mythologoumena and theologoumena,¹ are grouped together because of the similarities of their feminine imagery. In this regard, two elements are particularly striking: 1) the way in which typological resemblance shapes the roles and functions of female characters; 2) the portrayal of female characters who are both in need of salvation and soteriological agents.

Hence, Part II has two main trajectories. First, it aims at showing that typological resemblance links all female characters together in *ApJohn*, *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*. By the term typological resemblance, I mean that each ontological level of the Gnostic world – and, consequently, each female character in it – is structured to mirror the upper level.² According to this principle, all female beings are intimately connected one with another, since they bear a typological resemblance with the female character that is ontologically superior to themselves. The importance of typological resemblance for female characters is even stated explicitly in *HypArch*, where it is said that ‘she (Pistis Sophia) established each of his offspring in conformity with its power – after the pattern of the realms that are above, for by starting from the invisible world the visible world was invented (αὐτὴ ἀσκαθίστα ἡνεῖ τῷ οὐρῇ ποῦα ποῦα κατὰ τετραβὸν κατὰ πτύπος ἡαίων ἐτήπσα ντήε χε εβολ 2ῆ νεοήπ λυζε ανετογον2 εβολ)’.³ Secondly, it aims at examining how and to what extent female characters enact

¹ For the definitions of Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite traditions, *supra* I.3.

² For a description of the mechanism of typological resemblance, *supra* I.1. Being the typological resemblance a cosmological principle, it does not exclusively interest female characters, but also male ones. Nevertheless, it has severe repercussions on the descriptions, roles and functions of female characters for it generates confusions between them. This issue will be discussed in several occasions, see particularly *infra* II.2.5 and II.3.5.

³ *HypArch* II, 87, 8-11.

a soteriological role in these Gnostic mythologies. By defining their role with the adjective soteriological, I am relying on the Gnostic idea that salvation equals knowledge, since salvation occurs when one acknowledges that one's true self is consubstantial with the divine. Hence, I will show that most female characters are considered soteriological agents insofar as they are the main and primary instruments of divine revelation.

Given the intricacy of these matters, this part will be organised into four chapters. The first chapter (II.1) will provide a general overview of the primary sources, explaining also the criteria employed for their selection. The remaining three chapters will deal respectively with the three aspects of the feminine – namely, the intra-pleromatic feminine (II.2), the fallen feminine (II.3) and the incarnated feminine (II.4), according to the texts which I have chosen to examine.

II.1 Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite Sources and Selection Criteria

The selection of *ApJohn*, *HypArch*, *OrigWorld*, *AdHaer* I, 29 and I, 30 among the numerous texts which fall under the umbrella of Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite works has been a hard, but necessary, task. For this reason, after a brief introduction of the texts, I will explain in detail the criteria which I have used to select them.

The book of *ApJohn* has an extremely complex textual history. This text is known to us in four different Coptic translations: two long versions (NHC II, 1 and NHC IV, 1) and two short versions (BG 8502, 2 and NHC III, 1).⁴ Unlike the majority of Nag Hammadi treatises, it is possible to establish a *terminus post quem* – that is, around 180 CE – for the composition of *ApJohn*, since a very similar version of the myth is attested in Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 29. Although the identification of *AdHaer* I, 29 with a primordial version of *ApJohn* is not universally acknowledged,⁵ the majority of scholars agree that there is striking correspondence between the two narratives. In fact, most scholars (including myself) consider *AdHaer* I, 29 to reflect the earliest version of *ApJohn*.⁶ This hypothesis would be confirmed by the complex mythology and language of the four Coptic versions of *ApJohn*, which are indeed more elaborated than that of Irenaeus. Concerning the affiliation of *ApJohn* to one of the above-mentioned three Gnostic movements, there is no definitive answer since it displays an interesting mixture of Barbeloite, Sethian and – albeit to a lesser extent – Ophite mythologoumena and theologoumena.

⁴ In this work, I will mostly use the long version of Codex II. The differences with other texts will be highlighted only where relevant for the analysis at hand. For further information on different versions of *ApJohn*, see King (1997) and Wisse (1997). For the Coptic text and its translation, see Waldstein – Wisse (1995). Amendments will be made occasionally to the translation.

⁵ Wisse (1971), 208; Waldstein – Wisse (1995), 1, claim that the version known to Irenaeus was the source of *ApJohn* and not the book of *ApJohn* itself, which they hypothesize that it was written around the beginning of the third century CE.

⁶ Simonetti (1999), 45; King (1997), 105.

HypArch (NHC II, 4)⁷ is a Gnostic treatise which presents mainly Ophite and Barbeloite features.⁸ The author and the date of composition are unknown, but Bullard, who produced one of the first critical editions, hypothesized that *HypArch* was composed originally in Greek around the third century in Egypt.⁹ The most striking element of this treatise lies in the dependence upon the Genesis' stories, which are however interpreted in a strongly mythological sense. This Gnostic interpretation of Genesis' story establishes a clear link between *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*, so much so that Bullard speculated regarding the existence of a common source.¹⁰

OrigWorld (NHC II, 5) is one of the most obscure Gnostic treatises.¹¹ Unlike other Nag Hammadi treatises, the title of this work has been assigned to the text by modern scholars. Bethge claims that it does not belong to a specific tradition and that it was composed in Alexandria around the end of the third century or the beginning of the fourth century.¹² On the contrary, Rasimus lists this among the purely Ophite treatises and the following analysis of the feminine seems to confirm his theory.

The heresiological sources that describe Ophite, Sethian or Barbeloite mythologies are numerous, although not very consistent with one another. The heresiological accounts that will be considered in the following chapters are:

- a) The above-mentioned Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 29;
- b) The Ophite account in Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 30;¹³
- c) The Ophite account of Hippolytus, *El* V, 7-9;¹⁴
- d) Epiphanius, *Pan* I, 26.¹⁵

⁷ For the Coptic text and the translation, see Bullard (1989). I have also consulted Bullard – Krause (1970) and Bullard (1996). Amendments will be made occasionally to the translation.

⁸ Rasimus (2009), 61.

⁹ Bullard (1989), 220-222.

¹⁰ Bullard (1989), 222.

¹¹ For the Coptic text and the translation, see Bethge (1989).

¹² Bethge (1989), 12-14.

¹³ For the Greek and Latin texts of Irenaeus' work, see respectively Harvey (1857), Doutreleau – Rousseau (1965) and (1979). For the English translation see Unger (2012).

¹⁴ For the edition and translation of this text, see respectively Marcovich (1986) and Litwa (2016). I have made occasional amendments to the translation.

¹⁵ For the edition of the Greek text and translation, see respectively Holl (1915) and Williams (2009). I have made occasional amendments to the translation.

In the following analysis, I will focus mainly on Irenaeus' account, for it displays the most evident connections with the texts of *ApJohn*, *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*. Nevertheless, Hippolytus' and Epiphanius' accounts will be considered when relevant.

Before analysing these texts, it may be useful to explain further the criteria that I employed to select them among Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite works.¹⁶ The first criterion is the predominance of feminine imagery in these treatises. Although feminine imagery is crucial to the majority of Gnostic productions, it plays a more prominent role in some works than in others. For instance, this criterion led me to choose *ApJohn* over other Barbeloite texts, where feminine imagery plays a more marginal role. A second criterion concerns the success that some texts gained among Gnostic circles. Indeed, *ApJohn*, which is extant in no fewer than four versions, enjoyed clearly a wide and significant circulation. That is also confirmed by the fact that different versions were known to anti-Gnostic writers such as Irenaeus. A third criterion concerns the narrative affinities between *ApJohn* and *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*. Indeed, the narrative structures of these works follow roughly the plot of *ApJohn*. In any case, these treatises will be considered not only for their connections with *ApJohn*, but also as texts in their own right. Lastly, I believe that this selection is fairly representative of the three blocks of Sethian, Ophite and Barbeloite mythologoumena and theologoumena, thus providing a good overview of the feminine imagery within these Gnostic movements. Nevertheless, the theologoumena and mythologoumena found in this investigation ought not to be considered automatically valid for other texts that fall under the labels of Ophite, Sethian or Barbeloite texts, since Gnosticism is extremely variegated and one can never assume immediate correspondence. Besides constituting a good case study for Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite movements, I also believe that the findings of this investigation may have vast applications in contemporary research, since they may help scholars to shape further the elusive notion of Gnosticism.

¹⁶ This problem has already been mentioned in the Introduction.

II.2 Intra-Pleromatic Representations of the Feminine: Trinitarian Feminine Imagery

The first place where the feminine appears in Gnostic mythologies is in the Pleroma, that is, the totality of divine beings that dwells in the highest celestial spheres.¹⁷ Since the names and functions of these pleromatic female beings vary from text to text, only a detailed analysis of each textual instance allows us to highlight the similarities between these Gnostic accounts.

II.2.1 Barbelo in *The Apocryphon of John* (NHC II, 1)

ApJohn is structured as dialogue between the disciple John and the Saviour. At the beginning of the book, a figure appears to John in the mist of light as a three-formed likeness, saying: ‘I [am the Father], I am the Mother, and I am the Son (ΑΝΟΚ [ΠΕ ΠΕΙΩΤ ΑΝΟΚ ΠΕ] ΤΜΑΛΥ ΑΝΟΚ ΠΕ ΠΩΗ[ΡΕ]).’¹⁸ The Saviour encourages John not to be scared of this appearance of the divine, adding: ‘you are not unfamiliar with this idea (ΑΓΓΙΔΕΑ), are you?’¹⁹ Not surprisingly, such an opening statement has puzzled those scholars who deem the *ApJohn* to be an essentially non-Christian text.²⁰ Indeed, for the text is presenting God as a Trinity, the traits of which are also markedly Christian.²¹ If so, the representation of the Trinity becomes extremely interesting since it describes the third Trinitarian person as a female, rather than presenting the more “orthodox” thrice-male Trinity.²² In this regard, a more detailed analysis of the

¹⁷ For the sake of clarity, it is worth specifying that I will be using the term Pleroma to indicate the superior celestial sphere in which the divine aeons dwell despite the fact that it does not appear in all these texts but only in some (such as *ApJohn*).

¹⁸ *ApJohn* II, 2, 13-15.

¹⁹ *ApJohn* II, 2, 11. For an analysis of *ApJohn*’s Trinitarian representation, as well as its Jewish and Middle Platonic background see Waldestein (1997).

²⁰ For instance, Pearson claims that only the frame story of *ApJohn* is Christian, whereas the contents are pre-Christian, see Pearson (2007), 63.

²¹ This claim is supported by many studies, see Rasimus (2009); Luttikhuisen (2006), 17-21; Simonetti (1999), XIX-XXVII; Waldestein – Wisse (1995).

²² The identification of the Holy Spirit with a feminine being is grounded in the Jewish feminine name *rhua* (רוּחַ). For an evangelical perspective, the identification of the Spirit with a maternal figure could have its scriptural justification in *Mt* 12:50, ‘For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’ Nevertheless, the majority of early Christian theologian usually described the Trinity by using a masculine terminology, see Bates (2015). For a feminist reading of the Trinitarian articulations, see Soskice (2008), 66-83 and 100-124. Therefore, the Gnostics represent an exception, together with Origen, who used

three Trinitarian persons in *ApJohn* might help understanding the role of the Mother.

Although the text presents a straightforward Trinitarian articulation of the divine, the identification of each person is made quite challenging by the proliferation of divine beings that characterises Gnostic mythologies. The first person of this Trinity – that is, the Father as the highest and transcendent divinity – is probably the least problematic, since he is identifiable with the Monad, the Invisible Virginal Spirit.²³ By contrast, the identification of a specific female character with the second person of this Trinity is made trickier by the fact that the appellative **ΜΑΛΛΥ** is not an exclusive attribute of a single character in Gnostic sources; rather it works for several female figures.²⁴ Since the Trinity of *ApJohn* belongs exclusively to the highest celestial regions, an educated guess would be to identify the second person of the trinity with Barbelo (**ΒΑΡΒΗΛΩ**),²⁵ the First Power of the Virginal Spirit.²⁶ This character is described as follows:

And [his (Virginal Spirit) thought became] actual and she came forth
(**ΑΥΩ [ΤΕΦΕΝΝΟΙΑ ΑΣΩΠΕ ΝΟΥ] ΖΩΒ' ΑΥΩ ΑΣΩΛΠ**), [namely] she
who had [appeared] before him in the [shining] of his light. This is the
First [Power (**ΤΕΤΩΟΡΠ ΝΟΜ**) which was] before all of them (and)
[which came] forth from his mind (**ΝΤΑΖΟΥΩΝΖ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΗ ΠΕΦΜΕΕΥΕ**).

the appellative Sophia as an ἐπίνοια of the Son, see Origen, *ComJn* II, 87-88. For a brief but comprehensive overview of the Holy Spirit in early Christian tradition, see Quispel (2008a).

²³ See *ApJohn* II, 2, 35 – 4, 26. Especially, *ApJohn* II, 4, 10-15: 'His [aeon] is indestructible, at rest and existing in [silence, reposing] (and) being prior [to everything. For he] is the head of [all] the aeons, [and] it is he who gives them strength in his goodness.'

²⁴ In the following chapters, I intend to prove that the ambiguities in the use of the term mother are likely due to the typological correspondence between the different ontological levels of realities within Gnosticism.

²⁵ The origin and meaning of the name **ΒΑΡΒΗΛΩ** have not been determined yet. For more details, see Pétremont (1984), 136 and Stroumsa (1984), 61-62.

²⁶ The identification of Barbelo with the Mother is not accepted by all scholars: while Pagels (1979), 51-52 is persuaded of it, Hoffman (1994), 29-31 denies it. However, the latter position is compromised by the fact that Hoffman has a very specific and narrow notion of the Trinity, which corresponds to the mainstream one. This is indeed the only reason adduced to justify his position, for he admits that Barbelo is often called "Mother" and "Holy Spirit". Buckley (1986), 41-42 suggested a third alternative, proposing to identify all three persons with Barbelo: 'The Father and the Spirit can be equated. When the Father is reflected in the water, his thought, Ennoia, manifests herself as an anonymous figure. She is both the Father and herself.' On the contrary, Turner (2001), 754 identified the 'maternal figure' of Barbelo as her main characteristic, thus justifying her appellative of 'Mother'.

She [is the Forethought of the All ([ΤΠΡΟΝΟΙΑ Π]ΕΣΟΥΘΕΙΝ) – her light [shines like his] light (Ε[ΤΡ ΟΥΘΕΙΝ ΖΗ ΠΕΙΝΕ ΝΤΕ ΠΕΦ]ΟΥΘΕΙΝ) – the [perfect] power which is [the image] of the Invisible Virginal Spirit (ΘΙΚΩΝ ΉΠΙΑΤΝΑΥ [ΕΡΟΦ ΜΠ]ΑΡΘΕΝΙΚΟΝ ΜΠΝΑ) who is perfect. [The First Power] ([ΤΨΟΡΠ ΝΘ]ΟΜ), the glory of Barbelo (ΠΕΘΟΥ ΉΒΑΡΒΗΛΩ), the perfect glory in the aeons, the glory of the revelation, she glorified the Virginal Spirit [...] This is the First Thought (ΠΨΟΡΠ΄ ΉΜΕΕΥΕ), his Image (ΉΤΕΦΖΙΚΩΝ); she became the Womb of Everything (ΉΜΗΤΡΑ ΉΠΤΗΡΦ) for it is she who is prior to all of them, the Mother-Father (ΤΉΗΤΡΩΠΑΤΩ[Ρ]), the First Man (ΠΨΟΡΠ΄ ΉΡΩΜΕ), the Holy Spirit (ΠΝΑ ΕΤΟΥΑΛΒ), the thrice-male (ΠΨΟΜΤ΄ <Ν>ΖΟΥΤ), thrice-powerful (ΤΨΟΜΤΕ ΉΘΟΜ), the thrice-named androgynous one (ΠΨΟΜΤ΄ ΉΡΑΝ ΉΖΟ[Ο]ΧΤ ΕΖΙΜΕ), and the eternal aeon among the invisible ones, and the first to come forth.²⁷

As in other Gnostic mythologies, the Pleroma appears to be organised in syzygies; and the Invisible Spirit and Barbelo are the primordial and original syzygy (ΣΥΖΥΓΟΣ).²⁸ Besides being the Virginal Spirit's companion, Barbelo is also considered to be his emanation. In this regard, the analysis of the term ΑΣΘΩΛΠ used to indicate the emanation of Barbelo is only partially helpful, since the Coptic text uses different words each time to describe the 'coming forth' of aeons.²⁹ However, I believe this concept expresses well what the Gnostic author envisioned. Following Turner's investigation of the emanative process in Sethian texts, I am convinced that the language of emanation of *ApJohn* and its speculation about the generation in the superior realm draws heavily from Platonic and Middle-Platonic philosophy, thus envisioning an

²⁷ *ApJohn* II, 4, 26 – 5, 11.

²⁸ The use of the word 'syzygy' to indicate a male-female couple is common among Gnostic scholars, but there are nonetheless some who rejected it in the case of *ApJohn*, see Buckley (1986), 43-44, who claims that the syzygy is not necessarily composed of couples of opposite genders. However, she fails to support her hypothesis with sufficient textual evidence.

²⁹ *ApJohn* uses a variety of terms and periphrases, such as ΑΣΘΩΛΠ, ΟΥΩΝΖ, ΕΙ. In this regard, a comparison with the language of generating in the Valentinian *GosPhil* is extremely useful for it denotes the distance between the sacramental language of Valentinian texts and the more mythological language of *ApJohn*. For a study of the generative language of *GosPhil*, see Buckley – Good (1997).

emanation which implies knowing both itself and the originating principle.³⁰ As a matter of fact, Barbelo is not *generated* by the Invisible Virginal Spirit, for he is immovable, rather she *appears* (ϥωλπ) as result of an intellectual action of the Father. The use of this terminology suggests that *ApJohn* distinguishes between the intellectual emanation through which Barbelo comes forth and the material and *ignorant* generation through which the inferior world comes into existence.³¹ As a matter of fact, the Coptic translator uses the verbs ϥΙΝΕ ΕΒΟΛ and ΟΥΩΝΖ ΕΒΟΛ to describe Yaldabaoth's birth from Sophia.³² Furthermore, this is the only occurrence in which the Virginal Spirit is directly involved in the process of becoming, albeit in a purely intellectual and noetic form, thus showing that the author of *ApJohn* is concerned with preserving the transcendence of the highest divinity. Therefore, the generation of the rest of the Pleroma happens when both the Virginal Father and Barbelo wish to bring forth in an intellectual manner. To be precise, the generation of the remaining pleromatic aeons is carried forward by Barbelo with the consent of the Virginal Spirit. Again, the Coptic translation uses the word ϥωλπ to indicate the coming forth of the Pentad of aeons.³³ Hence, will and action coincide in the original syzygy since they generate together in an intellectual manner. From this moment forward, all deeds will be performed by the two as one, since Barbelo is the operating and active power of the Virginal Spirit; it is she who performs the deeds thought by the Virginal Spirit's mind. Her power comes from the Virginal Spirit, therefore she mirrors the power of her companion, as the text specifies: 'her light [shines like his] light' (ϥ[ΤΡ ΟΥΟΕΙΝ ΖΗ ΠΕΙΝΕ ΝΤΕ ΠΕQ]ΟΥΟΕΙΝ) and she is his 'Image of the perfect Virginal Spirit' (ΘΙΚΩΝ ΜΠΑΤΝΑΥ [ΕΡΟQ ΜΠ]ΑΡΘΕΝΙΚΟΝ ΜΠΝΑ).

The author of *ApJohn* used several epithets to describe Barbelo, thus leaving precious clues for understanding her role and functions. All of her names hint at the intimate connection that she has with the Virginal Spirit. First, she is

³⁰ This dependence on Platonic texts is clearly proved by Turner (2000), 187-188. Although his analysis is referred to *All* and *StSeth*, *ApJohn*'s description of Barbelo's actions and generation displays similar features.

³¹ In *ApJohn* II, 9, 25 – 10, 10. Also King (2000), 126-127, stresses the opposition between the noetic production of the syzygy and Sophia's sexual generation of Yaldabaoth.

³² This episode will be discussed in the next chapter, *infra* II.3.1.

³³ *ApJohn* II, 5, 14-32.

called the ‘Womb of everything’ (ἡ μήτρα ἡ πτήρη), for she is the one who presides over the generation of the entire Pleroma and the one from whom the entire Pleroma comes. Secondly, she is called the ‘Mother-Father’ (τῆς μητρὸς πατρὸς [ρ]) as she is the active power of the Father, and every generative act that she performs is in accordance with the will and power of the Virginal Spirit. Lastly, the intimate connection between her and the Virginal Spirit is confirmed by the name ‘Androgynous One’ (ἄνδρ[ο]χτ[ρ]ος γυνή), which shows how Barbelo and the Virginal Spirit are often considered a unity. A further confirmation of their unity is found in the epithet of ‘First Man’ (ἄνδρ[ο]χτ[ρ]ος γυνή), which is however only present in the versions of *Codex* III and BG.³⁴ Indeed, Barbelo and the Virginal Spirit are one syzygy and they act as one being;³⁵ they *act* as a single entity, thus they *are* one in the generation of the Pleroma.³⁶ The procreative power of this prominent pleromatic female character is manifested openly in the generation of the Only-Begotten, the third person of this Trinity. The Son resembles the Father’s light, albeit he does not equal it, and he was conceived when the Virginal Spirit looked at Barbelo.³⁷

Hence, differently from what Turner observed in regard to other Sethian texts,³⁸ *ApJohn* seems to oscillate between two contrasting influences: on the one hand, it attempts to preserve the transcendence of the superior principle; on the other hand, the Virginal Spirit’s actions are inextricably connected to Barbelo to such an extent that they are considered one. Although this might appear as a paradox according to a Platonic perspective, it does become more understandable if one considers it from a Christian perspective. In *ApJohn*, the relationship Father-Mother-Son is a Gnostic attempt at conceiving the relation

³⁴ *ApJohn* III, 7, 23-24 and BG 27, 19-21. In these two versions, the text runs like this: ‘She became a First Man who is the Virginal Spirit (ἄνδρ[ο]χτ[ρ]ος γυνή ἡ πτήρη πᾶν πᾶν ἡ παρθενικόν)’, making explicit the correspondence between her and the Virginal Spirit.

³⁵ A similar explanation could also be given for the appellatives of ‘thrice-male’ (πῶς ἄνδρ[ο]χτ[ρ]ος) and ‘thrice-powerful’ (τῶς ἄνδρ[ο]χτ[ρ]ος), which are in the citation above.

³⁶ Identifying the syzygy as a unity is certainly not unusual in *ApJohn*. For this reason, the so-called ‘Pentad of aeon’ – composed by Barbelo, Foreknowledge, Indestructibility, Eternal Life and Truth – is in truth a ‘decad of aeons’ in *ApJohn* II, 5, 11 – 6, 10. For more information on the composition of the Pentad in the different versions of *ApJohn*, see Williams (1985), 107-108.

³⁷ *ApJohn* II, 6, 10-18.

³⁸ See Turner (2001).

between the three persons. Moreover, within this Gnostic Trinity, Barbelo becomes the acting force of the Virginal Spirit, she who emanates the rest of the Pleroma by working in syzygy with her male counterpart.³⁹

To sum up, in the description of Barbelo given by *ApJohn*, Barbelo is the female counterpart of the primordial syzygy, whose male part is the Invisible Virginal Spirit. Being the perfect syzygy, the two entities always act as one: he is the will who conceives thoughts – the first of which is Barbelo – and she is the active power who realises his thoughts. Despite this unity, it is possible to detect a hierarchy, for the Virginal Spirit is not only ontologically prior to Barbelo, but she can also generate exclusively with the consent of the Virginal Spirit whilst he can generate on his own. Indeed, the Virginal Spirit emanated Barbelo out of himself, whilst Barbelo needed the consent of his companion to generate the Pentad of aeons.⁴⁰ Hence, so far, *ApJohn* presents a female character that puts in actions the will of her partner but needs the intervention of a male figure to validate her action. In this sense, Barbelo embodies the Barbeloite mythologoumena and theologoumena about feminine imagery. Nevertheless, it is worth highlighting that *ApJohn*'s speculation on Barbelo proves that feminine imagery was employed by Gnostics in their Trinitarian formulation, thus putting great emphasis on female characters.

II.2.2 Barbelo according to Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* I, 29

A similar representation of Barbelo is visible in Irenaeus' *AdHaer* I, 29, which has been widely recognised as a summary of *ApJohn*.⁴¹ However, it is unlikely that Irenaeus had access to any of the four versions of the Nag Hammadi library, since it is possible to detect some discrepancies between the five accounts. Therefore, it is likely that Irenaeus' source represents an older

³⁹ It is indeed possible that this description of the Gnostic Trinity echoes Plato, *Timaeus* 48-52, as observed by Turner (2000a), 90. As a matter of fact, the Platonic and Christian perspective ought not to be considered as mutually exclusive.

⁴⁰ *ApJohn* II, 5, 10-20: '<She> requested from the invisible, virginal Spirit – that is Barbelo – to give her Foreknowledge. And the Spirit consented. And when he had [consented], the foreknowledge came forth, and it stood by the forethought; it originates from the thought of the Invisible, Virginal Spirit.'

⁴¹ *Supra* II.1.

version of *ApJohn*.⁴² Irenaeus' description of Barbelo is shorter than the one reported above, but consistent overall with what I have shown previously:

Certain ones of them (Ophites) propose that there is a certain Aeon in a Virginal Spirit who never grows old. They call her Barbelo. There also exists an unnameable Father who thought of revealing himself to this Barbelo. This Thought [Barbelo], however, came forward and stood before him and asked him for Foreknowledge [...] While Barbelo gloried in them and looked upon the Majesty and took delight in a conception, she gave birth to a Light similar to the Majesty. They say she is the beginning of all light and generation, and that when the Father saw this Light, he anointed it with his kindness that he might be made perfect.⁴³

Concerning Barbelo's emanation, Irenaeus' account is mostly faithful to the Coptic account, since it describes it as a sort of intellectual self-contemplation. Most importantly, the dynamics of the generation of the rest of the Pleroma seem similar to that described in *ApJohn*. It would appear that this account conveys the idea that Barbelo is unable to generate on her own and that she needs the approval of the Father to generate Foreknowledge. Nonetheless, the dynamic of the relationship between Barbelo and the Father is mostly ignored by Irenaeus, thus leaving the dynamics of the syzygy undiscussed. Overall, this heresiological account does not entirely misrepresent Barbelo's role and function within the Pleroma, but it seems to stress Barbelo's dependence upon the Father.

II.2.3 Incorruptibility in *The Hypostasis of Archons* (NHC II, 4)

⁴² For more information on this hypothesis, see King (1997) and Simonetti (1999) 117-121. On the contrary, Wisse is quite skeptical, see Wisse (1971), 217. Nevertheless, the following analysis will show that there is a certain correspondence between the two versions of *ApJohn*.

⁴³ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 29 1: *Quidam enim eorum Aeonem quondam numquam senescentem in virginali Spiritu subiciunt, quem Barbelon nominant: ubi esse Patrem quondam innominabilem dicunt. Voluisse autem hunc manifestare se ipsi Barbeloni. Ennoeam autem hanc progressam stetisse in conspectu eius et postulasse Prognosis. [...] In quibus gloriantem Barbelon et prospicientem in magnitudinem et conceptu delectam in hanc, generasse simile ei Lumen. Hanc initium et luminationis et generationis omnium dicunt. Et vidente Patrem Lumen hoc, enxisse illud sua benignitate, ut perfectum fieret.*

The name Barbelo is replaced by ‘Incorruptibility’ in the narrative of *HypArch*.⁴⁴ As mentioned briefly in II.1, the plots of *ApJohn* and *HypArch* are quite similar; however, the former discusses the composition of the Pleroma at length, whilst the latter is mainly focused on the extra-pleromatic events.

Although *HypArch* provides less information concerning the highest female deity than *ApJohn*, it represents an additional step towards a more detailed understanding of intra-pleromatic feminine imagery. Indeed, the characters of Barbelo and Incorruptibility are similar only to a certain extent. On the one hand, just as Barbelo, Incorruptibility seems to transcend everything that is located in the inferior world. On the other hand, Incorruptibility plays a more meaningful role in the overall economy of salvation than Barbelo does. In this regard, the most meaningful element is the so-called ‘theophany above the waters’, which is a crucial mythologoumenon of Gnosticism that describes the creation of humankind by the superior deities.⁴⁵ The episode develops roughly as follows in most accounts.⁴⁶ In the midst of light, a deity appears to belie the Chief Archon’s claim to be the only God; and, upon the revelation of this deity, a divine reflection appears into the waters below. At the appearance of this divine reflection, the archons who live in the inferior realm – that is, Yaldabaoth’s offspring – are impressed by its beauty and decide to have it for themselves by replicating it. However, they are unable to grasp the image because they are ignorant beings and they can only create an imperfect copy of the divine reflection, namely Adam. The peculiarity of *HypArch*’s account of the theophany above the waters consists in identifying the deity which appeared to the archons in the waters with Incorruptibility:

⁴⁴ *HypArch* II, 87, 1 – 88, 10. The attribution of this name to the highest female divinity supports Williams’ theory regarding the immovability of the spiritual element in Sethian tradition even if he does not make an explicit connection with *HypArch*, see Williams (1985).

⁴⁵ King (2000), 99 has identified four essential elements that constitute the syncretistic cultural background of this Gnostic myth: a) The Platonic notion that humankind has been modelled from the Idea of Man; b) *Gen.* 1:2-3, according to which light has been brought into the world from a watery darkness; c) Jewish Wisdom traditions that viewed Sophia as God’s instructor; d) The Johannine connection between Christ and the creative speech of God. Its importance has also been illustrated by Lettieri (1996) and (1995), who has shown how this myth represents the Christological core of Gnosticism for its baptismal elements.

⁴⁶ *ApJohn* II, 14, 24 – 15, 13; *OrigWorld* 103, 15-32.

As Incorruptibility (ΑΤΜΗΤ'ΑΤΤΕΚΟ) looked down into the regions of water, her image (ΑΠΕCΙΝΕ) appeared in the waters (ΖΗΝΗΤΩΒ); and the authorities of the darkness became enamoured of her (ΑΝΕΡΞΟΥCΙΑ ΗΠΚΑΚΕ ΜΕΡΙΤC). But they could not lay hold of her image (ΗΠΟΥΘΩΝCΟΜ ΔΕ ΝΤΕΖΕ ΠΙΝΕ ΕΤΗΜΑΥ), which had appeared to them into the waters, because of their weakness (ΤΟΥΜΗΤΩΒ) – since psychic beings cannot lay hold of pneumatic beings (ΧΕ ΗΨΥΧΙΚΟC ΝΑΨΤΕΖΕ ΗΠΝΕΥΜΑΤΙΚΟC ΑΝ) – for they were from below, while she was from above. This is the reason why “Incorruptibility looked down into the regions (etc.)”: so that, by the Father’s will (ΖΗ ΠΟΥΨ ΗΠΕΙΩΤ), she might bring the Pleroma into union with the Light. The archons laid a plan and said, “Come, let us create a man that will be soil from the earth” (ΑΝΑΡΧΩΝ ΧΙ ΝΟΥCΥΜΒΟΥΛΙΟΝ ΠΕΧΑΥ ΧΕ ΑΗΗΕΙΤΗ ΝΤΗΤΑΜΙΟ ΝΟΥΡΩΜΕ ΝΝΟΥΧΟΥC ΕΒΟΛ ΖΗ ΠΚΑΖ). They modelled their creature as one wholly of the earth (ΑΥΡΠΑCCE ΗΠΟΥΤΑ[ΜΙΟ] ΕΥΡΜΗΚΑΖ ΤΗΡ<Q> ΠΕ).⁴⁷

Unlike *ApJohn*, where the image above the water is a male being,⁴⁸ *HypArch* raises Incorruptibility to the prototype of every human being – namely, the luminous being revealed above the waters in whose image human beings are made. Nonetheless, the first human created in her image is a man, for the archons try to lure her down by reproducing improperly her male counterpart.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ *HypArch* II, 87, 11-27.

⁴⁸ *ApJohn* II, 14, 13-35: ‘And a voice came forth from the exalted aeon-heaven: ‘The Man exists and the Son of Man.’ And the chief archon, Yaldabaoth, heard (it) and thought that it was from his mother. And he did not know from where it came. And he taught them, the holy and perfect Mother-Father, the complete foreknowledge, the image of the Invisible One who is the Father of the all (and) through whom everything came into being, the First Man. For he revealed his likeness in a human form. And the whole aeon of the chief archon trembled, and the foundations of the abyss shook. And of the waters which are above matter, the underside was illuminated by the appearance of his image which had been revealed. And when all authorities and the chief archon looked, they saw the whole region of the underside which was illuminated. And through the light they saw the form of the image in the waters.’ Luttikhuizen (2006), 60 claims that in the long version of *ApJohn* II, 14, 18-24 the image in the water must be identified with Pronoia. Although Luttikhuizen’s hypothesis might be validated by association with *HypArch*, it must be noted that *ApJohn*’s text refers to the First Man (often the Son), whilst Barbelo is called the ‘First Man’ only twice in Codex III and BG (*supra* II.2.1). Consequently, it remains possible that, in Codex II, the appellation ‘First Man’ is referring to the Son, rather than to Barbelo.

⁴⁹ *HypArch* II, 87, 27 – 88, 1 continues: ‘Now the archons [...] had taken [some soil] from the earth and modelled their [man], after the body and after the [image] of God that had appeared [to them] in the waters. They said, “[Come, let] us hold of it by means of the form that we have modelled, [so that] it may see its male counterpart [*lacuna*], and we may size it with the form we have modelled”’

Given the inferiority of their psychic nature, this archontic evil plan fails and they cannot lay hold of the luminous pneumatic being.⁵⁰ The anthropological resemblance that humankind shares with Incorruptibility proves both her primary role in the creation of humankind and her importance at a soteriological level. Hence, Incorruptibility's generative power in *HypArch* – even if it takes an indirect form – is greater than that of Barbelo in *ApJohn*. Incorruptibility's power is visible not only in the superior realm, but it reaches also the inferior realm in which the fashioning of humankind takes place. Furthermore, this episode reveals that she is an essential soteriological character. Her historical revelation above the water is not only the beginning of the history of humankind, but also the beginning of the history of Salvation since her voice 'came forth for the assistance of Adam' (ΕΤΕΡΕ ΤΒΟΗΘΙΑ ΝΑ`ΔΑΜ).⁵¹

However, in Gnostic scholarship, the identification of Incorruptibility with the highest female visible manifestation of the Pleroma is not shared by all scholars. For instance, Bullard has taken a slightly different stand, proposing the identification of Sophia with the highest spiritual divinity.⁵² Such identification is, however, the consequence of his failure to consider the typological resemblance between different Gnostic levels of reality. In this respect, his identification is only partially correct. On the one hand, Bullard is right in underlining how close is the relationship between these two expressions (Sophia and Incorruptibility) of the feminine within the Pleroma. On the other hand, he fails to acknowledge that there is a hierarchy of beings where each one plays a different role. As I will show later on, *HypArch* mentions Sophia exclusively to intend the lower and defective aeon of the Pleroma, rather than the higher female being.⁵³ For this reason, it is preferable

⁵⁰ In these passages – especially *HypArch* II, 87, 15-20 and II, 87, 25-27 – *HypArch* seems to postulate the existence of three natures: the pneumatic (spiritual) nature of those who dwell in the realm above; the psychic (soul) nature of those who dwell in the inferior world; lastly, the hylic nature of those who have been created by the psychic beings. The debate concerning the existence of three natures in these Gnostic movements will be discussed later on, *infra* II.4.3.

⁵¹ *HypArch* II, 88, 16-18. It is worth noting that βονηθός is the same word used to describe Eve in *Gen.* 2:18-20.

⁵² Bullard and Krause (1970), 56-58.

⁵³ This is indeed the case of *HypArch* II, 93, 32 – 94, 35. For the analysis of Sophia in *HypArch*, *infra* II.3.3.

to maintain the name of Incorruptibility to indicate the highest female divinity of the superior realm, being also aware that she maintains a clear link with all other female characters.

Overall, Incorruptibility appears to be far more relevant for the economy of salvation than Barbelo. She is the revealing agent insofar as she – in the form of spirit – assists Adam in becoming a spiritual man and rising above the ground.⁵⁴ Moreover, she is the object of the revelation insofar as she is the divine being who manifests above the waters to inhabitants of the inferior world. In addition, her actions are motivated by a specific cosmological and soteriological reason: ‘so that, by the Father’s will, she might bring the Pleroma into union with the light.’⁵⁵ By revealing herself to the inferior world, she is preparing the way for the pneumatic beings to be reunited with the Pleroma, that is, the totality of the aeons. Notwithstanding Incorruptibility’s pivotal role, it is worth noting that the text stresses also her dependence upon the Father’s will. Hence, as in most Gnostic mythologies, the dynamics of subordination of the will of a female being to a male superior being are maintained, albeit *HypArch* does not stress them as of utmost importance.

II.2.4 Pleromatic Feminine? Textual Evidence in *On the Origin of the World* (NHC II, 5)

The logic of the *typological resemblance* between female beings, which is at the core of these Gnostic texts, has one major risk: it may cause narrative overlaps between characters. If the higher female beings are mirrored in the lower ones, it follows that the lower ones have similar powers, albeit imperfect. Since most Nag Hammadi texts are the result of multiple revisions, the risk of narrative misunderstandings increases exponentially. Whereas this problem is only marginally present in *ApJohn* and *HypArch*, this overlapping between female pleromatic beings is especially visible in the *OrigWorld*.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ See *infra* II.4.2.

⁵⁵ *HypArch* II, 87, 22-23.

⁵⁶ For the edition and translation of the Coptic text, see Bethge (1989).

Like *HypArch*, *OrigWorld* is mostly concerned with extra-pleromatic events.⁵⁷ However, while the plot of *ApJohn* and *HypArch* presents a coherent development of the extra-pleromatic events – albeit with many digressions and few repetitions – the sequence of events in *OrigWorld* is quite confused. For instance, some episodes are re-told two or three times throughout the book, sometimes with major variations as in the case of the theophany above the waters. Within this chaotic narrative, the roles and functions of the different female characters are often intertwined. The most interesting passage about the highest female divinity is the following:

After the natural structure of the immortal beings had completely developed out of the infinite, a likeness then emanated from Pistis (ΟΥΕΙΝΕ ΑΦΖΤΕ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΗ ΤΠΙCΤΙC); it is called Sophia (ΤCΟΦΙΑ). It exercised volition and became a product resembling the primeval light (ΑΦ'ΟΥΩΨ ΑΦΨΩΠΕ ΝΝΟΥΕΡΓΟΝ ΕΦΕ<Ι>ΝΕ ΜΠΟΥΘΕΙΝ' ΕΤΨΟΟΠ' ΝΨΩΡΠ'). And immediately her will manifested itself as a likeness of heaven (ΑΥΩ ΝΤΕΥΝΟΥ ΑΦΟΥΩΝΖ ΕΒΟΛ ΝΒΙ ΠΕCΟΥΩΨ' ΕΦΟ ΝΝΙΝΕ ΝΠΕ ΕΥΝΤΑΦ ΜΜΑΥ), having unimaginable magnitude; it was between the immortal beings and those things that came into being after them, like [lacuna] she functioned as a veil dividing mankind from the things above. Now the eternal realm (aeon) of truth has no shadow outside it, for the limitless light is everywhere within it. But its exterior is shadow, which has been called by the name darkness. [...] It was from <in> the abyss that [it] (shadow) appeared, deriving from the aforementioned Pistis (Ν[ΤΑC]ΟΥΩΝΖ ΕΒΟΛ <Μ>ΠΝΟΥΝ' ΕΒΟΛ ΖΗ ΤΠΙCΤΙC' ΝΤΑΝΨΑΧΕ ΕΡΟC).⁵⁸

The first lines of this passage seem to suggest the existence of two female beings: Pistis (ΤΠΙCΤΙC), a pre-existent female immortal being developed out of the infinite, and Sophia, the daughter of Pistis (ΤCΟΦΙΑ). Hence, one would be inclined to identify Pistis as the higher female being and Sophia with the lower

⁵⁷ *OrigWorld* II, 98, 7-9: 'Let us therefore concern ourselves with the facts of the matter; and furthermore, with the first product, from which chaos was projected'. *OrigWorld* seems to detain a special relationship not only with the two works of Codex II here illustrated, but also with *Eug*. For more details on the similarities with *Eug*, see Painchaud (1995).

⁵⁸ *OrigWorld* II, 98, 11 – 99, 2.

female aeon.⁵⁹ However, Pistis is portrayed also as the lower and defective Sophia, since she is identified with the female being who caused the darkness and who defected: ‘Now when Pistis saw what had resulted from her defect, she became disturbed’ (Νῆταρε τπιστικ δε ναγ απενταζωωπε εβολ ζῆ πεσωτα ασωτα ασωτορτ̄).⁶⁰ If so, the transcendence of the primordial deity would be tainted utterly, for it would become the cause of the darkness from which chaos originated.⁶¹ In addition, it is important to highlight that Pistis does not seem to have a proper partner, nor it is mentioned explicitly that she is part of a syzygy. Both these elements – that is, her defectivity and her being without a partner – are usually associated with the lower Sophia and not the highest female being.

Before drawing conclusions regarding these characters, a few observations on terminology are again in order. It is possible to detect two different uses of the names of Pistis and Sophia in *OrigWorld*: on a few occasions, these names are used together to refer to a single character named ‘Pistis Sophia’ (τπιστικ σοφια);⁶² in others, they are used individually to indicate two different characters.⁶³ Moreover, although this character will be discussed in section II.3.4, it is worth anticipating that Sophia generated another aeon called Zoe, which is occasionally named ‘Sophia Zoe’ (σοφια ζωη).⁶⁴ The association between a proper name (Zoe) and ‘Sophia’ seems to suggest that, in this case, the name ‘Sophia’ functions as an epithet rather than as a proper name. This hypothesis seems supported by the fact that the name ‘Sophia’ alone recurs rarely. Against this theory there is the fact that in one of these occurrences,

⁵⁹ This would also be confirmed by the episode of the theophany above the waters, where Pistis’ likeness appears to the archons in *OrigWorld* II, 103, 29-32; II, 107, 18-22.

⁶⁰ *OrigWorld* II, 99, 29-30.

⁶¹ The text is extremely clear about the ontological priority of the light over darkness, see *OrigWorld* II, 97, 24 – II, 98, 7.

⁶² *OrigWorld* II, 100, 1; II, 100, 10; II, 100, 28; II, 104, 3; II, 104, 17; II, 106, 11; II, 108, 29-30. It is worth highlighting that this name occurs also in *HypArch* II, 87, 7-8 and II, 94, 2-8, where it is referred to Sophia the lower aeon, the mother of Yaldabaoth.

⁶³ Pistis is also used in: *OrigWorld* II, 99, 23; II, 99, 29; II, 100, 20; II, 103, 15; II, 103, 29; II, 104, 28; II, 106, 19; II, 112, 3; II, 113, 7; II, 115, 7. Sophia is also used in: *OrigWorld* II, 106, 6; II, 112, 1; II, 113, 22; II, 115, 31. In addition, it is important to mention that one of Yaldabaoth’s offspring is called Sophia and she is in charge of the sixth heaven, see *OrigWorld* II, 102, 1 and II, 102, 25-31.

⁶⁴ *OrigWorld* II, 113, 12-13.

Sophia is explicitly called the ‘daughter of Pistis’ (ΑΤΣΟΦΙΑ <N>ΠΙΣΤΙΣ),⁶⁵ thus granting her a clear status of individual entity. There are two possible explanations to unravel this intricate labyrinth of names: either one of the redactors mistakenly inserted this clarification or Pistis is indeed the highest female aeon in the Pleroma, as well as the defective one. However, if the second option is true, *OrigWorld* would be the only Gnostic document in which the highest female divine principle is directly involved in the defection.⁶⁶

In conclusion, I believe it is worth considering the following four points when approaching the feminine imagery in *OrigWorld*. First, one should consider that *OrigWorld*’s narrative is entirely concerned with the events of the lower world. Secondly, the occurrences of the name ‘Sophia’ are very limited compared to the ones of ‘Pistis’ and ‘Pistis Sophia’. Thirdly, the name ‘Pistis Sophia’ is also used in *HypArch* to indicate Sophia, the fallen aeon.⁶⁷ Fourthly, the copyists and translators of the Nag Hammadi codices were not very careful in their translation.⁶⁸ Lastly, Irenaeus distinguished the higher female character from the lowest Sophia in his description of the Ophite system. These considerations make me more inclined not to consider Pistis as the highest female aeon, but rather as one of its lower manifestations. Consequently, the discussion concerning this character is postponed to the following chapter on the fallen feminine.⁶⁹

II.2.5 Ophite Pleromatic Feminine according to Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* I, 30

The overlapping of female characters is visible also in the heresiological literature, particularly in Irenaeus’ account of the Ophite mythology.

⁶⁵ *OrigWorld* II, 106, 6.

⁶⁶ The only parallel that one could establish is with the *Book of Baruch* of the Gnostic teacher Justine. However, the parallel would be incorrect for Edem (the highest female character) is psychic by nature, therefore she does not belong to the pneumatic Pleroma. This topic will be discussed further, see *infra* IV.2.

⁶⁷ For instance, *HypArch* II, 87, 8 and 95, 7.

⁶⁸ This is very well explained by Waldestein – Wisse (1995), 6-7.

⁶⁹ *Infra* II.3.4.

Nonetheless, Irenaeus maintains – at least nominally – the distinction between the upper female pneumatic being, called Ennoia, and the lower pneumatic being, called Sophia. However, in his *AdHaer* I, 30, the heresiologist attributes to the highest female being those features that are proper to Sophia, the lowest manifestation of the Pleroma:⁷⁰

Moreover, below these there exists the Holy Spirit, and under this superior Spirit exist the separated elements – water, darkness, abyss and chaos – over which Spirit moved. This Spirit they call First Woman. After that, First Man, together with his Son took delight in the beauty of the Spirit, who is the woman, and by illuminating her, generated from her an incorruptible Light, the Third Man, whom they call Christ, the son of the First Man and Second Man and of First Woman. In other words, both the Father and the Son were wedded to the Woman whom they called the Mother of the Living. When she was not capable of enduring or receiving the greatness of the lights, they say that she was completely filled and then overflowed on the left side. Thus, their own son, Christ, as of the right side and elevated to the upper region, was immediately caught up with the Mother into the incorruptible aeon.⁷¹

Irenaeus' text is intentionally polemical. On the one hand, Ennoia is explicitly recognised as the Holy Spirit, thus – contrarily to *AdHaer* I, 29 – a part of the Trinity; on the other hand, she displays all those features that are usually attributed to Sophia: proclivity to passions, inability to restrain herself and liminality between the pleromatic and extra-pleromatic world. The identification made by Irenaeus between the First Woman and these “defective” traits is made possible by mythologoumena such as that of *HypArch*, in which the female character is explicitly identified with the spirit

⁷⁰ This character is analysed at length later on, *infra* II.3.5.

⁷¹ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 30, 1-2: *Sub his autem Spiritum sanctum dicunt, et sub superiori spiritu segregate elementa, aquam tenebras abyssum chaos, super quae ferri Spiritum dicunt, Primam Foeminam eum vocantes. Postea, dicunt, exultantem primo homine cum filio suo super formositate spiritus, hoc est foeminae et illuminante eam, generavit ex ea lumen incorruptibile, tertium masculum, quem Christum vocant, filium Primi et Secundi Hominis et Spiritus sancti Primae Foeminae. Concubentibus autem patre et filio foeminae, quam et matrem viventium dicunt, cum autem non potuisset portare neque capere magnitudinem luminis, superrepletam et superbullientem secundum sinisteriores partes dicunt: et sic quidem filium eorum solum Christum, quasi dextrum et in superiora allevatitum, arreptum statim cum matre in incorruptibile Aeonem.*

within Adam.⁷² In this manner, Irenaeus is de-potentiating the Gnostic Trinity by misrepresenting the main female pleromatic character. This is also proved by the fact that, after the fall, she requires the help of her own son to be uplifted to her proper status,⁷³ as proven by the metaphorical opposition between left and right.⁷⁴ The heresiological mechanism that drives Irenaeus is indeed ingenious: counting on Gnostic typology, he is retro-projecting Sophia's sin to the primordial syzygy, to the Trinity itself. He can easily project on the highest female being some of the features of the fallen feminine, by relying on the connection between female characters granted by the typological structure of the cosmos. In order to do so, he re-proposes Sophia's sin – that is, the ignorance that drives her to wanting to be like the Father – at a primordial level, by making the Mother-Holy Spirit tainted by sexual desire.⁷⁵ Rather than being the rightful bride of the Virginal Spirit (here First Man), Ennoia's lust causes her to be with both the Father and the Son, whose powers she cannot bear. In this text, both Sophia and Ennoia want to be like the Father; however, both of them fail to achieve such resemblance.

Hence, *AdHaer* I, 30 presents a superior pleromatic being who is utterly tainted by error and sin. The intelligence of Irenaeus' account lies in his ability to use the typological structure of Gnostic mythologies to his advantage. Using the confusion between different female characters caused by typological resemblance, Irenaeus attempts to undermine the Ophite theology, which envisions a female entity within the Trinity.

II.2.6 Concluding Remarks on the Intra-Pleromatic Feminine

⁷² There is no evidence that Irenaeus knew *HypArch* directly, but he probably had access to other Gnostic – likely Ophite – sources which displayed similar mythologoumena. These mythologoumena will be discussed later on, *infra* III.4.2.

⁷³ In this regard, *AdHaer* I, 30 resembles Irenaeus' account on the Valentinian Gnostics, *infra* III.3.1.

⁷⁴ In antiquity, the left was considered the defective part, whereas the right was the dominant part. For this reason, it was also common to associate the right with male gender and the left with female gender, as in the present case.

⁷⁵ The use of sexual language to refer to Sophia's sin is an extremely important feature of all Gnostic myths, as the following chapter will explain; *infra* II.3.

Each text analysed so far adds few important pieces to the puzzle of the representation of the feminine within the Gnostic Godhead. *ApJohn* provides precious information concerning the ontological status of the highest female divinity, describing the functions of the primordial cosmological unity – the syzygy – and the Gnostic Trinitarian role attributed Barbelo. Here, the Father and Barbelo are considered an inseparable unity, of which he is the intellectual principle and she is the operative power. Furthermore, Barbelo is considered the third person of the Gnostic Trinity, composed by Father-Mother-Son. Hence, she represents the generative power of the Trinity, for she is the one who begets the rest of the aeons. By assuming a female character as part of the Trinity, *ApJohn* is proposing an original Trinitarian model in which the role of the Spirit, albeit subordinated to the Father's will, is conceived as feminine insofar as it is generative. However, Barbelo does not retain any specific soteriological function in *ApJohn*, as she instead does in other Ophite, Barbeloite and Sethian texts. The portrayal of Barbelo in the four Coptic versions of *ApJohn*'s coincides roughly with that of *AdHaer* I, 29. Here, however, the heresiologist tends to stress the subordination of Barbelo to the Virginal Spirit, thus diminishing the importance of the syzygy and de-potentiating the innovative stand of the Trinitarian speculation of *ApJohn*.

In *HypArch*, although the highest female being seems to maintain some Barbeloite features, Incorruptibility's field of action is wider than that of male Trinitarian characters. As a matter of fact, by making her the protagonist of the theophany above the waters, Incorruptibility assumes here a prominent soteriological function, becoming both the revealed divine being and the revealing divine agent. On the one hand, Incorruptibility represents the prototype of all humankind, because it is in likeness of her image that humanity was made; on the other hand, she is also the spiritual and divine part hidden in Adam.

Furthermore, this chapter shows that Pistis Sophia of *OrigWorld* should be considered dissimilar to both Barbelo and Incorruptibility, for she is a lower manifestation of the Pleroma associated with the fallen feminine, rather than the higher female being. The overlay between different female characters is

probably caused by the confusion generated in the transmission due to the typological resemblance. Lastly, the last paragraph shows that Irenaeus, having understood the mechanism of typological resemblance which governs Gnostic cosmologies and Gnostic characters, proposes an interpretation of the Gnostic myth in which the highest female being is tainted by the sin of the fallen feminine in order to stress the absurdity of this Gnostic Trinity.

Having clarified the functions of the highest female pneumatic manifestations, it is now time to turn to the lower ones in order to understand how Ophite, Barbeloite and Sethian Gnostics portrayed the fallen female entities.

II.3 Divine Duplicity: Paradoxical Female Characters

The previous section has revealed that feminine characters play a primary and essential role within Gnostic mythology for they are both the main generative powers and, in some cases, divine agents of revelation and salvation. However, the analysis conducted hitherto has shown only one side of the coin, for the most famous and well-studied aspect of Gnostic feminine imagery focuses on a female being in a fallen state, namely, Sophia.⁷⁶ In Gnostic mythologies, Sophia is the defective aeon, who is mostly portrayed as an inferior aeon in a state of distress. However, the interesting characteristic of the Gnostic representations of Sophia lies in her paradoxical nature: she is not only the aeon responsible for the intra-divine rupture that resulted in the creation of an inferior world and its tyrant, but also a soteriological agent – occasionally, the only one – who opens the way to the ascent of the spiritual humans.

In the introduction,⁷⁷ I have underlined that the use of the term ‘fallen feminine’ is meant to recall the first chapters of Genesis, specifically Eve’s fall from the Garden of Eden. In the case of Ophite, Barbeloite and Sethian mythologies, the connection with the book of Genesis is particularly significant, and many scholars have considered it as a proof of the Jewish origins of Gnosticism. This dependence has been valued to such an extent that some scholars, like MacRae, have concluded that the entire notion of a fallen feminine within Gnosticism, especially in the person of Sophia, needs to be traced back to the Genesis account of Eve’s Fall.⁷⁸ Such a neat contraposition between Christianity and Judaism in the second and third centuries does not account for the numerous interactions between Judaism and Christianity. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that Gnostic readings were always

⁷⁶ Most likely, her name comes from the Jewish tradition of Wisdom, from which the character of Sophia borrows a few characteristics, such as the role of epistemological instructor and descendent spirit of God. The most complete analysis of the Jewish features of Sophia in Ophitism, Sethianism and Barbeloism is found in MacRae (1970), 86-101.

⁷⁷ *Supra* Introduction, 5-6.

⁷⁸ In his opinion, this is the decisive element to confirm the predominantly Jewish background of Sophia, see MacRae (1970), 98-99. He goes even as far as claiming that ‘we may say that the very intention of the Gnostic myth is to provide a “true” esoteric explanation of the Genesis story itself’. In favor of an exclusive Jewish background for Sophia’s myth, see also Dahl (1981).

influenced by both Jewish and Christian elements. Nevertheless, I will argue for the preponderance of Christian elements over Jewish ones.⁷⁹ There are three main reasons which I believe are relevant for my argument. First, it is worth reminding ourselves that the rejection of the God of Genesis and his instructions is explicit in all of the texts considered in this chapter. Moreover, there is no evidence to suggest that it is merely a rejection of a specific interpretation of this book, such as the pharisaic one, rather than a rejection of the Jewish exegeses *tout court*.⁸⁰ In this regard, the most striking example is the liberating effect of the eating from the Tree of Knowledge, which is attributed by Gnostics to Eve's action. Secondly, some episodes of *ApJohn*, *HypArch* and *OrigWorld* present marked similarities with Christian narratives. For instance, the theophany above the waters – which recalls clearly the baptismal narration of the Gospels⁸¹ – is strictly connected with the creation of humankind; thus, Gnostic theologians are devising powerful theological instruments that super-impose a Christian reading of Genesis onto the Jewish text. Thirdly, soteriological events are considered in a historical-typological perspective – that is, involving the descent of a divine Redeemer who acts directly in human history – as is proper to the Christian tradition rather than to a Jewish messianic one. Likewise, Gnostic texts often describe Sophia's

⁷⁹ There are many speculations about the Gnostic view of the book of Genesis and, in truth, few scholars have explored the possibility that these Gnostics had a primarily Christian perspective. For scholars who advocate the Jewish origins of Gnosticism, see Pearson (1990), 124-135; Stroumsa (1984), 9; MacRae (1970), 97. On the contrary, although Turner claims that Sethianism pre-existed Christianity, he is forced to conclude that the *ApJohn* and *HypArch* are only known to us in their Christian form; see Turner (2001), 127-178. Luttikhuizen (2003) shows how the Gnostic re-reading of Genesis stories fits the Graeco-Hellenistic background of the second century and it is inserted in the intra-Christian debate concerning the interpretation of Genesis at a later time. In a later work – Luttikhuizen (2006), 11-12 – he takes however a milder stand, admitting the possibility that Sethians, Barbeliotes and Ophites drew also from early Christianity, but rejecting the idea that Gnosticism is a proper Christian movement. Similarly, Rasimus (2009), 130-132 highlights the dependence of the feminine on both Jewish Wisdom and Pauline literature.

⁸⁰ Similarly, Luttikhuizen (2006), 19-28 insists that *ApJohn* 'meant to defy, if not ridicule, the monotheistic belief in the biblical creator and ruler of the world'. Later on, he notes another element that could support this claim: the rejection of the authority of Moses. He argues that *ApJohn* is referring to an intra-Christian debate regarding the interpretation and value of Genesis and I am inclined to agree with him.

⁸¹ The resemblance between the theophany above the waters and the baptismal descriptions of the Gospels has been extensively studied by Lettieri (1995). He highlights three main points. First of all, both episodes take place in the water, that is, the waters of the inferior realm and the Jordan River. Secondly, both narrations describe the divine revelation (theophany) as a voice coming from above. Thirdly, this voice acknowledges and validates previous announcements: the Baptist announcement in the case of the Gospels and Sophia's one in the case of Gnostic accounts.

actions throughout history, including her intervention in support of the lost spiritual seed. Hence, although the Gnostic Sophia has much in common with the Jewish Eve, the latter is not sufficient to account alone for the most important feature of Sophia's story: her restoration to the divine rank and her soteriological role in the history of Salvation as envisioned by Ophite, Barbeloite and Sethian texts.

In addition to the Jewish influence, the fallen feminine in these Gnostic movements also presents some significant Platonic elements.⁸² As mentioned in Part I.1, the belief that the female gender was defective – thus, fallen – and inferior to male gender was a mainstream cultural belief in the Hellenistic culture and such a gender imagery was proper to the Platonic philosophies. In his latest works, Turner discussed at length the extent of the relationship between Platonism and Sethian Gnosticism.⁸³ He identifies three main Platonic features in Sethian works: 1. The opposition between a superior realm – which is intellectual and immaterial – and an earthly realm, which is instead material and defective; 2. The use of the model/copy Platonic structure of the cosmos; 3. The representation of the Gnostic creator of the world as parody of the creator of both Genesis and Plato's *Timaeus*.⁸⁴ As the following textual analysis will prove, all of these Platonic features are extremely significant for the representation of the fallen feminine in Ophite, Barbeloite and Sethian texts alike. In this regard, following Turner's list, I believe it is useful to indicate why Platonic influences are essential for the representation of the feminine: 1. the inferior world is caused by the fallen female aeon, Sophia; 2. The Platonic model/copy structure of the cosmos is intertwined with the typological

⁸² By contrast with my interpretation of *ApJohn*'s cosmology as a result of Platonic influences, Luttikhuisen (2006), 30-43 believes this book is mostly influenced by Aristotelian doctrines, albeit he admits few Platonic traits. Nonetheless, I remain convinced that the typological structure of the Gnostic κόσμος is more likely the result of Platonic speculations on the perfect world of the ideas and the inferior imperfect world of copies, particularly *Timaeus* and *Parmenides*. In this regard, see Turner (2006).

⁸³ See Turner (2006) and Turner – Majercik (2000). Particularly, Turner (2001), 28 highlights the connection between Plotinus' hypostases and the Gnostic ontological levels of reality.

⁸⁴ See Turner (2000a), 90-91 and (2001), 747-749. I am not inserting in this list the so-called 'masculinization of the Mother' (Turner 2001, 81, 179-220), which he detects mainly in those Sethian texts that display an 'ascent pattern', which are not considered in this investigation (*All*, *StSeth*, *Zos* and *Mar*).

resemblance that links together female characters;⁸⁵ 3. The creator of the world is the illegitimate abortion of Sophia. Moreover, Turner acknowledged the main soteriological role played by female characters, especially in those texts that display a “descending pattern”, like *ApJohn* and *HypArch*.⁸⁶ Concerning the influence of Platonism on the representation of the fallen feminine, one clarification is in order. If, on the one hand, it is correct to say that Gnosticism shares the ontological hierarchy of Platonic systems; on the other hand, Gnostics understood the divine in a way entirely alien to the Platonic sensibility. While the latter interpreted divine beings as immutable and immobile, Gnostics portrayed the divine not only as part of the historical stream but also as subject to passions. This is indeed the case of the fallen feminine, for the primary feature of the fallen feminine is being passionate.⁸⁷

Besides these Jewish and Platonic influences, it is worth underlining the Christian core of the Gnostic fallen feminine imagery. In all the accounts that I am about to analyse, the events surrounding Sophia’s fall make sense exclusively *in the light of* her restoration, a restoration that will happen by means of a Redeemer, who is often – albeit not always⁸⁸ – identified with Christ. However, contrarily to “orthodox” Christian texts, the soteriological role of this Christological Redeemer in Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite theologies is completed by female characters, who assume a significant soteriological role in the Gnostic economy of salvation. Such soteriological functions may appear to contradict the very core of Gnostic mythology, causing an apparently aporetic dilemma: how can Sophia, who is responsible for the intra-divine rupture, also be a soteriological agent? This paradox is the

⁸⁵ However, unlike the Platonic paradigm of model/copy, the typological resemblance has a historical value, *Supra* I.1.

⁸⁶ See Turner (2001), 80-81, 127-178, 747-749. By ‘descending pattern’, Turner means those works that present ‘the advent of salvific enlightenment as a gift conferred through the earthly descent of transcendent beings’. In this category, he also listed *TriProt*, *HypArch*, *ThNor*, *ApAd*, *Mel* and the *GosEg*. On the contrary, Turner identified the ‘ascent pattern’ as a ‘self-actualised assimilation to transcendent realities encountered during the heavenly ascent of a visionary’.

⁸⁷ In truth, pagan philosophers were not the only ones to reject this portrayal of the divine, since it was unacceptable for many Christians too, albeit for different reasons. The identification of the ‘subjection to passions’ as one of the most important characteristics of Gnosticism has been discussed by Lettieri (2012).

⁸⁸ The following analysis of *HypArch* will prove that even in the case where the Redeemer is not identified with a male Saviour, the soteriological mechanism remains primarily Christian.

core of this section, which aims at analysing key passages of these Ophite, Barbeloite and Sethian texts, showing both differences and similarities in the representation of the fallen feminine among different Gnostic texts.

II.3.1 The Fallen Sophia: *The Apocryphon of John* (NHC II, 1)

The paradoxical nature of the feminine in Gnosticism is particularly stressed in *ApJohn*, thus highlighting the opposition between the transcendence of the mother Barbelo and the defectiveness of Sophia. The more a text stresses the transcendence of the highest female character, the more it will need to emphasise the pejorative aspects of the fallen feminine. For instance, contrarily to other narratives, *ApJohn* interprets Sophia's fall outside of the Pleroma as an act of ὕβρις:

And the Sophia of the Epinoia (ΤΣΟΦΙΑ ΔΕ ΝΤΕΠΙΝΟΙΑ), being an aeon, conceived a thought from herself (ΑCΜΕΕΥΕ ΖἸΝ ΟΥΜΕΕΥΕ ΕΒΟΛ ΝΖΗΤC) and the conception of the Invisible Spirit and foreknowledge. She wanted to bring forth a likeness out of herself (ΑCΟΥΩΨ[Ε] ΕΟΥΩΝΖ ΕΒΟΛ ΝΟΥΕΙΝΕ ΝΖΗΤC) [*lacuna*] without the consent of the Spirit (ΑΧἸ [ΠΟΥΩ]Ψ ἸΠΕΠἸΝἈ), – he had not approved (ΕΜΠΕQΡCΥΝΕΥ) – and without her consort (ΑΥ[Ω ΑΧἸ Π]ΕCΩΒΡ) and without his consideration. [...] And because of the invincible power that was in her, her thought did not remain idle and a product came out of her which was imperfect (ΟΥΖΩΒ` ΝΑΤΧΩΚ) and different from her appearance, because she had created it without her consort (ΑCΤΑΜΙΟQ` ΑΧἸ ΠΕCΩΒΡ ΝΖΕΤΡ).⁸⁹

Here, Sophia's defection is caused by her desire to generate like the Father, that is, without the help or consent of her syzygial counterpart.⁹⁰ This description contains two major implications. First, it would appear that Sophia's actions are limited by the same syzygial rule that regulated Barbelo's procreation, that is, the fact that both male and female members of the syzygy

⁸⁹ *ApJohn* II, 9, 25 – 10, 5.

⁹⁰ I am referring here to the primordial Father's generation of Barbelo. Indeed, this is the only generation which is accomplished without a syzygy being involved.

need to take part in the generation.⁹¹ Secondly, by wanting to generate on her own, Sophia threatens the cosmological order of the Pleroma, thus causing the disruption of the pleromatic peace. In a sense, *ApJohn* is attributing to Sophia a *form of original sin*. Just as in *Gen. 3:5* Eve's desire to eat from the tree is the result of the human desire to be 'ὡς θεοὶ' ('like gods', namely like the Father), so it is Sophia's sin.⁹² Correspondingly, just as Eve is expelled from Eden following her transgression, so Sophia is expelled from the Pleroma because of her sin. Moreover, just as Eve's betrayal causes the fall of humankind in Genesis, so in the Gnostic myth Sophia's actions have no less serious consequences since her 'adultery' originates the counterfeit Spirit, hypostatised in her offspring Yaldabaoth.⁹³

Hence, the cause of Sophia's original sin is identified with her inability to restrain her desire to generate. This female aeon seems here to bear an intrinsic fault that makes her and her offspring responsible for the intra-divine fracture because of her unrestrained passion. Hence, *ApJohn* proposes a highly pathological representation of the divine,⁹⁴ for Sophia is subject to passions even if she is a divine pleromatic being. This association has the unprecedented consequence of incorporating error and sin directly into the divine world, albeit not into the higher sphere of Barbelo. By claiming that Sophia is both a divine being and a fallen one, *ApJohn* is essentially admitting that a female divine being has originated all the evils in the world:

For from that fate came forth every sin (ΕΒΟΛ ΓΑΡ ΖἼ ΤΖΙΜΑΡΜΕΝΗ
ΕΤΙΜΟ ΛΥΟΥΩΝ<2> ΕΒΟΛ ΝΒΙ ΜΗΤΨΑΓΓΕ ΝΙΜ) and injustice and

⁹¹ It is worth reminding ourselves that in the case of Barbelo, the generation of the Pleroma followed the approval granted her by the Virginal Spirit, since Barbelo acted as the active force of the Father's will. Furthermore, this passage invalidates Buckley (1986), 48 who claims that 'syzygial partnership is not a prerequisite for creation in *ApJohn*'. I strongly disagree with Buckley to this regard, since the Virginal Spirit is the only being able to conceive on his own and there is no evidence that anyone is allowed to generate outside of the syzygy in *ApJohn*. Therefore, I believe that syzygial partnership is indeed necessary to generate, otherwise Sophia's sin would be inexplicable.

⁹² In this regard, Lanzillotta's remarks on the importance of Plato's doctrine of the 'ὁμοίωσις θεῷ' for Gnostic texts show how the influences of both Platonism and Judaism are strongly present in Gnosticism, see Lanzillotta (2013).

⁹³ *ApJohn* II, 27, 21 – 28, 32.

⁹⁴ This word needs to be understood in the Greek sense of πάθος.

blasphemy and the chain of forgetfulness and ignorance and every severe command and serious sins and great fears.⁹⁵

The theodicy presented by the Gnostic myth of Sophia is unprecedented in Christian theology, since it takes a direction opposite to most of its contemporary theological speculations.⁹⁶ By contrast with the so-called “orthodox” theologians, the Gnostics incorporated the error into the divine world, thus making the divine itself responsible – albeit indirectly – for the evils suffered by humankind. In this respect, both the rigid hierarchical order and the opposition male/female of Gnostic myths functioned as safety-nets, distancing the supreme divine being from this scandalous event. In this perspective, Sophia’s gender becomes a discriminating factor: it is her feminine nature – a nature considered prone to passions and generation, as recognised by the dominant cultural paradigms – to make her the most suitable candidate for causing the world’s evils. In other words, if a female divinity is responsible for this evil, the male divinities are not tainted by her sin. Therefore, by making Sophia responsible for the original divine sin and the rupture in the divine world, this Gnostic myth is also suggesting divine involvement (at least in its feminine aspect) in the origin of evil.

Moreover, contrary to the syzygial couple of the Virginal Spirit and Barbelo, Sophia seems unable to accord her will and her actions. This attitude disqualifies her further from the divine rank to which she however belongs:

Then the mother began to move to and fro (ΑΣΡΑΡΧΕΣΘΕ ΘΕ ΝΨΕΕΙ ΝΒΙ ΤΗΜΑΥ). She became aware of the deficiency (ΑΣΗΜΕ ΑΠΩΤΑ) when the brightness of her light diminished. And she became dark because her consort had not agreed with her (ΑΥΩ ΑΣΖΤΟΜΖΤΗ ΕΒΟΛ ΧΕ ΉΠΕΘΡΕΣΥΜΦΩΝΕ ΝΗΜΑΣ ΝΒΙ ΠΕΣΩΒΡ ΖΩΤΡ).⁹⁷

⁹⁵ *ApJohn* II, 28, 22-26. As I will show in the following sections, this theological position is not exclusive of *ApJohn*, for it is present in all Gnostic texts; nonetheless, such peculiar notion of the divine is made particularly clear in this version of Sophia’s fall.

⁹⁶ For a good overview of this issue, see Ramelli (2013).

⁹⁷ *ApJohn* II, 13, 13-17.

It is interesting to note that this passage underlines the intensity of her passions using two elements, one of philosophical origin and one of Christian origin. On the one hand, Sophia's inability to remain idle is a symptom of her unfitness for the state of divinity. As in Platonic and Aristotelian philosophical systems stillness was considered a divine quality,⁹⁸ Sophia's movement 'to and fro' suggests that she is unfit to be an ontologically divine being, for she is now in the realm of disorganized motion. On the other hand, her becoming dark fits perfectly the literary *topos* of the opposition between light and darkness typical of early Christian literature. Furthermore, the parallel with *Sos* I, 5, where the bride is said to be 'Dark I am, yet beautiful,' is particularly interesting. Just as in *Sos* the bride's darkness expresses metaphorically the sin which will be forgiven once she will be with the bridegroom,⁹⁹ thus Sophia's darkness represents her ambiguity of being both a prostitute (alias a sinner) and a redeemed being.¹⁰⁰ The opposition of prostitution and lawful wedlock is proper to *ApJohn*'s sexual imagery; indeed, Sophia's unrestrained passion, her acting without the consent of her consort and her being a single parent of an unformed offspring are described with the term 'adultery' (**NOEIK**).¹⁰¹ By using this word, the text is taking a clear stand regarding the appropriate status of Sophia: she functions perfectly only when she is united in syzygy with her male partner. Her refusal to act in accordance with her male counterpart makes her an adulterous woman; and only the restoration of the syzygy and the reunion with her rightful spouse would make her the perfect bride, as Barbelo.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ For instance, Plato, *Timaeus* 28c-29d; Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1071b 3-22.

⁹⁹ This exegesis of the bride's darkness was proper to several patristic commentaries on *Sos*, see Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs* II, 1, 1-57; Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs* II.

¹⁰⁰ For additional references to the use of *Sos* in Gnostic texts, see *infra* III.3.2.2.

¹⁰¹ *ApJohn* II, 28, 11-13: 'He [chief Archon] made a plan with his authorities, which are his powers, and they committed together adultery with Sophia, and bitter fate was begotten through them.' This terminology is similar in all accounts of Sophia's story, and more examples will be presented in the following sections of this chapter. King (2000), 92-94 highlights how this language is also employed to describe Yaldabaoth's power, which is a grotesque parody of the God of Genesis. Indeed, while the true God generates by means of verbal expressions, he generates by means of sexual reproduction.

¹⁰² The importance of the sexual language in reference to Sophia has been explored by Dahl (1981), who connected it to the apocalyptic fringe of Judaism. Although I agree with the idea that sexual language employed by Gnostics to describe Sophia is largely taken from Jewish apocalyptic texts, I do not think that it is sufficient to prove the Jewish origin of these Gnostic movements. Another attempt to explain the sexual language of *ApJohn* is made by King (2009), 125-127: 'the wise-fool Sophia is most arguably more completely the hero of the story than one might at first think. Her bold independence of thought and action could be read not as an act of ignorance but resistance, the same kind of resistance that the work affirms through

An additional confirmation of my theory according to which Sophia's sin consists primarily in the disruption of the Pleromatic syzygial order finds further confirmation in the way in which *ApJohn* describes Sophia's passions after the birth of her son Yaldabaoth:

And when she saw (the consequences of) her will (ἀπεσοῦσθε), it changed into a form of lion-faced serpent. And its eyes were like lightening fires which flash. She cast it away from her, outside that place, that no one of the immortal one might see it, for she had created it in ignorance (ἄτακτα μὴ οὐκ ὄντων ὁμοίαν). And she surrounded it with a luminous cloud, and she placed a throne in the middle of the cloud that no one might see it except the Holy Spirit who is called the Mother of the Living (ἀπὸ τῆς ἐκείνης ἐκπορεύεται ἡ ζωὴ τοῦ κόσμου). And she called his name Yaldabaoth.¹⁰³

In order to fully understand this description of Yaldabaoth's generation, a brief outline of the most popular ancient beliefs regarding conception might be helpful, especially concerning the form and the matter that originates the offspring. In the first centuries of Christianity, the two mainstream views on conception were still those propounded by Aristotle and Galen. Aristotle rigidly divided the spheres of competence between male and female: while the man provided the seed, which contained the form, the woman provided the substratum, that is, the material element. Galen meanwhile believed that both men and women produced seeds; however, the male seed was strong and hot, whereas the female one was weak and cold. According to Galen, the offspring resulted from the mingling of the two seeds such that both male and female elements provided matter for the foetus.¹⁰⁴ The wide circulation of these theories is also confirmed by its presence in the account of Hippolytus, which

Eve's opposition to the lower gods' illegitimate domination'. Such a feminist reading of *ApJohn*'s language is here rejected since I have shown how the language of the text responds to a clear philosophical and mythological necessity.

¹⁰³ *ApJohn* II, 10, 8-19. See also *ApJohn* II, 13, 13-27 and II, 13, 32 – 14, 16.

¹⁰⁴ For more details on ancient conception theories, see Preus (1977) and, especially, De Conick (2003), 321-324.

explicitly mentions it to explain Achamot's generation.¹⁰⁵ If these were the mainstream views about conception, *ApJohn*'s theory of generation resembles Galen's position more closely than that of Aristotle. In *ApJohn*, the female element is indeed able to conceive on her own, but her seed is weak and it does not produce a formed offspring. In this regard, the description of Sophia's reaction once she realizes what came forth from her is particularly indicative. Yaldabaoth is weak and deformed, and the primary cause of his infirmity is the absence of a father. Being fatherless, he is a monstrous creature who came forth from a weak seed. Yaldabaoth's dependence on his mother is so strong that King claims that Sophia should be considered accountable for Yaldabaoth's actions since he is the embodiment of her ignorance.¹⁰⁶ An alternative interpretation of this passage has been proposed by Fischer-Mueller,¹⁰⁷ who claims that the fallen feminine should be identified with Yaldabaoth, since he and Sophia share similar behaviors. But Yaldabaoth's faultiness is far better explained as the result of the violation of the syzygial rules, thus making him a distinct character from Sophia. It is indeed the fact that he was created outside of the syzygy to make him a monstrous product.

Once Sophia realizes what she brought forth, she requests the help of the Pleroma. The whole Pleroma sends downward a companion to help her, since it is indeed through the help of a male partner that she may rise from her wretched condition:

And the whole Pleroma (ΠΕΠΛΗΡΩΜΑ) heard the prayer of her repentance (ΝΗΤΕΣΜΕΤΑΝΟΙΑ) and they praised on her behalf the invisible, Virginal Spirit. (IV, 22, 5-7: And he consented; and when the Invisible Spirit had consented), the Holy Spirit poured over her from the whole Pleroma (ΑΦΠΩΖΤ` ΕΖΡΑΙ ΕΧΩΣ ΝΒΙ ΠΕΠΝΑ ΕΤΟΥΛΑΒ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΙΤΝ ΠΕΥΠΛΗΡΩΜΑ ΤΗΡΩ). For it was not her consort who came to her, but he came to her through the Pleroma in order that he might correct her deficiency (ΝΤΑΩΕΙ ΓΑΡ ΝΑΣ ΑΝ ΝΒΙ ΠΕΩΩΒΡ ΝΖΩΤΡ ΑΛΛΑ

¹⁰⁵ Hippolytus, *El* VI, 30, 6-9.

¹⁰⁶ King (2000), 98 and 232-233.

¹⁰⁷ Fischer-Mueller (1990). In truth, I could not find textual evidence to support Fischer-Mueller's identification of Yaldabaoth as having a "female principle".

<Ḣ>ΤΑϞ'ΕΙ ΝΑC ΕΞΡΑΙ ΖΙΤḢ ΠΠΑΗΡΩΜΑ ΧΕΚΑΛC ΕCΗΝΑCΩΖΕ
 ἸΠΕCΩΤΑ). [lacuna] And she was taken up not to her own aeon but
 above her son, that she might be in the ninth until she has corrected her
 deficiency (ΨΑΝΤΕCΩΖΕ ἸΠΕCΩΤΑ).¹⁰⁸

Although *ApJohn* stresses Sophia's need for a partner, this passage reveals also a certain ambiguity in her character. As a matter of fact, it is not entirely clear from the text who is meant to correct Sophia's deficiency. On the one hand, she seems to receive the help of her male companion. On the other, she is raised above her son in order to correct her deficiency by herself. The last verse seems to suggest that some soteriological duties are not performed directly by her unnamed male partner, but rather by Sophia herself. In this regard, her involvement in the soteriological process is also confirmed by her role of truth-teller, since she is the messenger of God's wisdom. If Gnostics achieve salvation through gnosis, Sophia performs a soteriological role by bringing knowledge of the Pleroma to the pneumatic beings trapped into the lower creation. In *ApJohn*, this soteriological act is visible in the theophany above the waters, when Sophia instructs Yaldabaoth about the existence of the 'Man and the Son of Man'.¹⁰⁹ It is indeed the likeness of this luminous Man that appears to the archons into the waters below. When the archons see the likeness reflected in the waters,¹¹⁰ they do not understand it and they decide to grab it. Since the archons are ignorant of their own condition, they fail in the attempt to grab the likeness and therefore decide to fashion a body resembling it. In their ignorance, they create a psychic body, which is 'completely inactive and motionless'.¹¹¹ Having assisted to the archons' failure, Sophia decides to seize the moment and uses this opportunity to retrieve the power that Yaldabaoth stole from her at his birth. She tricks her son into blowing the stolen spiritual power into the motionless man, who finally arises and becomes luminous.¹¹² Hence, by transferring her power to human beings, Sophia achieves a twofold

¹⁰⁸ *ApJohn* II, 14, 1-13.

¹⁰⁹ *ApJohn* II, 14, 13-35.

¹¹⁰ As it has been highlighted in the previous section (*supra* II.2.3), Barbelo and Sophia are merely the executors of the revelation and not its object, as in the case of Incorruptibility in *HypArch*.

¹¹¹ *ApJohn* II, 19, 14-15.

¹¹² *ApJohn* II, 14, 13 – 19, 33.

success: she deprives Yaldabaoth of the power he stole from her and hides the spiritual nature in human bodies. As a result of this stratagem, humans gain πνᾱ, which makes them consubstantial with pleromatic being. Unlike in *HypArch*, she is not the object of the revelation – that is, the divine being revealed in the midst of light – but she is the one who instructs others about the existence of a superior ‘Man’. Sophia is therefore the divine agent who willingly gives life to humans, making them spiritual beings.¹¹³ In *ApJohn*, the soteriological role of Sophia consists in awakening the pneumatic human beings from their ignorance, revealing them the existence of the ‘Son of Man’.¹¹⁴ Although Sophia’s soteriological role is necessary for salvation, *ApJohn* stresses that her actions alone are not sufficient for salvation because they need to be fulfilled by a male saviour. However, the role of the pleromatic Saviour is not emphasized much in this treatise. At a closer look, the reader realises that the Saviour’s role is predominant only in the narrative frame of *ApJohn*,¹¹⁵ whereas it is almost entirely absent from the myth told by the Saviour himself. The Saviour appears briefly at the end of the book as the one who responds to the Pronoia’s call for help in *ApJohn* II, 31, 5-30. The absence is striking to such an extent that Turner understood the Saviour as the masculine ‘last manifestation’ of Pronoia-Sophia.¹¹⁶

To provide some concluding remarks, the analysis conducted thus far has shown how ambiguous the portrayal of the fallen feminine is in *ApJohn*. On the one hand, Sophia is the impulsive, unrestrained, fallen aeon who causes boundless evil in the cosmos when she generates without her consort. On the other hand, she is an essential instrument of salvation for pneumatic humans, since she reveals them the existence of the Pleroma. Moreover, the absence of

¹¹³ It is worth noting that this episode is also revealing of *ApJohn*’s attitude towards the God of the Hebrew Bible. By making Sophia the true agent behind the divine insufflation, *ApJohn* is both denigrating the actions of the inferior Jewish God and stating the veracity of the Genesis account. Hence, this treatise maintains an antinomian position without denying the validity of Genesis’ stories.

¹¹⁴ In this regard, I strongly disagree with the conclusion drawn by La Porta (1997), according to which Sophia’s myth sprouted from a dichotomic interpretation of Jewish Wisdom theology. According to him, Barbelo would encompass all the ‘positive Wisdom characteristics’, whilst Sophia would encompass the ‘negative Wisdom characteristics’. This neat separation between Barbelo and Sophia, as well as the rigid allocation of ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ attributes, does not do justice to the paradoxical complexity of Sophia’s character in *ApJohn*.

¹¹⁵ For more details on the narrative scheme of *ApJohn*, see Luttikhuisen (2006), 44-58.

¹¹⁶ Turner (2001), 754.

a detailed explanation concerning the role of the Saviour leaves to Sophia the role of main salvific agent in history. The story of Sophia in *ApJohn* is a theological paradox, in which a defective female figure acts as a soteriological agent to guide pneumatic humans to their destiny of salvation.¹¹⁷ It would almost appear that the text oscillates between two opposite poles: one where Sophia is a salvific figure and the other in which she is the fallen, helpless aeon. Despite this oscillation, it must be noted that *ApJohn* prefers one representation to the other. Even when Sophia is considered in her salvific role, her weaknesses are stressed more than her strengths, as proved by the insistence on the necessity of male intervention to fulfil her soteriological acts.¹¹⁸

II.3.2 Sophia Προύνεικος in Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* I, 29

The version of *ApJohn* found in Irenaeus also confirms what I have previously observed in regard to the Coptic *ApJohn*:

Next, Holy Spirit, whom they also call Sophia and *Prunicus*, was emitted from the first Angel who remains near to Only-Begotten. When she saw that all the others belonged to a conjugal couple and she did not, she went in search of someone she might wed. When she was not able to find anyone, she struggled and strained forward and looked in the lower regions, thinking she might find a consort there. When she found none, she leaped forward, but was seized with sudden sadness because she had made the leap without the Father's approval. After that, moved by simplicity and kindness, she generated a work in which there were ignorance and boldness. They claim that this work of her was the First-

¹¹⁷ In this regard, it is worth mentioning King's study on roles of gender in each single version of *ApJohn*; see King (2000a). By contrast with my research, King's main goal consists in using the gender image in order to understand the social customs of Gnostic groups. Nevertheless, regarding the use of gender imagery, she concludes that whereas in the BG version it is the male-female couple that represents perfection, in Codex II, masculine elements represent perfection and female elements represent error. Against her interpretation, my research underlines that, even in the narrative of Codex II, Sophia maintains a certain soteriological role.

¹¹⁸ This preference is also confirmed by a peculiarity in the narrative sequence: not only the feminine is not the object of the revelation of the theophany above the waters, but the episode is preceded by her request for help to the Pleroma and the consent of her companion to rescue her.

Ruler, the Maker of this creation. But they tell us that he took away a great Power from his Mother, departed from her to the lower regions, and he made the firmament of heavens, in which he also dwells.¹¹⁹

The striking element of this account is the identification of Sophia with the Holy Spirit. This association is remarkable mainly for two reasons. First, Irenaeus is separating the character of Sophia from that of the Mother of the Gnostic Trinity of *AdHaer* I, 29, thus relegating the Gnostic Holy Spirit to the status of defective divinity.¹²⁰ Secondly, it contrasts with Irenaeus' identification of the Spirit with the First Woman, *Ennoia*, in *AdHaer* I, 30, 1. Such discrepancies lead to two considerations. On the one hand, the heresiologist is claiming that Gnostics did not deem the Holy Spirit to be part of their Gnostic Trinity, for they interpreted the Holy Spirit as a liminal being between two realms. On the other hand, he is – once again! – smoothing over the characters of Sophia and the Mother to stress the fact that Gnostics were contaminating the divinity with a defective element. Although the Barbeloite account of Sophia's story is not reported fully by Irenaeus, the heresiologist found the way to convey the idea of Sophia's defectiveness by using a very explicative word: *Prunicus* (Gr. προύνεικος). The adjective, in this context, is followed by a remarkable strategy of stressing incontinence and lack of restraint, thus stressing Sophia's inability to control her passions. Pasquier conducted a study on the use of this word in previous literature and within Gnosticism, concluding that it was probably used by Gnostics to indicate the 'cosmic principle of separation', thus highlighting how this term expresses Sophia's involvement in the intra-divine rupture that destabilized the Pleroma.¹²¹ Whereas her study aims at identifying the use of this term within Gnostic circles, I am more interested in stressing that Irenaeus' text most likely

¹¹⁹ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 29, 4: *Deinde ex primo angelo qui adstat Monogeni emissum dicunt Spiritum sanctum, quem et Sophiam et Prunicum vocant. Hanc igitur videntem reliquia omnia coniugationem habentia, se autem sine coniugatione, quaesisse cui adunaretur, et cum non inveniret, adservebat et extendebatur et prospiciebat ad inferiores partes, putans hic invenire coniugem; et non inveniens, exsiliit, taediata quoque, quoniam sine bona voluntate Patris impetum fecerat. Post deinde simplicitate et benignitate acta, generavit opus in quo erat ignorantia et audacia: hoc autem opus eius esse Protoarchontem dicunt, Fabricatorem conditionis huius. Virtutem autem magna abstulisse eum a Matre narrant et abstitisse ab ea in inferiora et fecisse firmamentum caeli, in quo et habitare dicunt eum.*

¹²⁰ *Supra* II.2.1.

¹²¹ Pasquier (2000).

used this term with a negative connotation in order to denigrate Gnostic cosmological principle, and that this is further achieved by hinting at Sophia's inappropriate sexual conduct.

Overall, this passage seems an additional confirmation that Irenaeus understood the mechanism of *typological resemblance* and used it to argue polemically against Gnostic beliefs.

II.3.3 Sophia and Zoe in *The Hypostasis of Archons* (NHC II, 4)

In *HypArch*, Sophia's expulsion from the Pleroma is only briefly outlined since this treatise deals mostly with the events that take place in the inferior world after her fall. Nevertheless, this account is of utmost importance in order to understand the role of the feminine in the Gnostic economy of salvation.

When reading *HypArch*, the differences between *ApJohn*'s and *HypArch*'s portrayal of Sophia do not go unnoticed. The first difference consists in the fact that *HypArch* inserts the myth of Sophia into a narrative frame, in which the angel Eleleth is revealing the events of the world above to Norea, Eve's daughter.¹²²

Sophia, who is called Pistis, wanted to create something, alone, without her consort (ΤΣΟΦΙΑ ΤΑΕΙ ΕΤΟΥΜΟΥΤΕ ΕΡΟΣ ΧΕ ΤΠΙΣΤΙΣ ΑΣΟΥΩΨ` ΕΤΕΝΕ ΟΥΖΩΒ ΟΥΛΑΑΣ ΑΧΝ ΠΕΣΖΩΤΡ̄); and her product was a celestial thing (ΑΥΩ ΠΕΣΕΡΓΟΝ ΑΩΨΩΠΕ ΝΝΙΝΕ ΝΠΕ). A veil exists between the world above and the realms that are below; and shadow came into being beneath the veil; and that shadow became matter (ΑΥΩ ΑΘΑΕΙΒΕΣ ΕΤ̄ΜΑΥ ΨΩΠΕ ΝΖΥΛΗ); and that shadow was projected apart (ΑΥΩ ΘΑΕΙΒΕ ΕΤ̄ΜΑΥ ΑΥΝΟΧ̄ ΑΥΣΑ ΝΟΥΜΕΡΟΣ). And what she had created became a product in the matter, like an aborted fetus (ΑΥΩ ΠΕΣΜΟΥΟΥΓ` ΑΩΨΩΠΕ ΝΝΟΥΕΡΓΟΝ ΖΝ ΘΥΛΗ ΝΘΕ

¹²² Although is not present in all Gnostic myth, Norea is usually presented as the virgin whose blood will save humankind. For more information on her account, *infra* II.4.2.

ἦν οὐ γέγονε). And it assumed a plastic form molded out of shadow, and became an arrogant beast resembling a lion.¹²³

In this passage, *HypArch* stresses Sophia's subjection to passion less than does *ApJohn*. Rather than focusing on her inability to restrain herself, the author insists on the disruption of the cosmic order. Sophia is the "veil" that separates the realms of shadows from the one of light, but this veil was broken when she brought forth without the consent of her consort. She caused the intra-divine disruption and put at risk the separation of these two realms by disregarding the rules of pleromatic generation and by introducing spiritual substance into the inferior realm.¹²⁴ Thus, the second difference between *ApJohn* and *HypArch* consists in a less "pathological" representation of the feminine, for the author underlines more the cosmological effects of Sophia's acts than her proclivity to passion.¹²⁵ In this respect, I disagree with King, who sets *ApJohn* and *HypArch* in opposition to one another, claiming that the latter insists exclusively on the sexual nature of Sophia's sin and disregards the ontological disruption of the cosmos.¹²⁶ Indeed, the use of sexual language to describe Sophia's sin ought to be understood as a metaphor of the ontological rupture of the cosmological order. Since the sexual language used to describe it represents a metaphor for the disruption of the cosmological order, Sophia's sin remains both a passionate and ontological sin, although the two texts stress the passionate aspect to a different degree. The narrative element which brings *ApJohn* and *HypArch* closer is the birth of Yaldabaoth, since both texts describe Sophia's son with similar adjectives and use similar cultural paradigms about conception. Yaldabaoth – often called Samael (ΣΑΜΑΗΛ), the blind God, or Sakla (ΣΑΚΛΑ)¹²⁷ – is created in ignorance and therefore cast away into matter. Moreover, although he maintains a connection with his mother due to his 'celestial' nature, this can be seen as a sort of spiritual leftover and it does not indicate any affiliation to the pleromatic world. Furthermore, a consistent use

¹²³ *HypArch* II, 94, 5-18.

¹²⁴ *HypArch* II, 94, 27-33: 'And he (Yaldabaoth) said "If any other thing exists before me, let it become visible to me" And immediately Sophia stretched forth her finger and introduced light into matter; and she pursued it down to the region of chaos.'

¹²⁵ A further confirmation can be found in the scarce mentions of Sophia's regret, which is instead a main topic in *ApJohn*.

¹²⁶ King (2000), 90-91.

¹²⁷ See respectively *HypArch* II, 87, 3 and II, 25, 7.

of sexual language in reference to Sophia's actions leads to the definition of Yaldabaoth as an 'aborted foetus' (ἄνωγζογζε). Being generated by the mother alone, Yaldabaoth was a weak and blind product.¹²⁸

The most distinctive element of *HypArch* is, however, the attribution of some soteriological actions otherwise attributed to Sophia to her daughter, Zoe (ΖΩΗ).¹²⁹ This mythological character is attested in both *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*. In *HypArch*, she is not only the one who imprisons Yaldabaoth in the Tartaros, but also the one who instructs Sabaoth, Yaldabaoth's son, making him aware of the events of the realm above:¹³⁰

And Yaldabaoth said to his offspring, 'It is I who am the God of the Pleroma' (πνούτε ἡπτηρῶ). And Zoe, the daughter of Pistis Sophia, cried out and said to him, 'You are mistaken Sakla' (ἀγὼ ΖΩΗ τῷερε ἡπτικισ τσοφια ἀσαφῆκακ' ἐβολ πεχας ναῖ' ἔε κῆπαλα σακλα) [...]. She breathed into his face, and her breath became a fiery angel for her, and that angel bound Yaldabaoth and cast him down into Tartaros below the abyss.

It is Zoe who belies the false God, thus showing Yaldabaoth's lies to his children. She is the Instructor who will save the spiritual humanity that Sophia created. Hence, she takes on many of the soteriological functions that are attributed to Sophia in *ApJohn*, since she acts as a divine instructor of the counterfeit God. The addition of one character to the traditional Sophia myth has two possible explanations: either it is another case in which Gnostics prove their tendency to multiply the aeons or, by introducing a Sophia-like character,¹³¹ the author of *HypArch* is hypostatizing the soteriological functions of Sophia in another character. According to this latter hypothesis, Zoe represents the nobler parts of Sophia, so much so that it is extremely difficult to distinguish the two figures in the narrative sequence. Hence, Zoe embodies the

¹²⁸ This topic has already been discussed *supra* II.3.1.

¹²⁹ The name Ζωή has two implicit references. On the one hand, Ζωή is the name of Eve in *Gen.* 3:20, according to the Septuagint; on the other hand, in the Valentinian traditions, Ζωή is one of the four female characters of the Pleromatic Ogdoad.

¹³⁰ *HypArch* II, 95, 13- 96, 3.

¹³¹ By the periphrasis 'Sophia-like characters', I mean every female character who bears a typological resemblance to Sophia.

soteriological Sophia, thus proving the extent to which the paradoxical nature of the fallen feminine was perceived by Gnostic writers.

Overall, the analysis of *HypArch*'s portrayal of the fallen feminine coincides with the findings about *ApJohn*'s feminine only to a certain extent, since this text shows the paradoxical nature of Sophia up to the point of hypostatizing her defective and soteriological functions in two different characters. By splitting Sophia into two intra-pleromatic characters – one with mostly pejorative connotations and the other with salvific connotations – *HypArch* is acknowledging and hypostatizing the ambiguity of the character of Sophia, thus giving prominence to Sophia's duplicity.

II.3.4 A Soteriological Sophia: *On the Origin of the World* (NHC II, 5)

In the previous section on *OrigWorld*,¹³² it has been highlighted that this treatise does not provide information regarding the highest female divinity but only about its lower manifestations. As a matter of fact, although Sophia appears here in many guises,¹³³ it is still possible to draw an overall portrait of the fallen feminine.

In *OrigWorld*, Sophia is presented as more independent from her male counterpart than in the other texts analysed so far. Here, she is free to exercise her own volition and resembles the Primeval Light.¹³⁴ Furthermore, while *ApJohn* and *HypArch* envision Sophia trapped in the inferior world because of her sin, *OrigWorld* considers Sophia as a liminal being who is free to move around between the two realms, in spite of her sin. Hence, her leaping out of the Pleroma does not seem to result in a permanent condition; it is rather a momentary lack of control that does not prevent her from accessing the Pleroma after the fall.¹³⁵ In addition, many salvific events attributed to her are described at length. For instance, just as in *HypArch* the theophany above the

¹³² *Supra* II.2.4.

¹³³ In *OrigWorld* II, 101, 34 – 102, 1 and II, 102, 25-26, the name of Sophia is also used to indicate one of Yaldabaoth's daughters, who seems to have a special place among his children for she is in charge of the sixth heaven.

¹³⁴ *OrigWorld* II, 98, 14-16.

¹³⁵ *OrigWorld* II, 100, 26-28; 103, 30-32.

waters reveals the female likeness of Incorruptibility, so in *OrigWorld* Sophia appears to the archons in the waters:

And having seen the likeness of Pistis in the waters (ΑΠΙΝΕ ΝΤΠΙCΤΙC 2Ν ΝΗΜΟΟΥ), the prime parent grieved very much, especially when he heard her voice, like the voice that had called to him out of the waters.¹³⁶

However, unlike *HypArch*, there is a second theophanic event after this first one: the appearance and descent of ‘Adam of Light’.¹³⁷ The two events seem subsequent. At first, Sophia reveals her image into the waters, but fails to make her son Yaldabaoth believe in the existence of a superior God. Then, upon Yaldabaoth’s request, the ‘Immortal Man of Light’ reveals his existence.¹³⁸ Sophia’s response to the appearance of this luminous man is extremely significant for the understanding of the fallen feminine imagery:

Then when Pronoia (Sophia) saw the emissary, she became enamored of him. But he hated her because she was in the darkness (ΝΤΟQ` ΔΕ ΝΕQ` ΜΟCΤΕ ΝΗΜΟC` ΧΕ ΝΕC2Ι ΠΚΑΚΕ). But she desired to embrace him, and she was not able to (ΜΠΕCΘΜ ΒΟΜ). When she was unable to assuage her love, she poured out her light upon the earth (ΑCΠΩ2Τ ΝΠΕCΟΥΕΙΝ` ΕΧΗ ΠΚΑ2). Since that day, that emissary has been called “Adam of Light” (ΧΙΜ ΦΟΟΥ ΕΤΗΜΑΥ ΑΥΜΟΥΤΕ ΑΠΑΓΓΕΛΟC ΕΤΗΜΑΧ ΧΕ ΑΔΑΜ` ΟΥΟΕΙΝ), whose rendering is “the luminous man of blood”, and the earth spread over him, holy Adaman, whose rendering is “the Holy Land of Adamantine”. Since that day, all the authorities have honored the blood of the virgin. And the earth was purified on account of the blood of the virgin (ΠΚΑ2 ΔΕ ΑQΤΟΥΒΟ ΕΤΒΕ ΠCΝΟ6 ΝΤΠΑΤΘΕΝΟC). But most of all, the water was purified through the likeness of Pistis Sophia, who had appeared to the prime parent in the waters (Ν2ΟΥΟ ΔΕ Ν2ΟΥΟ ΑΠΜΟΟΥ ΤΟΥΒΟ 2ΙΤΗ ΠΕΙΝΕ

¹³⁶ *OrigWorld* II, 107, 18-22. This episode occurs also in *OrigWorld* II, 103, 15-32. Here, although she failed to instruct her child, the truth was received and accepted by Sabaoth – Yaldabaoth’s son – who started a war with his father, flanked by Zoe, Sophia’s daughter. This is an additional correspondence between *OrigWorld* and *HypArch*.

¹³⁷ *OrigWorld* II, 107, 35 – 109, 1.

¹³⁸ *OrigWorld* II, 107, 26.

ἡΤΠΙCΤΙC ΤCΟΦΙΑ ΤΑΕΙ ἡΤΑΖΟΥΩΝΖ ΕΒΟΛ` ἡΠΑΡΧΙΓΕΝΕΤΩΡ`
 ΖΗΝἡΜΟΥ). Justly, then, it has been said: “through the water.” The holy
 water, since it vivifies the all, purifies it (ΠΜΟΥ ΕΤΟΥΑΛΒ ΕΠΕΙ
 ΕΤἡΖΟ ἡΠΠΗΡΕ` ΕΤΟΥΒΟ ἡΜΟΥ).¹³⁹

The exceptional ambiguity and obscurity of this text have often struck its interpreters. First of all, this is the only instance among Gnostic texts in which Sophia is rejected – even if only at first – by the Saviour, who is here identified with Adam of Light.¹⁴⁰ Despite this rejection, *OrigWorld* acknowledges Sophia as the rightful companion of the Saviour, as it is explicitly stated in *OrigWorld* II, 106, 5-6, thus generating an apparent contradiction. In the first instance, the Saviour could not remain with Sophia because she was covered in darkness and, therefore, unworthy as a bride. Once again, the theme of the “dark bride” – already found in *ApJohn* II, 13, 13-17 – as an unworthy bride is present in a Gnostic text. In other words, the opposition between lawful and unlawful bride is reiterated once again, since Sophia needs to correct her deficiency in order to be reunited with her companion. Hence, this passage highlights fully the ambiguity of the fallen feminine. On the one hand, it proves that Sophia needs the intervention of her companion to become a soteriological agent, since the overflow of light is considered to be the result of the Saviour’s rejection of her love. On the other hand, the passage directly attributes to the ‘blood of the virgin’ (ΠCΝΟC ἡΠΠΑΤΘΕΝΟC) – that is, the overflow of light – a redemptive and purifying power, which is described through a clear baptismal imagery. Pronoia’s blood has purified the waters and, in turn, the waters vivify

¹³⁹ *OrigWorld* II, 108, 14 – 109, 1.

¹⁴⁰ In this regard, it ought to be noted that most Gnostics identified “Adam of Light” with the Saviour. The identification of Christ or the Saviour with a luminous man is not only very common, but also a distinctive feature of Gnostic texts, even when the association is implicit as it is in this case. The association between Adam and Christ is rooted in the Gnostic exegesis of the Pauline text of *1Cor* 15:45-49: ‘The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit. The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of heaven. As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the heavenly man, so also are those who are of heaven. And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man.’ Furthermore, the allegorical interpretation of Adam as Christ the Saviour is strengthened by means of the Johannine imagery of light, which Gnostics always used to indicate pleromatic beings. The identification of Christ with the “Adam of Light” is not exclusive of *OrigWorld*, but it can also be found in *GosTh* 83, 47:19 – 47:24, where Jesus is identified with the ‘image of the Father light’. For more information, see Tardieu (1974), 85-99 and Pagels (1999), 483-487.

humankind. This overflowing of blood is indeed the second peculiarity of *OrigWorld*'s description of the fallen feminine, since it reveals an unusual pattern in the sexual behaviour of Sophia. As noted by Tardieu,¹⁴¹ the pouring of her light – metaphorically represented by her blood – over the earth has the same reproductive function of the male seed, thus attributing to her an active procreative role that usually belongs to male characters. Therefore, this passage represents an extremely significant exception to the sexual language used in all the other texts, since it attributes vivifying power to female blood rather than to male seed. In this regard, Sophia is not only the adulterer who begets an abortion, but she is also an active generative force who releases her vivifying spirit over the earth.

An alternative interpretation of these theophanies above the waters is given by Stroumsa.¹⁴² He considers Sophia's failed attempt to unite with the Saviour equal to the archon's failed attempt to grab the spiritual Eve. According to him, both episodes prove the archontic desire to possess the loved one. However, I believe that two episodes cannot be equated because of their extremely different outcome. While the unsuccessful archontic attempt to seduce the spiritual Eve resulted in the creation of a carnal Eve and in the perpetration of the archontic dominion, the unrealised union between Sophia and the Adam of Light resulted in the pouring of 'salvific blood' for the redemption of humankind. Although the failed attempt may associate the two events, the results could not be more different. While the archons create a material and fleeting being, Sophia's blood aids humans to achieve redemption. Moreover, *OrigWorld* seems to associate Sophia's blood with the blood of the Saviour, as is also confirmed by the rendering of the Saviour's name with 'the luminous Man of blood'. Stroumsa understands Sophia's blood as menstrual blood, a miscarriage due to Sophia's will to generate on her own. Yet, he fails to mention the fact that Pronoia's blood is the blood that will 'purify the earth'. Therefore, it seems more likely to me that, far from proposing only a pejorative and archontic representation of Sophia, *OrigWorld* is here using a

¹⁴¹ Tardieu (1974), 141-174. Tardieu connects Sophia with the character of Eros in *OrigWorld*, thus interpreting this character as a perfect example of Gnostic syncretism.

¹⁴² Stroumsa (1984), 64.

Christological image – the blood of the Saviour – to affirm the soteriological role of Sophia.¹⁴³

It would appear that, among the texts considered in this research, *OrigWorld* stresses the soteriological role of the fallen feminine the most. Consequently, it is also the work in which the character of Sophia is most ambiguous, so much so that the reader can find it extremely difficult to discern the single episodes. Nonetheless, a confused narrative does not diminish the contribution that this text provides to give a comprehensive representation of the feminine in Ophite, Barbeloite and Sethian movements.

II.3.5 The Defective Sophia according to Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* I, 30

Compared to *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*, *AdHaer* I, 30 takes a slightly different stand concerning the feminine. In the previous section,¹⁴⁴ it has been highlighted that Irenaeus has retro-projected Sophia's features on Ennoia, thus making her a "primordial Sophia", so to speak. According to Irenaeus, just as Yaldabaoth is the result of Sophia's sinful action, so Sophia is the result of Ennoia's inability to handle the power of the Father and the Son. Therefore, Sophia is already the result of the Mother's inability to restrain herself, thus rooting the "original sin" in the highest female divine being. Although Irenaeus conceives the error to be internal to the Trinity, he feels the need to maintain a certain distance between pleromatic beings and the actual sinner, Sophia. Hence, he inserts into the Ophite mythology an element that is typical of Valentinian speculations and alien to the previous texts here considered: the separation of Sophia into two different characters.¹⁴⁵ According to the heresiological account, this is the Ophite version of Sophia's story:

The power, on the other hand, which overflowed from the Woman, since it was endowed with moisture of light, fell downwards from her

¹⁴³ In the following Part III, I will show how Sophia's passions are interpreted as the Saviour's Passion in Valentinianism, thus establishing an interesting link between the two traditions.

¹⁴⁴ *Supra* II.2.5.

¹⁴⁵ In the Valentinian tradition, these characters take the name of Sophia Echmot and Sophia Achamot, see *infra* III.3. Some scholars believe that this split happens also in *ApJohn*, see MacRae (1970), 89. I have proven this is not the case in *supra* II.3.1.

Progenitors, they teach, though she of her own will retain the moisture of light, which they call Left-handed, Prounikos, Sophia and Androgynous. She simply descended into the waters which were in the state of calm and set them in motion by recklessly agitating them to their depths. From them, she took a body for herself. [...] she made an attempt to escape from the waters and ascend to her Mother. She could not accomplish this because of the weight of the body which surrounded her. She felt very bad and she schemed to hide the light she had from above, fearing lest it too should suffer from the lower elements as she had. But when she had received power from her moisture of light, she leaped back and was lifted up on high. [...] But when she was seized by a longing for the higher light [...] she put off the body and was freed from it. Now this body that she is said to have put off they style a female from a female.¹⁴⁶

Irenaeus has a double purpose here. On the one hand, he openly classifies maleness and femaleness as philosophical categories, thus identifying the feminine with the material part of Sophia, the body. On the other hand, he re-elaborates the story in order to distance the properly pleromatic Sophia (the power overflowed from the First Woman, the right handed)¹⁴⁷ from the inferior and material one (Sophia *Prounikos*, the left handed), thus avoiding a twist to the Gnostic myth up to the point of making it unrecognisable by his readers. This material Sophia, which he calls the *foemina a foemina*, needs to be expelled to free the divine from its feminine material part that is considered intrinsically faulty. In this respect, Irenaeus is borrowing a Valentinian solution

¹⁴⁶ Irenaeus' *AdHaer* I, 30, 3-4: *Virtutem autem quae superebulliit ex foeminam, habentem humectationem luminis, a patribus decidisse deorsum docet, sua autem voluntate habentem humectationem luminis: quam et Sinistram et Prunicon et Sophiam et Masculo-foemina vocant. Et descendente simpliciter in aquas, cum essent immobiles, et movisse quoque eas, petulanter agentem usque ad abyssos, et assumpsisse ex eis corpus. [...] conatam esse fugere aqua et ascendere matrem, non potuisse [eam] autem propter gravedinem circumpositi corporis. Valde autem male se habentem machinatam esse abscondere illud quod erat desuper lumen, timentem ne et ipsum laederetur ab inferioris elementis, quaemadmodum et ipsa. Et cum virtutem accepisset ab humectatione eius quod erat secundum ea lumen, resiliit et in sublimitatem elata est [...] Cum accepisset concupiscentiam superioris luminis et virtutem sumpsisset, per omnia deposuisse corpus et liberatam ab eo. Corpus autem hoc exuisse dicunt eam, foeminam a foemina nominant.*

¹⁴⁷ The identification of the First Woman with a right-handed being relies on the abovementioned passage of Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 30, 2: 'When she was not capable of enduring or receiving the greatness of the lights, they say that she was completely filled and then overflowed on the left side. Thus, their own son, Christ, as of the right side and elevated to the upper region, was immediately caught up with the Mother into the incorruptible aeon.' In this case, the connection with the Valentinian version of Sophia's myth is even more explicit because of the Sophia-Christ duplicity. This topic will be discussed later, *infra* III.3.

and applying it to the Ophite theologoumena. However, as I will show in the next section, the Valentinians applied this solution in order to meet a philosophical need – that is, a Platonic reading of the Gnostic myth – whilst Irenaeus is using it for a polemical and anti-heresiological purpose.¹⁴⁸

Overall, Irenaeus does not deny the soteriological role of Sophia,¹⁴⁹ but he insists on the fact that all her actions need to be fulfilled by a male character, namely, Christ. As happened in the case of his mother Ennoia, Sophia becomes the lawful bride only when she gains her role of companion of Christ: ‘They say that when he descended into this world, he first clothed himself with his sister, Sophia. Both were exultant resting against each other. These, they hold, are the bridegroom and the bride.’¹⁵⁰ Hence, Irenaeus seems to have understood the innovative and revolutionary strand of this Gnostic mythology; however, he re-interpreted it to meet his heresiological goal.

II.3.6 Concluding Remarks on the Divine Duplicity

The analysis conducted in this section has shown how the paradoxical nature of the feminine in Gnostic texts is deep-rooted in *ApJohn*, *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*. Each of the works analysed here stresses this paradoxical nature of the feminine to a different degree, thus giving precious information concerning the Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite evaluation of feminine imagery.

Having stressed the transcendence of Barbelo and her positive role in the divine production, *ApJohn* prefers to discuss only briefly Sophia’s soteriological functions in order to mark the opposition between the two female pneumatic beings. In this treatise, which works within a predominantly Barbeloite framework, Sophia is described mainly as a defective aeon, whilst her soteriological role of instructor is mentioned only briefly, albeit not entirely overlooked. In contrast, *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*, which show predominantly

¹⁴⁸ *Infra* III.3.

¹⁴⁹ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 30, 6 and 11-12.

¹⁵⁰ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 30, 11: *[Dicunt] descendentem Christum in hunc mundum, induisse primum sororem suam Sophiam, et exultasse utrosque refrigerantes super invicem: et hoc esse sponsum et sponsa definiunt.*

Ophite and Sethite mythologoumena, present a more ambiguous portrayal of the fallen feminine. Although both texts envision Sophia as the defective aeon who originates the inferior world, they also recognise Sophia's soteriological role in the Gnostic economy of salvation. More specifically, *HypArch* acknowledges Sophia's ambiguity so much so that it hypostatizes her two functions (defective aeon and soteriological aeon) in two different characters, respectively Sophia and her daughter Zoe. Likewise, *OrigWorld* insists greatly on the soteriological role of Pronoia, making her blood the one which will 'purify the earth'. In the case of the representation of the fallen feminine, Irenaeus' accounts are deeply biased, but faithful nonetheless. Having understood the typological mechanism of resemblance that governs Gnostic texts, he exploits this in order to condemn the feminine *tout court*, thus denying the differences between the various aspects of the Gnostic feminine.

In conclusion, while *HypArch* and *OrigWorld* stress the soteriological role of Sophia, *ApJohn* insists on her defectivity and mentions briefly her soteriological role. Notwithstanding this difference, it is worth analysing these texts together for they show three ways of understanding Sophia's soteriological role: from the simple participation of Sophia in the creation of spiritual humans in *ApJohn* to the salvific blood of *OrigWorld*.

II.4 Spiritual and Carnal Eve: the Incarnated Feminine

The previous chapters have shown the ambiguity of the intra-pleromatic and the fallen feminine. This section will show that the contrasting combination of soteriological features and defectiveness is also proper to the incarnated feminine.

In Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite mythologies, Eve is a pivotal character who often plays an essential role in the economy of salvation. In the case of the incarnated feminine, the ambiguity of female characters shown thus far is personified in two separate and polar characters: the pleromatic and spiritual Eve and the carnal and hylic Eve. In order to explain the separation of the two Eves, I will need to tackle the issue of the Gnostic understanding of human creation and anthropology, for the distinction in three natures – that is, the pneumatic, psychic and hylic nature – is pivotal if we are to understand the differences between the two Eves. Hence, this section will explore in detail the accounts of human creation in order to determine the various roles and functions of Eve.

II.4.1 Spiritual and Carnal Eve in *The Apocryphon of John* (NHC II, 1)

In *ApJohn*, Adam is fashioned by the evil archons according to the image of the Man that is reflected in the waters below. All of these archons take part in the creation of the body and each one of them contribute by creating a specific part of his body.¹⁵¹ However, such a body is ‘completely inactive and

¹⁵¹ *ApJohn* II, 15, 2 – 19, 34: ‘And he said to the authorities that attended him, “Come, let us create a man according to the image of God and according to our likeness, that his image may become a light for us.” And they created by means of their respective powers in correspondence with the characteristics which were given. And each authority supplied a characteristic in the form of the image which he had seen in its (natural form). He created a being according to the likeness of the first, perfect Man. And they said, “Let us calling him Adam, that his name may become a power of light for us” [...] And when the mother wanted to retrieve the power which she had given to the chief archon, she petitioned the Mother-Father of the All who is most merciful. [...] And they said to Yaldabaoth “Blow into his face something of your spirit and his body will arise.” And he blew into his face the spirit which is the power of his mother; he did not know (this), for he exists in ignorance. And the power of the mother went out of Yaldabaoth into the natural body which they had fashioned after the image of the one who exists from the beginning. The body moved and gained strength, and it was luminous.’

motionless',¹⁵² for it is merely a psychic (soul endowed) body, a faded and inferior copy of the true Man who appears to them in the theophany above the waters. Nonetheless, 'the body moved and gained strength, and it was luminous'¹⁵³ when Sophia tricks the Demiurge into blowing her power into this carnal Adam. This narrative sequence shows that Adam is created first as a merely psychic creature and that he gains the spirit only at later time.¹⁵⁴ Hence, the first creation (psychic Adam) is inferior and consubstantial with the archons, whereas the second creation (pneumatic Adam) is superior even to the Chief Archon, for he is made consubstantial with the Pleroma by Sophia's breath of life. Hence, in *ApJohn*, Adam possesses both a pneumatic element – Sophia's spirit – and a psychic element – that is, the body fashioned by the archons. By representing human creation as a two steps process, *ApJohn* is resorting to the theory of a *double creation*, albeit in an inverse order compared to "orthodox" exegetes.¹⁵⁵ Commonly, it is called a doctrine of double creation every interpretation that envisions the creation of humankind in two different stages: first, God creates perfect intellectual and spiritual beings, often described as androgynous, and only later does he create physical men and women.¹⁵⁶

Once Adam's luminosity was noticed by Yaldabaoth, the Chief Archon casts him in the lower regions of his kingdom out of jealousy, for he realises that his creature has become greater than him. Nonetheless, Sophia takes pity on the man she has breathed into and petitions the Pleroma to send him a helper:

¹⁵² *ApJohn* II, 19, 14.

¹⁵³ *ApJohn* II, 19, 32-33.

¹⁵⁴ An alternative interpretation of the creation of humankind in *ApJohn* is offered by Luttikhuisen. In Luttikhuisen (2000a), he underlines how this creation – that is, the psychic creation – is conceived as the creation 'in the image of God', namely the luminous archetype. Furthermore, in Luttikhuisen (2006), 62-71 he interprets the 'light-power' from the Mother as an Aristotelic δυνάμεις, since this would solve the contradiction between the fact that all humans need to possess this spirit (otherwise they could not stand) and the fact that *ApJohn* states that only those who possess the spirit will be saved.

¹⁵⁵ The idea of a double creation is certainly not alien to Christian theologians of the third and fourth century, since both Origen and Gregory of Nyssa resort to it in their works; see Simonetti (2004a) and Ludlow (2007), 166-181.

¹⁵⁶ This theory of a double creation leaves the problem of the creation of a hylic body unsolved. In this regard, I am inclined to agree with King (2009), 103 and 118-119 who believes that Adam gained a hylic body only at a later time after the expulsion from Eden.

But the blessed One, the Mother-Father, the beneficent and merciful One, had mercy on the power of the Mother which had been brought forth out of the chief archon, for they (the archons) might gain power over the natural and perceptible body (ΑΓΩ ΟΝ ΧΕ ΣΕΝΑΘΗΘΟΜ' ΕΖΡΑΙ ΕΧΜ ΠΣΩΜΑ ΜΦΥΧΙΚΟΝ ΑΓΩ ΠΕΣΘΗΤΟΝ). And he sent, through his beneficent Spirit and his great mercy, a helper to Adam (ΒΟΗΘΟΣ ΝΑΔΑΜ), luminous Epinoia which comes out of him, who is called Life (ΟΥΕΠΙΝΟΙΑ ΝΟΥΘΕΙΝ ΤΑΙ ΟΥ ΕΒΟΛ ΝΖΗΤΩ ΤΕ ΕΛΥΜΟΥΤΕ ΕΡΟΣ ΧΕ ΖΩΗ). And she assists the whole creature, by toiling with him and by restoring him to his fullness (Pleroma) and by teaching him about the descent of his seed (and) by teaching him about the way of the ascent, (which is) the way he came down (ΤΑΙ ΔΕ ΕΣΡΖΥΠΟΥΡΓΕΙ ΝΤΚΤΙΣΙΣ ΤΗΡΣ ΕΣΩΕΠ ΖΙΣΕ ΝΗΜΑΩ' ΑΓΩ ΕΣΣΩΖΕ ΜΜΑΩ' ΕΖΟΥΝ ΑΠΕΡΠΛΗΡΟΜΑ ΑΓΩ ΕΣΤΣΕΒΟ ΜΜΑΩ' ΑΤΕΦΘΙΝΕΙ ΑΠΙΤΗ ΜΠΣΠΕΡΜΑ ΕΣΤΣΑΒΟ ΜΜΟΩ' ΕΠΜΑΙΤ ΕΒΩΚ ΕΖΡΑΙ ΠΜΑΙΤ' ΕΝΤΑΩ'ΕΙ ΕΖΡΑΙ ΜΜΑΥ). And the luminous Epinoia was hidden in Adam (ΑΓΩ ΤΕΠΙΝΟΙΑ ΝΟΥΘΕΙΝ ΕΣΖΗΤ' ΖΝ ΑΔΑΜ), in order that the archons might not know her, but that the Epinoia might be a correction of the deficiency of the Mother (ΑΛΛΑ ΝΣΩΩΠΕ ΝΒΙ ΤΕΠΙΝΟΙΑ ΝΟΥΣΩΖΕ ΜΠΩΤΑ ΝΤΜΜΑΥ).¹⁵⁷

Although the name of Eve is not mentioned explicitly in this passage, the identification of Epinoia with Eve is confirmed by the Genesis language used in *ApJohn*. As God in *Gen.* 2 decides to give a βοηθόν – a ‘helper’ – to Adam so the Virginal Spirit sends Epinoia as a helper to Adam (ΒΟΗΘΟΣ ΝΑΔΑΜ).¹⁵⁸ Likewise, Epinoia is described as coming out of him (ΤΑΙ ΟΥ ΕΒΟΛ ΝΖΗΤΩ), just as Eve is taken from Adam’s rib.¹⁵⁹ In truth, even the fact that she is not yet explicitly named Eve confirms that she is the woman created to help Adam in *Gen.* 2:21, for – according to Genesis – the name ‘Eve’ has been attributed to her only after the expulsion from Eden in *Gen.* 3:20: καὶ ἐκάλεσεν Ἀδὰμ τὸ ὄνομα τῆς γυναικὸς αὐτοῦ Ζωή ὅτι αὕτη μήτηρ πάντων τῶν ζώντων.¹⁶⁰ In

¹⁵⁷ *ApJohn* II, 20, 9-28,

¹⁵⁸ For further observations on Sophia’s role as a helper, see Luttikhuisen (2006), 53-55 and (2000a), 151-155.

¹⁵⁹ See *Gen.* 2:21: ὕπνωσεν καὶ ἔλαβεν μίαν τῶν πλευρῶν αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀνεπλήρωσεν σάρκα ἀντ’ αὐτῆς. In the Coptic text, it is not entirely clear if the pronoun is referred to the Virginal Spirit or to Adam. Be as it may, the very fact that Epinoia ‘comes out’ from a male being suggests her identification with Eve.

¹⁶⁰ *Gen.* 3:20: ‘The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living.’

addition, when observing the Greek text, the connection between Epinoia of Life (ΤΕΠΙΝΟΙΑ ΝΟΥΘΕΙΝ) and Eve becomes even more evident, for the Hebrew name נָחַשׁ (from the verb ‘to be’ in biblical Hebrew) has been translated in Greek as Ζωή, Life (ΖΩΗ). Lastly, the fact that Epinoia of Life is hidden in Adam, thus originating an androgynous human being, is consistent with the anthropology of *Gen. 1:27*: καὶ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν ἄνθρωπον κατ’ εἰκόνα θεοῦ ἐποίησεν αὐτόν ἄρσεν καὶ θήλυ ἐποίησεν αὐτούς.¹⁶¹ Furthermore, the fact that Epinoia of Light has been hidden in Adam confirms the typological mechanism that governs Gnostic myth. Epinoia and Adam constitute a mixed syzygy, thus imperfectly reproducing on earth the pleromatic syzygial order of the aeons. Therefore, this myth confirms both the importance of the unity of the syzygy for Gnostic mythologies and the typological resemblance according to which the cosmos is organised. Epinoia is created with the purpose of restoring the pneumatic Adam to his rightful place, thus correcting the ‘deficiencies of the Mother (Sophia)’ (ΜΠΩΤΑ ΝΤΜΜΑΥ).¹⁶² Hence, as well as Sophia, Adam needs a companion to be re-introduced in the Pleroma.

From an anthropological perspective, the myth is therefore suggesting that the unity of the spiritual Adam and Eve is the lawful status of humankind. Consequently, it is not surprising that the division of humankind into two different sexes is interpreted as the ignorant act of an ignorant Archon:

Then the Epinoia of the Light hid herself in him (Adam) (ΤΟΤΕ ΤΕΠΙΝΟΙΑ ΜΠΟΥΕΙΝ ΑΣΖΩΠ` ΝΖΗΤΩ). And the chief archon wanted to bring her out of his rib (ΑΓΩ ΑΦΟΥΩΘΕ ΝΒΙ ΠΡΩΤΑΡΧΩΝ ΛΕΙΝΕ ΜΜΟΣ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΗ ΠΕΦΩΠΡ). But the Epinoia of the Light cannot be grasped. Although darkness pursued her, it did not catch her. And he (the Chief Archon) brought a part of his power out of him (Adam). And he (the Chief Archon) made another creature in the form of a woman according to the likeness of the Epinoia which had appeared to him (ΑΓΩ ΑΦΤΑΜΙΟ ΝΚΕΠΛΑCΙC ΖΗ ΟΥΜΟΡΦΗ ΝCΖΙΜΕ ΚΑΤΑ ΠΙΝΕ ΝΤΕΠΙΝΟΙΑ ΕΤΑΖΟΥΩΝΖ

¹⁶¹ *Gen. 1:27*: ‘So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.’

¹⁶² In this respect, I agree with Buckley (1986), 54-56 and Luttikhuisen (2006), 70-71, who consider both Adam and Eve to be pneumatic in *ApJohn*’s account, rather than considering Eve as fully pneumatic and Adam as merely a psychic being.

ΝΑQ` ΕΒΟΛ). And he brought the part which he had taken from the power of the man into the female creature.

And the Chief Archon saw the virgin who stood by Adam, and that the luminous Epinoia had appeared in her (ΑΥΩ ΑQ`ΝΑΥ ΝΒΙ ΠΡΩΤΑΡΧΩΝ ΕΠΠΑΡΘΕΝΟC ΕΤΑ ΖΕ ΕΡΑΤC ΜΝ ΑΔΑΜ` ΑΥΩ ΧΕ ΑCΟΥΩΝΖ ΕΒΟΛ ΝΖΗΤC ΝΒΙ ΤΕΠΙΝΟΙΑ ΝΟΥΘΕΙΝ ΝΩΝΖ). And Yaldabaoth was full of ignorance. And when the Pronoia of the All noticed (it), she sent some and they snatched Life out of Eve (ΑCΓΝΗΝΟΟΥ ΝΝΖΘΕΙΝΕ ΑΥΩ ΑΥΤΩΡΠ` ΝΖΩΗ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΝ ΕΥΖΑ).¹⁶³

Once again, *ApJohn* describes Eve's creation as a double creation. First, the pleromatic Eve is created, whilst the material Eve is created only at a later stage. However, there is a striking difference between Adam's and Eve's creations. Whilst Adam is created originally as a material being who receives the Mother's spirit only at a later time, the Epinoia of Light is created first as a spiritual being and then trapped into a psychic and material body. In this regard, the narrative of Eve's creation is diametrically opposite to that of Adam. She is primarily a pneumatic being, and only accidentally a psychic one. However, *ApJohn* postulates a separate ontological status for the spiritual Eve and the carnal Eve by personifying them in two separate characters. Such a neat ontological separation between the spiritual and psychic human is exclusive of the incarnated feminine, since Adam remains always a whole, albeit composed of different parts.

The contrast between the two Eves could not be more marked. While the pneumatic Eve is 'luminous', the psychic Eve is pursued by 'darkness'. Similarly, whilst the psychic Eve is subdued entirely to the will of the Chief Archon – for she is his creature – the pneumatic Eve cannot be grasped by him – for she outdoes the Archon's nature. Most importantly, while the psychic Eve is the origin of evil, the Epinoia of Light is one of the main soteriological agents of the story.¹⁶⁴ As a matter of fact, the spiritual Eve assumes almost

¹⁶³ *ApJohn* II, 22, 29 – 23, 3 and 24, 8-15.

¹⁶⁴ Alternative interpretations of Eve's creation have been proposed by Buckley (1986), 54-56. Expanding on Orbe (1974) and Wilson (1973), she proposes a fourfold exegesis of Eve: Spirit,

Christological functions in the abovementioned passage. Thus, she is the one who awakes Adam's self-awareness:

And he (Adam) saw the woman besides him. And in that moment the luminous Epinoia (ΤΕΠΙΝΟΙΑ ΝΟΥΘΕΙΝ) appeared, and she lifted the veil (ἸΠΙΚΑΛΥΜΜΑ) which lay over his mind. And he became sober from the drunkenness of darkness. And he recognised his counter-image (ΑΥΘΑΥΤΟΥΝ ΤΕΘΕΙΝΕ), and he said, "This is indeed bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh".¹⁶⁵

This passage highlights clearly the importance of Epinoia of Light, for her incarnation – that is, the incarnation of a spiritual and divine being – makes Adam acknowledge his consubstantiality with the divine.¹⁶⁶

It appears, therefore, that *ApJohn* postulates two soteriological events, assigned respectively to Epinoia and the Saviour. The difference between the two is that while the Saviour is *an eschatological soteriological agent*, Epinoia is the *protological soteriological agent*. Epinoia of Light is a soteriological agent insofar as she functions as protological instructor of humankind, as also confirmed by her identification with the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.¹⁶⁷ Hence, Epinoia's revelation is a protological action, the memory of which will be partially destroyed by the 'bond of forgetfulness' cast by Yaldabaoth.¹⁶⁸ Insofar as the spiritual Eve acts as an instructor, *ApJohn* stresses the similarities between her and Sophia. In the episode of the appearance of a female soteriological character in the form of an eagle, the characters of Sophia and Epinoia are almost indistinguishable one from the other.¹⁶⁹ Hence, both Epinoia and Sophia have the power to save humankind by revealing to the

Sophia, the Epinoia of Light and Eve. Although Buckley's interpretation has the merit of highlighting the connections between the different female characters of *ApJohn*'s, her classification flattens the characters one on the other, without giving the due attention to the differences between Sophia and the Spiritual Eve.

¹⁶⁵ *ApJohn* II, 23, 4-10. This is also confirmed by *ApJohn* II, 21, 15-16.

¹⁶⁶ This is also noted by Luttikhuisen (2000a), 155 and King (2009), 128-129.

¹⁶⁷ *ApJohn* II, 22, 3-9.

¹⁶⁸ *ApJohn* II, 21, 12.

¹⁶⁹ *ApJohn* II, 23, 20-35. Contrarily to texts with marked Ophite mythologoumena, neither Sophia nor Epinoia are identified with the Serpent in *ApJohn*. Nevertheless, the beast has a positive function for it is an instrument of revelation for Adam and Eve, see *ApJohn* II, 22, 9-20.

pneumatic seed its true origin. Nonetheless, the two female characters should not be confused with each other since their work differs slightly. As I have pointed out several times, the spiritual Eve is a protological agent of salvation: she reveals to humankind its true nature at the time of creation, whereas Sophia acts as soteriological agent throughout history, acting to contrast Yaldabaoth's actions.¹⁷⁰ Although the feminine plays a major soteriological role, it must be noted that the sole efforts of Sophia and the spiritual Eve are not sufficient in *ApJohn* to guarantee humanity's salvation, for their soteriological actions need to be fulfilled by the intervention of a male Saviour.

ApJohn's portrayal of the carnal Eve is opposite to that of the Epinoia of Light, since the carnal Eve is an archontic product *tout court*, used to serve the scope of Yaldabaoth and his archons.¹⁷¹ The passage reported previously highlights the typological mechanism that governs Gnostic mythology, presenting the Chief Archon's creation of the psychic Eve as a pale copy of the pneumatic creation of the true Eve. Regarding the relationship between Eve and Yaldabaoth, the abovementioned passage of *ApJohn* clarifies Yaldabaoth's inability to create anything more than an empty shell resembling the Epinoia of Light. To a certain extent, Yaldabaoth is here perpetrating the same mistake of his mother, for he is disrupting the syzygial order by breaking the unity of Adam and Eve:

And the Chief Archon defiled her (ΛΥΩ ΛΟΧΩΣΗΕ ΠΜΟC ΝΒΙ ΠΡΩΤΑΡΧΩΝ) and he begot in her two sons (ΛΥΩ ΛΟΧΠΟ ΕΒΟΛ ΝΖΗΤC ΝΦΗΡΕ CΝΑΥ) [...] And these he called with the name of Cain and Abel with a view to deceive. Now up to the present day sexual intercourse continued due to the Chief Archon (ΦΑΖΟΥΝ ΘΕ ΑΠΟΟΥ ΝΖΟΟΥ ΑCΘΩ ΝΒΙ †CΥΝΟΥCΙΑ). And he planted sexual desire (ΝΟΥCΠΟΡΑ ΝΕΠΙΘΥΜΙΑ) in her who belongs to Adam. And he produced through intercourse the copies of the bodies, and he inspired them with his counterfeit spirit

¹⁷⁰ For instance, the episode of the flood or the assistance to the seed of Seth, see *ApJohn* II, 28, 32-15 and II, 24, 32 – 25, 16.

¹⁷¹ It is worth noting that, once more, the narrative of *ApJohn* is faithful to the Genesis' narrative, according to which Eve is fashioned from Adam's rib.

(ΑΦΤΟΥΝΟΥΣ ΔΕ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΗΤΗ ΤΣΥΝΟΥΣΙΑ ΗΠΛΗΠΟ ΗΠΕΙΝΕ ΝΗΝΣΩΜΑ
 ΑΥΘ ΑΡΧΩΡΗΓΕΙ ΝΑΥ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΗ ΠΕΦΠΗΝΑ ΕΤΩΒΒΙΑΕΙΤ).¹⁷²

Here, Yaldabaoth manages to separate Adam from the Epinoia of Light hidden in him, thus creating a separate vessel for Epinoia, the carnal Eve, who becomes the primary mean of perpetuation of his power. This passage gives a representation of the carnal Eve as utterly powerless; she is a means to an end.¹⁷³ Similarly, the human beings who do not possess the spirit are merely objects in the hands of the counterfeit God who created them. This race of human beings that are the result of the union between the carnal Eve and Yaldabaoth are destined to be destroyed. On the contrary, the legitimate union between Adam and Eve, which typologically reproduces the intra-syzygial union, originates the true spiritual seed in Seth, the elected child.¹⁷⁴

Just as the carnal Eve is subject to Yaldabaoth's power, so are carnal women subdued to the archon's will. The role played by women in perpetrating the counterfeit spirit is also confirmed by the episode of the union between the daughters of men and the evil archons. Here the daughters of men are tricked into generating children to the archons, thus causing the 'whole creation to be enslaved forever'.¹⁷⁵ This story also testifies to the influence of apocalyptic Judaism on Gnostic mythologies.¹⁷⁶ According to Stroumsa, *ApJohn* would be

¹⁷² *ApJohn* II, 24, 15-31.

¹⁷³ Interestingly King (2009), 127 noticed that the removal of Epinoia of Light from Eve before she is raped is a deliberate effort to distance the divine from sexual intercourse, which is considered a demiurgic act.

¹⁷⁴ For a different interpretation of Eve's seduction, see Stroumsa (1984), 38-42. For more information on Eve's children in *ApJohn*, see Luttikhuisen (2006), 83-91.

¹⁷⁵ *ApJohn* II, 29, 16 – 30, 11: 'And he made a plan with his powers. He sent his angels to the daughters of men, that they might take some of them for themselves and raise offspring for their enjoyment. And at first they did not succeed. When they had no success, they gathered together again and they made a plan together. They created a counterfeit spirit, who resembles the Spirit who had descended, so as to pollute the souls through it. And the angels changed themselves in their likeness into the likeness of their mates (the daughters of men), filling them with the spirit of darkness, which they had mixed for them, and with evil. They brought gold and silver and a gift and copper and iron and metal and all kinds of things. And they steered the people who had followed them into great troubles, by leading them astray with many deceptions. They (the people) became old without having enjoyment. They died, not having found truth and without knowing the God of truth. And thus the whole creation became enslaved forever, from the foundation of the world until now. And they took women and begot children out of the darkness according to the likeness of their spirit. And they closed their hearts, and they hardened themselves through the hardness of the counterfeit spirit until now.'

¹⁷⁶ For an interesting study on the influence of Enochism on Gnosticism, see Reed () and Berno (2018).

here inheriting – and confusing – two different Jewish traditions, one from the *TReub* and the other from *EnI*, in particular the so-called *Book of Watchers*. These two Jewish apocalyptic texts tell the story of the angels and the daughters of men, but they identify two different causes for the women's cooperation with the archons. While *TReub* deems it impossible for the angels to sin, therefore it blames the women's lust for the illicit union, *EnI* portrays the women as victims of the angels' will. In Stroumsa's opinion, the account of *ApJohn* inherits mostly from *TReub*. However, concerning women's lust in *ApJohn*, Stroumsa's conclusions seem unsubstantiated, for there is not any direct responsibility of the illicit union to the women's will. The account found in *ApJohn* seems instead to suggest that the daughters of men are passive victims of the archons' crime, which would also fit within Gnostic hierarchy of nature, according to which the psychic nature of the archons is superior to the hylic nature of the women.¹⁷⁷ By functioning as a child-bearer for the archons' seed, carnal women are carrying on the archons' plan, that is, the generation of beings consubstantial to them and on whom they have power. The passivity of women has attracted the attention of few Gnostic scholars who tried to "liberate" women from the accusation of being the "devil's gateway".¹⁷⁸ In particular, Pagels have claimed that such a poor consideration of the carnal women would clear Eve from the accusation of being an evil temptress, since the "fault" would be entirely attributed to Yaldabaoth.¹⁷⁹ However, a close analysis of *ApJohn*'s passage confirms the idea that these carnal women were involved in the archons' evil plans since they played, albeit unwillingly, an important part in the perpetration of the counterfeit Spirit's power.

In conclusion, the revolutionary representation of feminine imagery in *ApJohn* lies in the attribution of a soteriological role to the incarnated feminine in its spiritual form. Furthermore, in the case of humankind, the spiritual Eve represents the protological soteriological agent, while Adam is instead

¹⁷⁷ Stroumsa (1984), 36-38. For an alternative interpretation of the myth in *ApJohn*, see Perkins (2014).

¹⁷⁸ For an alternative reading of this section of *ApJohn* as a monastic text, see Bull (2017).

¹⁷⁹ *ApJohn* II, 24, 26-31. Against Pagels (1979), see Hoffman (1994), 35-36 who sees in Eve the origin of sexual desire. A social interpretation is instead proposed by King (2009), 106-107, who believes this passage – together with the demiurgic command on the subordination of woman to man – to be the 'strongest overt critique of the patriarchy in all ancient literature'.

represented as a helpless being in need of redemption. Thus, gender roles would be utterly overturned, so much so that the male being – albeit possessing a spiritual element – is in need of female spiritual aid to achieve true gnosis. Nevertheless, even more than in previous instances, the incarnated feminine is composed of opposite polarities, instantiated in the spiritual Eve and in the carnal Eve. Just as the spiritual Eve is the incarnated divine spirit, the carnal Eve is the origin of all evils. In her, the generative power that is proper to the feminine – as established by our analysis of the character of Barbelo – is perverted by Yaldabaoth in order to perpetrate the counterfeit spirit. As King’s most recent work on *ApJohn* has proved, Yaldabaoth’s power and realm should be considered as a parody of those that exist above him. Consequently, the role played by the carnal Eve should be understood as an overturning of the power of the pleromatic feminine.¹⁸⁰ Interestingly, such a negative portrayal functions as litmus paper for the positivity of the spiritual Eve. In other words, the more the negativity of the carnal Eve is stressed, the more striking the comparison with the spiritual Eve becomes.

To summarise, the portrayal of the incarnated feminine breaks the pattern observed in previous aspects of the feminine in *ApJohn*. On the one hand, this treatise stresses the subordination of Barbelo and Sophia to a male character; on the other hand, it highlights the soteriological features of spiritual Eve in the inferior world.¹⁸¹

II.4.2 Eve and Norea in *The Hypostasis of Archons* (NHC II, 4)

In the previous section,¹⁸² I have proved that *HypArch* interprets the theophany above the waters as a revelation of a female image, Incorruptibility. Although

¹⁸⁰ The role of the spiritual Eve cannot be interpreted in the same way because she is a pleromatic being and, consequently, she is not subject to the rule of the psychic world of Yaldabaoth.

¹⁸¹ According to Rasimus, this discrepancy in the representation of the feminine can be explained through the use of different paradigms, see Rasimus (2009), 148-151. While *ApJohn* presents a Barbeloite representation of the intra-pleromatic and fallen feminine, it has a predominantly Ophite portrayal of the incarnated feminine. For a detailed discussion of this topic, see *supra* II.5. Unfortunately, it is impossible here to establish a comparison with Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 29, because the heresiological account ends with Sophia’s Fall.

¹⁸² *Supra* II.3.3.

the archons use a female image as archetype for the creation of humankind, they do not fashion a female body. Rather, they fashion a male body resembling Incorruptibility's partner in order to lure her into the inferior regions. This man fashioned by the archons is, however, a 'soul-endowed man';¹⁸³ and he becomes a 'living soul' only when the spirit comes down from above and descends over him.¹⁸⁴ It is indeed when he becomes a living being that he also acquires the name of Adam and he is put in charge of the earth by Incorruptibility. Nonetheless, Yaldabaoth is still lord over Adam:

The ruler took counsel with one another and said "Come, let us cause a deep sleep to fall upon Adam". And he slept. – Now the deep sleep that "they caused to fall upon him, and he slept" is Ignorance. They opened his side like a living woman (ΑΥΟΥΕΝ ΗΠΕΡΣΠΙΡ' ΝΘΕ ΗΝΟΥΣΖΙΜΕ ΕΣΟΝΖ). And they built up his side with some flesh in place of her (ΑΥΩ ΑΥΚΩΤ' ΗΠΕΡ'ΣΠΙΡ ΗΝΟΥΣΑΡΖ ΕΠΕΣΜΑ), and Adam came to be endowed only with soul (ΑΥΩ ΑΔΑΜ' ΩΩΠΕ ΗΨΥΧΙΚΟΣ ΤΗΡΩ). And the spirit-endowed woman (ΤΣΖΙΜΕ ΗΠΝΕΥΜΑΤΙΚΗ) came to him and spoke with him, saying, "Arise, Adam." And when he saw her, he said "It is you who have given me life; you will be called Mother of the Living" (ΝΤΟ ΠΕΝΤ'ΑΖ† ΝΑΕΙ ΗΠΩΝΖ ΣΕΝΑΜΟΥΤΕ ΕΡΟ ΧΕ ΤΜΜΑΥ ΗΝΕΤΟΝΖ). For it is she who is my mother (ΧΕ ΝΤΟΣ ΠΕ ΤΑΜΜΑΥ). It is she who is my physician, and the woman, and she who has given birth (ΝΤΟΣ ΤΕΤΣΟΕΙΝ' ΑΥΩ ΤΑΝΤΑΖΜΙΣΕ)."¹⁸⁵

Like *ApJohn*, *HypArch* understands the perfect human as an androgynous being, since it acknowledges that the union between a man and a woman is the typological reproduction of the pleromatic syzygies. Moreover, the female element of the syzygy personifies the spiritual nature, whereas the male element personifies the psychic nature. This view is indeed consistent with *HypArch*'s theophany above the waters, since the image revealed into the water is the image of Incorruptibility. Thus, when Yaldabaoth removes Eve from Adam's side, he eliminates completely the part of Adam that makes him into a

¹⁸³ *HypArch* II, 88, 12.

¹⁸⁴ *HypArch* II, 88, 15.

¹⁸⁵ *HypArch* II, 89, 4-10.

‘living soul’, making him merely a psychic man.¹⁸⁶ As in *ApJohn*, the anthropological paradigm proposed by *HypArch* represents an overturning of pleromatic syzygial dynamics since the feminine becomes superior to the male element. Furthermore, Eve assumes the role of instructor, inhabiting the snake and suggesting the carnal Adam and Eve to eat from the Tree.¹⁸⁷ In this Ophite treatise, the eating from the tree is understood to be a positive and salvific action that frees humans from the enslavement of Yaldabaoth. Moreover, Eve is the one who gifts Adam with the spirit which he needs to arise from the ground and recognise her true nature.¹⁸⁸ Therefore, this spiritual Eve causes the awakening of Adam by giving him the possibility to acknowledge her as a spiritual instructor. In this regard, Adam’s words when he recognises Eve as a pneumatic being are an explicit acknowledgement of the overlapping of female characters due to the typological resemblance.¹⁸⁹ By describing the pneumatic Eve as his mother, Adam is explicitly recognising her as Sophia, the ‘Mother of all Living’. Thus, the characteristics of Incorruptibility, Sophia and the spiritual Eve are all incarnated in the salvific character of the Instructor. The concentration of all female attributes in a single character is particularly significant in the case of the incarnated feminine because it implies that Eve is not only revealing to Adam the existence of a superior nature, but she is also revealing the mysteries of the spiritual feminine. If so, the feminine has risen to such an essential role that the revelation of the spirit *is* the revelation of the feminine. It is worth remembering that such an identification would contravene the predominant cultural and philosophical assumptions concerning genders. It has been noted before that both Platonists and Aristotelians identified maleness with the spiritual/superior element and femaleness with the inferior/material element. By making Eve the spirit-endowed part of the united protological man represented by the androgynous Adam of the first creation, *HypArch* is

¹⁸⁶ Consequently, the sleep of ignorance that fell upon Adam is the metaphorical representation of the status that awaits him if he will be deprived of his spiritual part and restored to previous psychic condition. It is also worth mentioning that this conclusion is in contrast with what it has been observed in *ApJohn*, where Adam seems to maintain some sort of pneumatic spark also after the separation from Eve, see Buckley (1986), 54 and Orbe (1996), 326.

¹⁸⁷ The Tree is considered another manifestation of Sophia, see *HypArch* II, 89, 30 – 90, 12.

¹⁸⁸ The awakening of Adam is understood as the donation of the spiritual spark also by Orbe (1996), 326.

¹⁸⁹ They are very similar to the words used in the Pronoia hymn in *ApJohn* (*ApJohn* II, 30, 11 – 31, 31) and in Eve’s hymn in *OrigWorld* (*OrigWorld*. II, 114, 8 – 17).

overturning this mainstream structure in order to affirm a revolutionary standpoint.

Although *HypArch*'s portrayal of the incarnated feminine is quite revolutionary, it does not reject completely the mainstream association between female gender and materiality, since the spiritual Eve has an equivalent carnal Eve:

Then the authorities came up to their Adam. And when they saw his female counterpart speaking with him, they became agitated with great agitation; and they became enamoured of her. They said to one another, "Come, let us sow our seed in her" and they pursued her. And she laughed at them for their witlessness and their blindness (ΑΥΘ ΑCΘΒΕ ΝCΩΟΥ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΝ ΤΟΥΜΝΤΑΤ' ΘΗΤ' ΜΝ ΤΟΥΜΝΤΕΛΛΕ); and their clutches she became a tree (ΑΥΘ ΑCΡ ΟΥΨΗ(Ν) ΝΤΟΟΤΟΥ), and left before them her shadowy reflection resembling herself (ΑCΚΩ ΝΤΕCΖΑΙΒΕC Ε[C]ΕΙΝΕ ΜΜΟC ΖΑΤΟΟΤΟΥ); and they defiled it foully (ΑΥΘ ΑΥΧΟΖΜ[ΕC] ΖΝ ΟΥCΩQ).¹⁹⁰

The spiritual Eve cannot be grasped by the archons because she is ontologically superior to them and they are unable to imprison her. On the contrary, they can defile the carnal Eve – that is, Eve's 'shadowy reflection' (ΝΤΕCΖΑΙΒΕC Ε[C]ΕΙΝΕ) – for she is their equal. In this regard, the only difference with *ApJohn* consists in the fact that the carnal Eve is not an archontic production, but rather a decoy created by the spiritual Eve to escape capture. Notwithstanding, *HypArch* confirms the conclusions reached in the analysis of *ApJohn* concerning Eve's double creation: the text interprets the Genesis creations not as subsequent moments in time, but rather as two distinct creations. Moreover, the narrative of the creation of Adam and Eve is opposite: while Adam appears primarily as a soul-endowed being, Eve's true essence is pneumatic. Borrowing improperly some Aristotelian terminology, one could say that while in Adam the spirit is merely an accident – one that can be easily removed – Eve's true substance is the spirit and it cannot be removed from her.

¹⁹⁰ *HypArch* II, 89, 17-28.

This hypothesis would also explain why Yaldabaoth and his archons seem to have power over Adam but not over the spiritual Eve, who always escapes their attempts to grab her.

The very coming into existence of Eve gives precious insights about what the goal of life should be for Gnostics. When Yaldabaoth expelled Adam and Eve from Eden, he intended to distract them with a life of toil so that ‘they might not have the opportunity of being devoted to the Holy Spirit’ (ἐπιπῆλᾱ ετοϋλλε).¹⁹¹ This sentence well summarises the importance of the feminine within Gnostic circles, since it implies that reaching true knowledge of the Spirit means reaching salvation.¹⁹² It would therefore appear that *HypArch* considers the re-appropriation of the spirit as an epistemological journey, a progressive acquisition of knowledge that is mediated by the historical intervention of Sophia. Not surprisingly, the first character to acquire such knowledge of the superior world is again a woman: Norea. She is the last daughter of Adam and Eve, and she is generated after Seth. Granting that *HypArch* conceives the transmission of *gnosis* as an acquired possession and not the inheritance of a specific race (the Sethian one),¹⁹³ the importance attributed to her rather than to Seth should not surprise us:

Again Eve became pregnant, and she bore [Norea]. And she said: “He has begotten on [me a] virgin as an assistance [for] many generations of mankind” (αὐτὴ πεχας χε ἀρχιπωνα[ει] ἡοὔπαρθε]νος ἡβοηθεῖα [2ἡ] ἡγενεα ἡγενεα ἡρρωμε).¹⁹⁴

Besides identifying her as the virgin who will help humankind throughout history, this passage also acknowledges her as an instructor-character, like Sophia and the spiritual Eve. A first indication of such identification is given by the name of ‘helper’ (ἡβοηθεῖα), which is a typical name for Eve:

¹⁹¹ *HypArch* II, 91, 3 – 11.

¹⁹² This will be expanded more in detail in the following section, *infra* III.3.

¹⁹³ This particular Sethian mythologoumenon is thus absent from *HypArch*.

¹⁹⁴ *HypArch* II, 91, 34 – 92, 2. For an investigation of the character of Norea, see Luttikhuisen (2006), 94-95; McGuire (2000) and Pearson (2000).

The archons went to meet her intending to lead her astray. Their supreme Chief said to her, “Your mother Eve came to us.” But Norea turned to them and said to them, “It is you who are rulers of the darkness; you are accursed. And you did not know my mother; instead it was your female counterpart that you knew (ΟΥΤΕ ΗΠΕΤΝ̄COΥΩΝ ΤΑΜΑΛΥ ΑΛΛΑ Ν̄ΤΑΤΕΤΝ̄COΥΩΝ ΤΕΤΝ̄ΩΡΕΙΝΕ). For I am not your descendant; rather it is from the world above that I am come”. [...] Norea turned, with the might of [*lacuna*]; and in a loud voice [she] cried out [up to] the holy one, the God of the Pleroma, “Rescue me from the archons of the unrighteousness and save me from their clutches.”¹⁹⁵

The archons’ inability to force Norea’s proves that she is somehow superior to them and that she therefore possesses spirit. Her spiritual status is further confirmed by her crying out to receive help from the world above, thus mirroring the actions of Sophia. It should be noted that, despite her importance as helper of humankind, Norea does not perform directly any salvific action, rather, she appears to remind humans of their possibility to rise above the psychic and hylic condition by means of knowledge. In this respect, the text is drawing a subtle but decisive line between the incarnated women and the utterly spiritual one, such as Eve.

To sum up, the portrayal of the incarnated feminine in *HypArch* is quite revolutionary and unique within a Gnostic framework. It is worth observing first that, as in the case of the fallen feminine, *HypArch* splits the incarnated feminine into mother and daughter characters, thus underlining an awareness of feminine ambiguity. The case of the incarnated feminine confirms that the text desperately tries to solve such ambiguity by personifying and hypostatizing the different roles attributed to Eve – that is, the spiritual Eve and the carnal Eve. Although the spiritual Eve is unable to grant humans eschatological redemption by herself, she performs here a vital protological soteriological role by making Adam aware of his condition and showing him the way of knowledge. She is the instructor and her interventions in the history of salvation make humans aware of the existence of something greater and lead

¹⁹⁵ *HypArch* II, 92, 18 – 93, 2.

them towards the true gnosis.¹⁹⁶ In this respect, the importance attributed to Norea is a further indication of the importance that female characters have in these Gnostic mythologies.

II.4.3 The Luminous Woman in *On the Origin of the World* (NHC II, 5)

The longest account about the creation of humankind is found in *OrigWorld*. As in *ApJohn* and *HypArch*, the creation of Adam and Eve is distinct. The woman possesses spiritual features and only later a psychic body, whereas Adam has only a material existence. Nevertheless, *OrigWorld* adds further particulars, since the creation of Adam and Eve is here performed by different entities: while Adam is fashioned by the archons,¹⁹⁷ Eve is created by Zoe, Sophia's daughter.¹⁹⁸ As previously explained,¹⁹⁹ the characters of Zoe and Eve are often confused:

After the day of rest Sophia sent her daughter Zoe (ΜΗΝΕΑ ΠΖΟΥ ΝΤΑΝΑΠΥCIC ΑΤCΟΦΙΑ ΧΟΟΥ ΝΖΩΗ ΤΕCΨΕΕΡΕ), being called Eve (ΕΥΜΟΥΤΕ ΕΡΟC ΧΕ ΕΥΖΑ), as an instructor (ΖΩC ΡΕCΨΑΜΟ) in order that she might make Adam, who had no soul (ΑΤΡΕCΤΟΥΝΟC ΑΔΑΜΨΑΕΙ ΕΜΝΨΥΧΗ ΝΖΗΤΨ), arise so that those whom he should engender might become containers of light (ΝΑΓΓΕΛΕΙΟΝ ΗΠΟΥΟ[ΕΙΝ]). When Eve saw her male counterpart prostrate she had pity upon him, and she said, "Adam! Become alive! Arise upon the earth" (ΑΔΑΜΨΩΝΖ ΤΨΟΥΝ ΖΙΧΜΨΚΑΖ). Immediately her word became accomplished fact. For Adam, having arisen suddenly opened his eyes. When he saw her he said, "You shall be called Mother of the Living. For it is you who have given me

¹⁹⁶ The positivity of the character of Eve-Epinoia has also been noted by Bak Halvgaard (2017). Contrarily to my analysis, she gives a non-Christian interpretation to the character.

¹⁹⁷ *OrigWorld* II, 112, 25 – 113, 21.

¹⁹⁸ *OrigWorld* II, 113, 21-34: 'Now the production of the instructor (Sophia Zoe) came about as follows. When Sophia let fall a droplet of light, it flowed onto the water, and immediately a human being appeared, being androgynous. That droplet she molded first as a female body. Afterwards, using the body she molded it in the likeness of the mother which had appeared. And he finished in twelve months. And androgynous human being was produced, whom the Greek call Hermaphrodites, and whose mother the Hebrew call Eve of Life (Eve of Zoe), namely, the female instructor of life. Her offspring is the creature that is lord.'

¹⁹⁹ *Supra* II.3.3.

life” (Ἰταρεφναγ ερος πεχαδ χε ἵτο εὔναμοῦτε ερο χε τμμαγ
ἵνετονζ χε ἵτο πεταζ† ναει ἡπωνζ).²⁰⁰

The overlapping of female characters is striking in this narrative, so much so that one could easily suppose – incorrectly – that Zoe and Eve are the same character, especially considering that they are a single character in Genesis.²⁰¹ Since the name “Eve” is also used as Sophia’s apposition, Eve can be referred to as both the mother and the daughter. However, since the text refers to Zoe as the pre-existent daughter of Sophia, it would be incorrect to consider them one and the same. In addition, this passage openly identifies Adam as Eve’s counterpart, thus marking a significant difference between the two female beings. While Zoe is an intra-pleromatic being who only occasionally dwells in the inferior world, Eve is an utterly extra-pleromatic being who will eventually return to the pleromatic light. In any case, the similarities between the two are striking and need to be underlined.

Overall, the characteristics of Eve in *OrigWorld* do not differ greatly from the previous representations in *HypArch* and *ApJohn*. She is identified with the instructor who awakes Adam, making him acknowledge his psychic status.²⁰² Since the archons were afraid of this Luminous Woman (namely, the spiritual Eve) whom they saw standing next to Adam, they tried unsuccessfully to grab her. Laughing at their attempt, the spiritual Eve created a material reflection which they defiled.²⁰³ Furthermore, the text narrates that while the Luminous Woman was escaping from the archons, she entered the ‘Tree of Acquaintance’,²⁰⁴ thus confirming a significant Ophite influence on this treatise. Similarly, Ophite mythologoumena are traceable in *OrigWorld*’s interpretation of the original sin, since the serpent – called also ‘Beast’ and ‘the

²⁰⁰ *OrigWorld* II, 115, 30 – 116, 8.

²⁰¹ Eve is indeed called Zoe in *Gen.* 3:20.

²⁰² In this regard, I disagree with Dunning (2009), 77-78 who believes that Adam’s psychic body results from Sophia’s insufflation.

²⁰³ *OrigWorld* II, 116, 33 – 117, 4: ‘Afterwards, when they had recovered from the daze, they came to Adam; and seeing the likeness of this woman with him, they were greatly disturbed, thinking it was she that was the true Eve. And they acted rashly; they came up to her and seized her and cast their seed upon her.’

²⁰⁴ *OrigWorld* II, 115, 25-33.

wisest of creatures' – is identified with the instructor.²⁰⁵ By rebelling against the archontic rules and eating from the Tree of Acquaintance (namely, the spiritual Eve), Adam and Eve discovered that they were naked of knowledge and clothed in shame.²⁰⁶ It is therefore thanks to this discovery and the mediation of the Luminous Eve that Adam and the carnal Eve became part of the divine plan of salvation.

However, being more focused on the destinies of human beings, *OrigWorld* is far more detailed than previous accounts regarding Eve's offspring:

First she was pregnant with Abel, by the first ruler. And it was by the seven authorities and their angels that she bore the other offspring. And all this came to pass according to the Pronoia of the prime parent (ΠΑΕΙ ΔΕ ΤΗΡΕ` ΑΦΩΠΕ ΚΑΤΑ ΤΠΡΟΝΟΙΑ ἩΠΑΡΧΙΓΕΝΕΤΩΡ), so that the first mother might bear within her every seed, being mixed and being fitted to the fate of the universe and its configurations, and to Justice (ΧΕΚΑΑΣ ΤΩΟΡΠ` ἩΜΑΥ ΕΣΑΧΠΟ ΖΡΑΙ ΝΖΗΤΕ̄ ΝΣΠΕΡΜΑ ΝΙΜ ΕΩΤΗΖ ΕΩΡΖΑΡΜΟCE ΕΖΟΥΝ` ΕΧΙΜΑΡΜΕΝΗ ἩΠΟΚΟCΜΟC ἩΝ ΝΕCСХΗΜΑ ΑΥΩ ΤΔΙΚΑΙΟCΥΝΗ). A prearranged plan came into effect regarding Eve, so that the modelled forms of the authorities might become enclosures of the light (ΑΥΟΙΚΟΝΟΜΙΑ ΩΩΠΕ ΕΤΒΕ ΕΥΖΑ ΧΕΚΑΑΣ ἩΠΛΑCΜΑ ΝΕΖΟΥCΙΑ ΕΥΝΑΩΩΠΕ ΝΧΟΛΧ̄ ἩΠΟΥΟΕΙΝ), whereupon it would condemn them through their modelled forms.²⁰⁷

In contrast to the previous accounts, even the carnal Eve becomes part of the soteriological plan of the Luminous Eve, albeit not voluntarily. The material surrogate of the true Eve begets not only psychic and material children, but also the pure and spiritual seed through the intercession of Pronoia. Furthermore, *OrigWorld* confirms openly the metaphysical necessity of a cosmic order, since the destinies of human souls are 'prearranged' and thus predetermined.²⁰⁸ Consequently, *OrigWorld* discusses openly the destiny of

²⁰⁵ *OrigWorld* II, 118, 24 – 119, 18.

²⁰⁶ For additional information about the anthropology of *OrigWorld*, see Dunning (2009), 78-82.

²⁰⁷ *OrigWorld* II, 117, 15-28.

²⁰⁸ The debate concerning determinism of Ophites, Sethian and Barbeloite theologies, is still very much open and some scholars have strongly spoken against it, such as Löhr (1992).

three different races of humans: pneumatic race (πνευματικός), psychic race (ψυχικός) and material race (χοϊκός).²⁰⁹ It would also appear that only the pneumatic humans, aided by the spiritual Eve, will reach salvation.

Overall, *OrigWorld* seems to underline Eve's soteriological actions more than both *ApJohn* and *HypArch*.

II.4.4 The Psychic Eve according to Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* I, 30

Irenaeus' account of human creation in Ophite mythology is quite dissimilar to that observed thus far, since he presents a different anthropological model.

Describing Yaldabaoth's breathing into Adam, he underlines that: 'When, then, he breathed the spirit of life into man, he was secretly deprived of that power. On the other hand, man from then on had intelligence and intention; and these are the parts that are saved.'²¹⁰ This passage implies that Yaldabaoth breathes two elements – instead of one – into Adam: *nun* and *enthymesin*. Interestingly, the Latin terminology shows that the translator is well aware that these were considered technical terms by Gnostics. On the one hand, the term *nun*, which is the transliteration of the Greek accusative νοῦν, could indicate the spiritual and intellectual part of humans.²¹¹ On the other hand, the Latin transliteration *enthymesin* comes from the Greek ἐνθύμησις, which means literally 'conception', but also shares the root of θῦμός, literally 'a strong and irresistible passion'. Irenaeus is here presenting a tripartite anthropology. Hence, Adam is tripartite insofar as he possesses νοῦς (spiritual element), θῦμός (psychic element), and a χοϊκός σῶμα (hylic body). Among these elements, the first two are that which will be saved in the eschatological times, whilst the latter will be destroyed. This tripartite anthropology fits better the

However, *OrigWorld* seems quite explicit in affirming the fixity of the eschatological destinies reserved for each Gnostic nature (pneumatic, psychic and hylic).

²⁰⁹ *OrigWorld* II, 117, 28 – 118 6.

²¹⁰ *AdHaer* I, 30, 6: *Illo autem insufflante in homine spiritum vitae, letenter evacuatum eum a virtute dicunt: hominem autem inde habuisse nun et enthymesin; et haec esse quae salvantur.*

²¹¹ In Valentinianism, this is the part of human beings that has the same nature as the Pleromatic Nous, see *AdHaer* I, 1, 1.

narrative of *ApJohn*, rather than the more openly Ophite *OrigWorld*, thus showing that Irenaeus is aware of the Gnostic terminology and its use.

This tripartite anthropology has significant consequences when it comes to Eve's creation from Adam:

Thereupon, Yaldabaoth was jealous and wanted to devise a way by which to deprive man [of power] by means of a woman. So he brought forth a woman from his Thought (Adam's), but *Prunicos* took her to herself and invisibly deprived her of power. But the rest came and admired her beauty and called her Eve. They were filled with desire towards her and begot sons from her, who they claim are also angels. Their Mother, however, tried to mislead Adam and Eve through the serpent to transgress the precept of Yaldabaoth. Eve, thinking she was hearing from the Son of God, easily believed and persuaded Adam to eat of the tree of which God had commanded them not to eat. But when they had eaten, they received knowledge of that Power which is above all things and forsook those who made them. Now, when Prunikos saw that they were overcome by their own creature, she greatly rejoiced and again cried out that, since there was already the Incorruptible Father, he [Yaldabaoth] told a lie when he once called himself Father, and that, given that the First Man and the first Woman once existed, she committed adultery.²¹²

Irenaeus' description of Eve is quite dissimilar from that of *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*. First, the separation between the two Eves is misrepresented by the heresiologist, since there is a psychic Eve and a carnal Eve. Indeed, Eve is produced by Adam's *enthymesis*, namely his psychic part. This description does not match previous accounts, according to which Eve is created out of

²¹² Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 30, 7: *Zelantem autem Ialdabaoth voluisse excogitare evacuare hominem per foeminam, et de sua enthymesi eduxisse foeminam, quam illa Prunicos suscipiens invisibiliter evacuavit a virtute. Reliquos autem venientes et mirantes formositatem eius, vocasse eam Evam, et concupiscentes hanc, generasse ex ea filios, quos et angelos esse dicunt. Mater autem ipsorum argumentata est per serpentem seducer Evam et Adam, supergredi praeceptum Ialdabaoth; Eva autem quasi a Filio Dei hoc audiens, facile credidit, et Adam suasit manducare de arbore, de qua dixerat Deus non manducare. Manducantes autem eos, cognovisse eam quae est super omnia virtutem dicunt, et abscesisse ab his qui fecerant eos. Prunicum autem videntem quoniam et per suum plasma victi sunt, valde gratulatam et rursum exclamasse quoniam, cum esset Pater incorruptibilis, olim hic semetipsum vocans Patrem, mentitus est: et cum Homo olim esset et Prima Foemina, et haec adulterans peccavit.*

Adam's spiritual part.²¹³ Moreover, the separation between the Eve who was taken out of Adam's *enthymesis* and the carnal Eve – that is, the shell of flesh which is seduced by the serpent – is operated by *Prunicos* rather than by Eve herself. In this regard, Eve is deprived of any active role in the story besides that of being persuaded by the serpent.

Once again, it would appear that Irenaeus is confusing different aspects of the feminine imagery and, as a result, the importance of female characters is diminished. First of all, Irenaeus' account denies that the superior Eve – namely, she who is taken out of Adam's psychic element – is consubstantial with the Pleroma. Secondly, by making *Prunicos* responsible for the separation between the two Eves, he denies Eve's soteriological role. Thirdly, by making Eve come from Adam's *enthymesis*, Irenaeus is rejecting the Ophite mythologoumenon according to which she is the instructor and has a main soteriological function. Therefore, I have concluded that Irenaeus exploits the typological resemblance between female characters – especially that between Sophia and the spiritual Eve – to misrepresent the soteriological functions proper to Ophite female characters.

II.4.5 Concluding Remarks on the Spiritual and Carnal Eve

The portrayal of the incarnated feminine in these texts is remarkable, for the ambiguity that is proper to the feminine is now personified into two characters: the spiritual Eve and the carnal Eve.

ApJohn opposes the spiritual Eve, who detains key soteriological functions, to the carnal Eve, who is instrumental for the perpetration of the counterfeit spirit. Concerning the incarnated feminine imagery in *ApJohn*, it is worth noting that while the male gender represents the spiritual element in the pleromatic world, the female gender represents the spiritual element in the extra-pleromatic world. This inversion in the use of gender imagery at an extra-pleromatic level

²¹³ This is indeed the interpretation of Simonetti, who interpreted this *enthymesis* as the 'material sensibility given by Yaldabaoth to Adam', see Simonetti (1999), 426.

is a consequence of *ApJohn*'s cosmological principle according to which the material world is fashioned by Yaldabaoth as a purposeful reversal of the pleromatic world. Regardless, my analysis has confirmed that feminine imagery has been used by *ApJohn* in an ambiguous and paradoxical manner.

HypArch presents two main innovations in the case of the incarnated feminine. First, it stresses the Gnostic typological resemblance by equating the union between Adam and Eve with the one of Sophia and the Saviour. In this regard, gender imagery is similar to *ApJohn*, since the feminine represents the spirit whereas the maleness is taken as the weaker and psychic element. Nonetheless, the reasons that explain this reversal of gender imagery between the pleromatic and the material worlds are distinct from those of *ApJohn*. Given that Incorruptibility is the likeness revealed in the theophany above the waters, the spiritual Eve becomes the revealed part of the Godhead. She is the instructor of knowledge, the protological soteriological agent who gives life to Adam and his lineage. In addition, *HypArch* introduces the character of Norea, the daughter of Eve, who possesses true *gnosis*, thus becoming the prototype of the perfect Gnostic. Hence, the feminine is here both the instructor – in the characters of Sophia and the spiritual Eve – as well as the instructed – in the person of Norea.

The portrayal of the incarnated feminine in the *OrigWorld* coincides to a great extent with that of the *HypArch*. As in the case of the fallen feminine, *OrigWorld* shows a typological resemblance between the three aspects of the feminine, testifying once more to the overlap between female characters. The Luminous Woman, Sophia, Zoe and Eve are often interchangeable, thus generating much of confusion on the part of the reader. Notwithstanding, I have tried to clarify the role of each female character. For instance, I hope to have proved that Zoe and Eve are two separate entities, since one is a pleromatic being and the other is a spiritual woman. Although the contrast between the spiritual and carnal Eve is often underlined, it is easy to detect a neat prevalence of episodes concerning the soteriological aspects of the incarnated feminine.

The soteriological aspects that are proper to the spiritual Eve in *ApJohn*, *HypArch* and *OrigWorld* do not find any correspondence in Irenaeus *AdHaer* I, 30. On the contrary, the portrayal offered by Irenaeus is interesting because it shows that heresiological literature tends to minimise the revolutionary soteriological feminine imagery by giving more prominence to the events surrounding the carnal Eve, and by associating the spiritual Eve of the Nag Hammadi treatises to a psychic and non-soteriological Eve.

II.5 Conclusion

Part II of this work aims at contributing to recent scholarly debate with the following observations.

First, the analysis conducted on *ApJohn*, *HypArch*, *OrigWorld* and Irenaeus' *AdHaer* I, 29 and I, 30 suggests that ambiguity and paradox should be considered pivotal and essential characteristics of the Gnostic feminine imagery. In particular, the ambiguity consists in envisioning female characters as both defective entities and soteriological agents. At an intra-pleromatic level, the wills of Barbelo and Incorruptibility are subordinated to the one of their male syzygial counterparts. Notwithstanding, they both have an active role in the generation of the Pleroma, since they put in actions their partners' will. In addition, Incorruptibility plays a fundamental role in the Gnostic economy of Salvation. Being the divine likeness that appears into the waters to the archons, she reveals the existence of a superior God to the inferior world. Likewise, the ambiguity of the Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite feminine imagery is visible in the case of the fallen feminine. Sophia is not only ambiguous in comparison to the highest pleromatic female being, but also within herself, for she is both the cause of the intra-divine rupture and the soteriological agent who reveals the truth about the Pleroma. Her paradoxical nature is often expressed through sexual imagery; thus, she is portrayed both as the wandering prostitute who commits adultery and the perfect bride who will marry the Saviour. Finally, in the case of the incarnated feminine, the paradoxical aspect of feminine imagery becomes more evident than ever. The soteriological and defective aspects of Gnostic feminine imagery are personified in two Eves, a spiritual and a carnal one. In these texts, Eve is both the spirit who awakens Adam and the primary means of perpetration of the counterfeit Spirit.

Secondly, the textual analysis shows that the typological resemblance between different levels of the Gnostic cosmos affects greatly the Gnostic feminine imagery. In particular, it is worth focusing on two consequences of this Gnostic

cosmological mechanism. On the one hand, the typological resemblance between the three aspects of the feminine generates confusion among the different female characters. This is indeed the case of both *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*. On the other hand, since the typological resemblance implies a progressive loss of perfection from the highest level to the lowest, it helps explaining the interpretation of the lower aspects of the feminine as a reversal of its highest aspects. In other words, only the mechanism of typological resemblance explains the extent to which Sophia is an imperfect copy of Barbelo and in what ways the carnal Eve is opposed to the spiritual Eve. In addition, the typological resemblance was exploited by Irenaeus to diminish and refute the importance of feminine imagery in Gnostic mythologies. As a matter of fact, Irenaeus' most powerful heresiological argument against these Gnostic mythologies is based on the projection of the sins committed by the lower female characters onto the female characters in the Godhead. It is mainly because of the typological resemblance among different aspects of the feminine that Irenaeus can "corrupt" the highest feminine pleromatic being, thus incorporating error and sin into the highest level of the divine Godhead.

Hence, the paradoxical nature of feminine imagery in Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite mythologies finds its confirmation in the portrayals of female characters who are both defective beings and soteriological agents. Each text underlines this ambiguity to a different extent, but they underline it nonetheless. Among the texts analysed, I would say that *ApJohn* is the text which stresses this element the least and *OrigWord* the one which stresses it the most. In this regard, my findings represent a further step into contemporary researches on such matter. In his monograph on Ophite, Barbeloite and Sethian texts, Rasimus concluded that female characters are portrayed as marginal figures needing male supervision in texts who show Barbeloite and Sethian mythologoumena and theologoumena, whilst they are central characters in those texts that show predominantly Ophite features.²¹⁴ According to him, the

²¹⁴ Rasimus (2009), 129-158. As Ophite works, he listed *Eugnostos*, *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, *Hypostasis of Archons* and *On the Origin of the World*. As Barbeloite and Sethian works, he listed *Zostrianos*, *Marsanes*, *Allogenes* and the *Three Steles of Seth*. He has then classified *ApJohn* has a mixture of Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite mythologoumena. In particular, *ApJohn* owes its peculiarity to the combination of two opposite paradigms: it has a Sethian and

relationship between Barbeloite and Ophite features is inversely proportional: the more one work is influenced by a Barbeloite framework, the less relevant Ophite features becomes and vice versa. My analysis of *ApJohn*, *HypArch* and *OrigWorld* confirms his findings only partially. On the one hand, Rasimus is right when he affirms that Barbeloite mythologoumena, such as the intra-pleromatic feminine in *ApJohn*, overlook the soteriological functions of the feminine. On the other hand, his findings do not account for the typological resemblance proper to these female characters. I believe that the identification of a typological link between the various aspects of the feminine in all three Gnostic movements makes it impossible to isolate clear differences between their feminine imagery. Therefore, while it remains true that *ApJohn* stresses more than other texts the defectiveness and dependence upon male characters of the intra-pleromatic female characters, it would be an overestimation to consider its paradigm as entirely opposite to the ones of *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*. Moreover, I am convinced that episodes such as the theophany above waters in *OrigWorld* contrasts with Rasimus' conclusion that the Ophite feminine is not in need of male redemption. In this case, Pronoia needs the intervention of a Saviour, regardless of the fact that her blood has salvific power. In other words, it seems to me that the distance between the three aspects of the Gnostic feminine can be stressed only to a certain extent, since they remain always interconnected through a typological mechanism. In conclusion, the peculiarity of these Gnostic texts lies in the ability of harmonising conflicting aspects of the feminine into a single narrative.

It is now time to turn the attention to Valentinian texts to see how they dealt with the radical ambiguity of Gnostic feminine imagery.

Barbeloite portrayal of the feminine in II, 4, 29 – 10, 28 (that I have called intra-pleromatic and fallen feminine) and an Ophite rewriting of Genesis stories in II, 11, 15 – 30, 11 (that I have called incarnated feminine).

III. The Valentinian Feminine Imagery

In the previous section, I have shown that most female characters in Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite Gnostic mythologies play a soteriological role. In *ApJohn*, *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*, female characters are involved in the soteriological process of knowing-revealing to different extents. I have also shown that all female characters are linked to one another by a mechanism of typological resemblance, according to which each female character reproduces imperfectly the characteristics of a superior female character. Furthermore, I have argued that the heresiological accounts of Irenaeus confirm the revolutionary stance of these movements, since he uses the typological resemblance between female characters to his advantage. Therefore, I have concluded that the most significant features of Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite feminine imagery are both the salvific roles attributed to female characters and the typological link established between them. When one looks at the Valentinian feminine imagery, the theological and mythological role of the feminine changes significantly. In particular, female characters lose most of the soteriological functions detectable in Sethian, Ophite and Barbeloite works. Furthermore, the connection between the three aspects of the feminine is less marked than in other Gnostic mythologies, since greater importance is granted to the fallen feminine. In Valentinian texts, the soteriological and revealing functions of the feminine – although detectable at times – are reduced to a minimum, whilst the aspects of their defectiveness and dependence upon a male redeemer are stressed and highlighted. Such a dependence is marked by the emergence of a more structured and organised syzygy, that is, a male/female pleromatic spousal couple. Besides its importance at theological and mythological levels, the syzygy also represents the underlying principle of the so-called sacrament of the bridal chamber, a Valentinian ritual practice which most likely aimed at the reconstitution of the original undivided and syzygial status of pneumatic beings.

Once again, due to the complexity and length of the topic at hand, this second part of my work has been organised into four chapters, preceded by an overview of the primary sources and the selection criteria employed in this study (II.1). The second chapter will discuss the role of feminine imagery in Valentinian pleromatologies (II.2).¹ The third chapter will consider the role, functions and doubling of Sophia (II.3). Lastly, the fourth chapter enquires into the status of carnal women in Valentinian systems (II.4). To help the reader, each one of the three chapters has its own brief introduction and conclusion, thus making each chapter a logical unit that stands on its own but finds its proper position within the wider interpretation of Valentinianism.

¹ The word “pleromatology” indicates the doctrines and myths connected with the Valentinian Pleroma; see Thomassen (2006), 193-195.

III.1 Valentinian Primary Sources and Selection Criteria

Having already highlighted the complexities of defining the Valentinian School in the first chapter,² I move on to illustrate the primary sources that I have selected as representative of the Valentinian feminine and the criteria employed to select such texts. In this regard, it must be highlighted that the sources regarding Valentinian feminine imagery are mainly constituted by heresiological accounts. This is primarily due to the fact that Valentinianism was the form of Gnosticism that was better known among other Christians, especially in the West; consequently, it was also the Gnostic movement that was considered most “dangerous” from a heresiological perspective.

In Irenaeus’ *AdHaer*, it is possible to detect three accounts of Valentinian theology:

- a) *AdHaer* I, 1-8 (*Grand Notice*) and *AdHaer* I, 12, 1-4: these passages illustrate the doctrines of Ptolemy and his followers;
- b) *AdHaer* I, 11, 1-5: this section discusses the teachings of the founder of the movement, Valentinus;
- c) *AdHaer* I, 14-20: these paragraphs discuss the doctrines and practices of the Valentinian teacher, Marcus the Magician.

In addition to Irenaeus’ work, here is a list of the more exhaustive heresiological accounts on Valentinianism:

- a) Hippolytus, *El* VI, 29-36;
- b) Epiphanius, *Pan* I, 31, 5-6 (*Dogmatic Letter of the Valentinians*);³
- c) Tertullian, *Adversus Valentinianos*.⁴

² See *supra* I.3. The dating of the Valentinian texts is still highly debated among scholars. For the texts analyzed in the following chapters, I will provide an estimated date of composition in the dedicated section; whilst for the others, I will briefly discuss them in the footnote.

³ At the present stage of research, it has not yet been identified a possible date of composition for this text. For more information, see Thomassen (2006), 218-231.

⁴ For the edition and translation of the text, see Kroymann (1954).

Given the primary ritual and sacramental focus of the account on Marcus, I will primarily reference to the accounts of Valentinus and Ptolemy. Similarly, the accounts of Epiphanius *Pan* I, 31, 5-6 (that is, the so-called *Dogmatic Letter*) and Tertullian's *AdVal* will always be used as a valuable comparison to verify or integrate Irenaeus' information, albeit they will not always be analysed in depth.⁵

The original Gnostic sources available for the Valentinian feminine are:

- a) the *Gospel of Philip*;⁶
- b) *A Valentinian Exposition*;⁷
- c) the *Excerpta ex Theodoto*;⁸
- d) Ptolemy, *Letter to Flora*: an original writing of Ptolemy bequeathed to us by Epiphanius, *Pan* I, 33, 3-7.
- e) *Gospel of Truth*;⁹
- f) *Tripartite Tractate*.¹⁰

Concerning *GosPhil* and *ExVal*, it is necessary to point out that while the codex of the *GosPhil* has been found in good material condition, the surviving manuscript of *ExVal* is severely damaged, making the text quite difficult to read. Nonetheless, I found both works essential for a deeper understanding of

⁵ This list is not obviously exhaustive of all heresiological accounts about Valentinianism, but it lists those who are more relevant for the feminine. For a discussion of the polemic nature of heresiological sources, *supra* I.3.

⁶ For the edition and translation of the text, see Isenberg (1996). I have made occasional changes to the translation. It ought to be mentioned that the identification of *GosPhil* as a Valentinian text has not been straightforward. Schenke (1960) concluded that this gospel had been contaminated with non-Valentinian material during its numerous redactions and following scholars seemed to have mainly agreed with him. Nonetheless, Schenke's conclusion has been challenged by Thomassen (1997), who has successfully proved that the theology of *GosPhil* is coherent with eastern Valentinianism. In this research, I will expand on Thomassen's conclusion and consider the *GosPhil* a properly Valentinian text.

⁷ For the edition of the Coptic text and the translation, see Turner (1990) and Ménard (1985). Occasional amendments will be made to the translation.

⁸ For the edition of the Greek text and the translation, see Sagnard (1948) and Casey (1934). Occasional amendments will be made to the translation.

⁹ *GosTruth* is considered one of the oldest Valentinian documents, but scholars do not offer an exact date of composition. See Attridge – MacRae (1985), 76-81. For a comprehensive analysis on this debate, see Marksches (1992), 339-356.

¹⁰ Most scholars deem this treatise to be an early Valentinian work written between third and fourth century CE. See, Attridge – Pagels (1985), 178.

Valentinian feminine imagery, for they are complementary: while *ExVal* discusses Valentinian pleromatology, *GosPhil* focuses primarily on Valentinian eschatological and the sacramental theology.

Similarly, *ExTheod* bears its own series of textual and exegetical problems. Being a collection of quotations from the writing of Theodotus in Clement's works, *ExTheod* remains an unsystematic source for Valentinian doctrines.¹¹ For the sake of clarity, scholars have decided to divide *ExTheod* into four sections: (A) 1-28; (B) 29-42; (C) 43-65; (D) 66-86.¹² Section C is usually considered independent from the other ones, for its doctrines conflict with those of sections A-B-D, presenting instead many similarities with the *GN* of Irenaeus. Most scholars would agree that parts A (1-28), B (29-42) and D (66-85) offer a good representation of the teachings of the eastern Valentinian school. Contrariwise, part C is generally considered as independent from the other three parts, for it represents the doctrines of the western Valentinian school.¹³ This internal discrepancy between parts A-B-D and C is further complicated by the necessity of resorting to other accounts of Valentinian doctrines in order to interpret some obscure passages of *ExTheod*. In most instances, a valid term of comparison has been found in Irenaeus' *GN*, which has occasionally generated biased interpretations, as recently pointed out by Dubois.¹⁴ Although I would not go as far as Dubois in affirming that *ExTheod* sections A, B and D possess an internal coherency that makes it understandable in its own right, I do welcome his suggestion to interpret *ExTheod*'s parts A-B-D as a coherent and unitary work, resorting also to eastern Valentinian Nag Hammadi treatises as means of comparison.¹⁵ Regarding the identity of the author, the most reliable study on his character has been conducted by Thomassen, who has observed that only five quotations (frag. 22, 7; 26, 1; 30,

¹¹ Thomassen (2006), 28-29 speculates that Theodotus was a representative of eastern Valentinianism who lived about a generation before Clement of Alexandria (ca 150-215).

¹² This particular classification has been taken from Sagnard (1947), but the idea of dividing the texts in four sections goes back to Heinrici (1871). Thomassen (2006) presents a different separation of section B (29-43,1) and C (43,2-65).

¹³ This had already been noted by Sagnard (1947) and it is accepted widely, see Pagels (1974), Simonetti (1999), Thomassen (2006).

¹⁴ Dubois (2013) fiercely opposes any interpretation of *ExTheod* based on Irenaeus' works.

¹⁵ Since *ExTheod* A-B-D belongs to the eastern Valentinian School, I will mostly resort to *GosPhil*, one of the few other Eastern Valentinian School documents.

1; 32, 2; 35, 1) can be surely attributed to the Valentinian teacher Theodotus.¹⁶ Contrariwise, Ptolemy's *EpFl* is certainly a less problematic source, for it has been transmitted in its entirety and it does not seem to have been corrupted.

In addition to the abovementioned sources, it is worth devoting a few words to two additional Valentinian treatises preserved in the Nag Hammadi library, namely, the *GosTruth* and the *TriTrac*. As far as this research is concerned, they represent peculiar case-studies, for these Valentinian books have been expunged of most references to female characters. Here, the role of the fallen feminine has been taken up by the Logos itself and they constitute therefore a particular case.¹⁷ Due to complexity of these works, it is here impossible to analyse them in detail, but their study represents a valuable opportunity for future researches on Valentinianism.

¹⁶ See Thomassen (2006), 29.

¹⁷ It would be particularly interesting to develop further the concept of the "masculinization of the Mother", which has been put forth by Turner (2017).

III.2 The Feminine in the Godhead: the Original Syzygy

Studying the Valentinian Pleroma, particularly its syzygial organisation, means primarily dealing with the fundamental philosophical problem of the passage from unity to plurality. In Gnostic mythologies, the Father is generally conceived as the primordial divine being from whom other aeons originated. However, as in the case of *ApJohn*,¹⁸ the generation of the Pleroma – that is, the passage from individuality to plurality – is an open problem that most Gnostic texts either do not address directly or address in an unsatisfactory way. This latent and unsolved tension between singularity and plurality becomes evident in Valentinian mythologies, producing two alternative narratives about the formation of the Pleroma: on the one hand, the Father is represented as a Monad; on the other, he is conceived as the male element of a syzygy.

In an attempt to make sense of these multiform materials, Thomassen grouped the Valentinian accounts into two main categories, which he called ‘Pleromatology Type A’ and ‘Pleromatology Type B’.¹⁹ Within the Pleromatology of Type A, he listed all of those Valentinian texts or accounts that ‘stress the idea of a generative exteriorisation of the aeons from within the Father’ and, therefore, do not specify the names or numbers of aeons which are present in the Pleroma. In Thomassen’s opinion, the main representatives of this category are the *TriTrac* and *GosTruth*. By contrast, the Pleromatology of Type B groups all those accounts that describe the internal composition of the Pleroma, specifying names and numbers of the aeons, showing the Pleroma as a production of an original syzygy. Under this classification, he listed all of the heresiological accounts mentioned in the previous section and *ExVal*, although the latter treatise is somewhat an exception.²⁰ In 2011, Marksches objected to Thomassen’s classification, accusing him of having fallen into the trap skilfully orchestrated by the heresiologists, who wanted to sell Valentinianism as a

¹⁸ *Supra* II.1.1.

¹⁹ Thomassen (2006), 193-195.

²⁰ As Thomassen highlighted rightly, the pleromatologies of type B should not be considered as a homogenous group sprouting from a single source. For this reason, most of these texts have different sources; consequently, each one represents a different version of the pleromatic myth.

religion of ‘polytheistic individualities’.²¹ Against Thomassen, Marksches attempted to prove that all Valentinian texts incorporated the henotic platonic tendency towards a ‘de-individualisation’, a reduction of plurality to unity. In other words, he understood the different aeons as manifestations of the Father’s being. In his opinion, the two types of pleromatology are not an ontological characteristic of Valentinian mythologies, rather a mere literary device. In this thesis, I disagree with Marksches’ conclusion that the Valentinian organization of the Pleroma in aeons is a mere rhetorical artifice and I am instead expanding on Thomassen’s suggestion of a twofold classification of Valentinian pleromatologies in types A and B. However, I believe it is necessary to clarify further two issues. On the one hand, I believe it is necessary to admit that the aeons maintain such a strict connection to the Father that their powers ought to be considered dependent upon the ones of the Father, even if they remain real ontological entities. On the other hand, I will soften Thomassen’s neat separation between the two types of pleromatologies by acknowledging the existence of a henotic afflatus²² – that is, the tension of reducing the differences to one – in both types of pleromatologies. Concerning this henotic afflatus, I would even take a step further and state that since all Gnostic pleromatologies show an irreducible tension between unity and plurality, this tension should be considered a distinctive feature of Gnostic mythologies. As the investigation conducted in the previous chapters has shown, the henotic afflatus and the consequent tension between unity and plurality were implicit also in Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite texts. The constant interchangeability of feminine characters in Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite myths suggests a certain tendency to consider them as one. It would appear to me that such tensions culminate in Valentinian theology, assuming the form of two alternative versions of the protological myth. Giving my own line of interpretation, I think that Thomassen tends to stress excessively the differences between the two Valentinian pleromatologies, denying the henotic tension that underlies not only the pleromatologies of type A, but also the ones classified as Type B. In this respect, I am convinced that his own detailed and

²¹ Marksches (2011), 427.

²² I am voluntarily using the term ‘afflatus’ since I presently lack a better terminology that could render the nature of such Gnostic tendency.

correct analysis of *ExVal*, in which the two types mingled and coexisted, ends up contradicting his neat division between the two types.²³ On the other hand, Marksches' proposal of reducing a mythological and theological tension to a mere literary device does not do justice to the complexities of the Valentinian speculation. In addition, although Marksches carefully avoided using a controversial term such as 'modes' to describe the relation between the aeons and the Father, his theory of the de-individualisation of the Pleroma seems to lead to that conclusion. Considering the aeons as 'modes' of the Father and reducing the pleromatic plurality to a mere rhetorical artifice would depotentiate and misrepresent the innovative nature of Valentinian protology, thus denying its ground-breaking value within Gnosticism.

Concerning the role of the feminine, the two types of pleromatology reveal different roles and functions proper to female characters. While the feminine plays almost no role in type A pleromatologies and its soteriological functions are usually taken on by the Son, in the type B pleromatologies its roles and functions vary from text to text, since none of the accounts of type B perfectly match one another. It is clear that, due to the focus on feminine imagery, this work will deal mainly with pleromatologies of type B, for here the pleromatic feminine is explicated as the female counterpart of the abyssal Father. In order to understand the role of the feminine in pleromatologies of type B, I will compare the role of the highest female pleromatic being in *ExVal* and *GN*, thus comparing an original Gnostic source and a heresiological account.

III.2.1 Monadic Father? The Syzygy in the *Valentinian Exposition* (NHC XI, 2)

ExVal is one of the four Valentinian treatises found in the Nag Hammadi library, but it is also one of the least studied.²⁴ As for all Nag Hammadi treatises, the date and circumstances of its composition and transcription are

²³ Thomassen (2006), 231-241.

²⁴ To my knowledge, the only comprehensive studies on this treatise are Turner (1990); Thomassen (1989); and Ménard (1985).

quite obscure; so much so that the recent edition of Turner does not even speculate over the date of composition.²⁵

Notwithstanding the poor conservation of the codex, *ExVal* represents an invaluable source for the study of Valentinianism, especially since the protological myth of *ExVal* presents many similarities with the heresiological accounts of Irenaeus and Hippolytus.²⁶ *ExVal* is particularly interesting for its two different accounts about the origin and composition of the Pleroma:

Moreover, it is these [who have known him who] is, the Father, that [is, the Root] of the All, the [Ineffable One who] dwells in the Monad (ΠΩΤ ΕΤΕ [ΠΕΕΙ ΠΕ ΤΝΟΥΝ]Ε ΜΠΤΗΡQ ΠΙΑΤ [ΨΕΧΕ ΑΡΑQ ΕΤ]ΨΟΟΠ ΖΝ ΤΜΟΝΑΣ). [He dwells alone] in silence ([ΕQΨΟΟΠ ΟΥΑΕΕΤ]Q ΖΝ ΠΚΑΠΩQ), [and silence is] tranquility since, after all, [he was] a Monad (ΠΚΑ [ΡΩQ ΝΔΕ Π]Ε ΠCΘΡΑΖΤ ΕΠΕΙ ΟΥΝ [ΝΕQΨΟΟ]Π ΜΟΝΑΣ) and no one [was] before him (ΑΥΩ ΝΕΜΝ [ΛΑΓΕ ΨΟ]ΟΠ ΖΑΤΕQΕΖΗ). He dwells [in the Dyad] and in the Pair, and his Pair is Silence (ΕQΨΟΟΠ [ΖΝ ΤΔ]ΥΑΣ ΑΥΩ ΖΝ ΠCΑΕΙΨ ΠΕQ [C]ΑΕΙΨ ΝΔΕ ΠΕ ΤCΙΓΗ). And he possessed the All dwelling within him.²⁷

Now this [is the] Root [of the All] and Monad without any [one] before him. Now the second [spring] exists in Silence (ΤΜΑΖCΝ[Τ]Ε ΝΔΕ [ΝΠΗΓΗ] ΕQΨΟΟΠ ΖΝ ΤCΙΓΗ) and speaks with him alone [...] He [is] a [spring]. He is [one] who appears [in Silence] (ΤCΙΓΗ), and [he is] Mind of the All dwelling secondarily with [Life].²⁸

It is possible to make two interesting observations about these two pleromatic accounts: firstly, they appear to be a unique example of the combination of pleromatologies A and B; secondly, they confirm Irenaeus' and Hippolytus'

²⁵ Turner (1990). On the contrary, Ménard hypothesized that it was composed around the end of the second century even if he dated the Coptic text sometimes in the third century, see Ménard (1985), 2.

²⁶ For a discussion of the similarities, see Pagels (1990) and Thomassen (2006), 231-241.

²⁷ *ExVal* XI, 22, 18-28.

²⁸ *ExVal* XI, 23, 19-22 and 24, 18-22. Thomassen (2006), 236-237 translated '[from Silence]' in XI, 24, 20 and read Bythos (ΠΩΙΚQ) instead of Life (ΠΩΝQ) in XI, 24, 22. Against his reconstruction, I am here following Turner (1990), 109 and Ménard (1985), 25 in reading the passage as if Mind-Life were a dyad.

testimonies about an ongoing Valentinian debate regarding the monadic or syzygial nature of the Father.²⁹ Concerning the presence of pleromatologies of type A and B, one ought to notice that while the second passage (*ExVal* XI, 23, 19-22 and 24, 18-22) discusses the individual aeons and their organization in Dyads and a Tetrad external to the Father,³⁰ as one would expect in pleromatologies of type B, the first passage (*ExVal* XI, 22, 18-28) presents a type A pleromatology. Hence, *ExVal* combines the two Valentinian pleromatologies by stating the paradoxical existence of a Monad who has within itself 360 aeons. As I have shown in the previous paragraph, some heresiological accounts of Valentinianism admit the presence of a syzygial companion within the Father,³¹ but none of them envisions the indwelling of the entire Pleroma in the abyssal Father. Therefore, this feature is proper to *ExVal*, representing a *unicum* within the Valentinian school.³² Thomassen has hypothesized that this internal discrepancy is the result of the author's resort to two different sources: one of type A for *ExVal* XI, 22 and one of type B for *ExVal* 23-24-29-30.³³ If Thomassen's hypothesis were correct, the representation of the feminine in *ExVal* would be of great importance, since it would be a testimony of the intent of an unknown Valentinian teacher to combine the two different pleromatologies in a single narrative, thus representing an important step in the development of Valentinian theology. If so, the place of *ExVal* within the history of Valentinianism would be utterly different from the one envisioned by Ménard and its date of composition would

²⁹ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 2, 4 and I, 11, 1; Hippolytus, *El* VI, 29, 2-3. It is worth noting that Hippolytus explained the origin of the Pleroma as if the Father was without a companion.

³⁰ For a detailed account of the Tetrad see *ExVal* XI, 29-30.

³¹ For instance, Tertullian, *AdVal.* 7 and Epiphanius, *Pan* I, 31, 5, 3-4.

³² The closest account would be the one of *Pan* I, 31, 5, 3-5: 'When, in the beginning, the Self-Progenitor himself encompassed all things within himself, though they were within him in ignorance – he whom some call ageless Aeon, ever renewed, both male and female, who encompasses all and is yet unencompassed – then the Ennoia within him (softened the Majesty). Her some have called Ennoia, others, Grace, but properly – since she has furnished treasures of the Majesty to those who are of the Majesty – those who have spoken the truth have termed her Silence, since the Majesty has accomplished all things by reflection without speech. Wishing to break eternal bonds, the imperishable <Ennoia>, as I said, softened the Majesty to a desire for his repose. And by coupling with him she showed forth the Father of Truth whom the perfect have properly termed Man, since he was the antitype of the Ingenerate who was before him.' Although the pleromatology of this anonymous Valentinian document displays some features similar to *ExVal*, too many uncertainties remain regarding its date of composition and place within the Valentinian literature to be discussed appropriately in this chapter. For a study on this text, see Chiapparini (2015).

³³ Thomassen (2006), 233-241.

probably be moved to the third or fourth century, that is, after Valentinus and Ptolemy's systematizations.³⁴

Regarding the characteristics attributed to the syzygy in *ExVal*, scholars have not reached an agreement. On the one hand, Pagels does not deem the Father and Silence to be a syzygy, since she intended **ⲡⲕⲁⲡⲱⲗ̅** as the tranquility in which the Father dwells.³⁵ On the other hand, both Thomassen and Ménard have concluded that Silence is indeed the female companion of the Father.³⁶ Although I agree with the latter position, I deem it necessary to note that the use of the Coptic **ⲡⲕⲁⲡⲱⲗ̅** rather than the transliterated Greek **ⲧⲥⲓⲛⲏ** (Gr. Σιγή) would suggest, as Pagels claims, that the author meant the status of tranquility rather than an individual being in *ExVal* XI, 22, 18. Nonetheless, the choice of using **ⲧⲥⲓⲛⲏ** in the following sentences suggests that, while **ⲡⲕⲁⲡⲱⲗ̅** might be translated simply as 'tranquillity', **ⲧⲥⲓⲛⲏ** ought to be referred to something else. Indeed, the choice of using the Greek word rather than the Coptic one, although very frequent in Nag Hammadi treatises, might suggest that the author is using it as a proper name, namely Silence, the companion of the Father. Within the Valentinian writings, there are many words that work as technical terms for pleromatic realities: the Greek term Σιγή is certainly one of them.³⁷ Furthermore, the similarity between Irenaeus' *GN* and this passage is absolutely striking, since the heresiologist wrote that the Father 'was in solitude and tranquility (ἡσυχία) in the infinite times'.³⁸ Therefore, it is likely that while the author used **ⲡⲕⲁⲡⲱⲗ̅** to translate 'ἡσυχία', 'tranquility of the Father', the term **ⲧⲥⲓⲛⲏ** indicates the syzygial unbegotten partner of the Father.³⁹ Besides the philological evidence, it ought to be noted that the

³⁴ Ménard (1985), 2 hypothesized that *ExVal* should have been composed before the systematization of Valentinian doctrines, that is around the end of second century. Unfortunately, discussing the place of *ExVal* within the Valentinian production falls beyond the scope of this research for it would require an extensive investigation. Moreover, as far as I know, no studies have been conducted regarding the place of *ExVal* within Valentinianism except that of Thomassen. Therefore, this represents an interesting angle for expanding further the researches on the Valentinian school.

³⁵ Pagels (1990), 97-98 and Turner (1990), 154.

³⁶ Thomassen (2006) and Ménard (1985), 66-67.

³⁷ On the use of technical terminology in the Valentinian school, see Lettieri (2011).

³⁸ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 1, 1.

³⁹ Regarding the unbegotten nature of Silence, see *ExVal* XI, 22, 31.

hypothesis of an original pleromatic syzygy fits very well within the overall theology of *ExVal*, which attributes the utmost importance to the syzygy:

For this is the will of the Father: not to allow anything to happen in the Pleroma apart from a syzygy (ΠΕΕΙ Ν ΓΑΡ ΠΕ ΠΟΥΩΦΕ ΜΠΩΤ Α ΤΗΤΡΕΛΛΥΕ ΦΩΠΕ ΞΝ ΠΠΑΗΡΩΜΑ ΟΥΦΝ ΣΥΖΥΓΟΣ). Again, the will of the Father is: always produce and bear fruit (ΠΟΥΩΦΕ ΣΕ ΜΠΩΤ ΠΕ ΤΕΥΩ ΑΒΑΛ ΝΟΥΛΕΙ[Ν]Ω ΝΙΜ ΛΥΩ † ΚΑΡΠΟΣ) [...] The syzygy is the [perfect one].⁴⁰

From this brief passage, it seems that the syzygy represents the core unit of the Pleroma, since being part of the Pleroma means being one half of a syzygy; indeed, there is nothing in the Pleroma but syzygies. The perfection of the syzygy is a very recurrent theme in Valentinian writings and it is intimately connected with nuptial imagery,⁴¹ as confirmed by many passages from *ExTheod*,⁴² *GosPhil*⁴³ and the Marcosian account.⁴⁴ Hence, the entire Pleroma is organized in 180 syzygies, which are produced hierarchically starting from the Father and Silence, who produced Mind and Life.⁴⁵

Although *ExVal* describes at length the composition of the Pleroma, the roles and functions of the highest feminine pleromatic being are quite difficult to discern, especially given the *lacunae* in the manuscript. Nonetheless, the available passages reveal that the core law of the Pleroma is to ‘produce and bear fruit (ΝΟΥΛΕΙ[Ν]Ω ΝΙΜ ΛΥΩ † ΚΑΡΠΟΣ)’, thus suggesting that the primary function of the pleromatic feminine is such generation. From a mythological and literary perspective, one might even speculate that the two partners of a syzygy can be considered one for they act as one, thus explaining how the

⁴⁰ *ExVal* XI, 36, 28-34 and XI, 39, 13.

⁴¹ This connection will be explored in *infra* III.4.

⁴² In particular, *ExTheod* 32, 1: ‘Since there is unity in the Pleroma, each aeon has its own plenitude in the syzygy. They say that everything that comes from the syzygy has plenitude, while what comes from the individuality is image.’

⁴³ *GosPhil* II, 76, 6-17.

⁴⁴ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 21, 3.

⁴⁵ *ExVal* XI, 24, 18-22.

Father is a monad and a dyad at the same time.⁴⁶ Although the syzygy is composed by two elements, they cannot act as separate beings for they are made for the very purpose of bearing fruit. From a philosophical perspective, however, this ambiguity between unity and duality in *ExVal* remains unsolved and inexplicable. Nonetheless, as the text reiterates, it is impossible to be in the Pleroma and not to have a partner. Hence, while the textual evidence states clearly the paradoxical existence of the Father who is simultaneously one and two, the philosophical structure that should support this claim fails to provide a coherent explanation of its existence.

In conclusion, the analysis conducted on *ExVal*'s pleromatology suggests that Silence exists in order to produce all the other pleromatic syzygies with the Father and the only reason for her existence is to be the female being within this syzygial partnership who helps to generate the rest of the Pleroma.

III.2.2 Silence in the *Grand Notice* of Irenaeus

The *GN* of Irenaeus – *AdHaer* I, 1-8 – represents probably the most complete account about the origin and composition of the Valentinian Pleroma. As mentioned previously, its doctrines are usually attributed to the Valentinian teacher Ptolemy, who was probably one of the direct disciples of Valentinus. Although some scholars have raised doubts regarding this attribution,⁴⁷ I will assume that Irenaeus' account discusses the theology of Ptolemy and his followers, as information deducible from Irenaeus' chapters seems compatible with the information deducible from Ptolemy's *EpFl*.⁴⁸ Furthermore, since *AdHaer* was redacted around the middle of the second century, the information contained in this account can reasonably be seen as representative of Valentinianism of the time.

⁴⁶ On the consideration of the syzygy as one, see Simonetti (1999), 456.

⁴⁷ Concerning the identity of Ptolemy and the attribution of Irenaeus' account to him or his disciples, the scholarship is quite divided. Some scholars, such as Simonetti (1999) and Thomassen (2006), 17-22, have acknowledged the trustworthiness of Irenaeus' account concerning the attribution of the system described to Ptolemy. On the contrary, Marksches has expressed several doubts regarding the attribution of the *GN* to Ptolemy, see Marksches (2011) and (2000).

⁴⁸ For a study of these correspondences, see Lettieri (2015).

The *GN* offers good insights about the role and functions of Silence:

Along with him (the Abyss/Father), there existed Ennoia, whom they also name Grace and Silence. At one time, the Abyss decided to emit from himself the Beginning of All things. This emission would be as a ‘seed’ which he decided to emit and deposit as it were in the womb of Silence, who coexisted with him. After she had received this ‘seed’ and had become pregnant, she gave birth to Mind.⁴⁹

Overall, *AdHaer* I, 1, 1 seems to confirm the general information deducible from *ExVal*’s passages. As the author of the Nag Hammadi treatise, Ptolemy conceives the highest pleromatic female being as an unbegotten aeon which exists *with* and *in* the Father. Through the use of the verb συνυπάρχω, Irenaeus’ text specifies twice that Silence coexisted with the Father, thus confirming Ptolemy’s belief in the existence of a protological and original syzygy composed of Abyss and Silence. Furthermore, as in *ExVal*, Silence maintains a primarily generative role in Ptolemy’s system. In *AdHaer* I, 1, 1-2, Silence is said to have generated the Pleroma in syzygy with the Father, originating thirty more aeons. However, this account of Ptolemy’s teachings goes even further in describing Silence’s dependence upon the Father, as explicated by Silence’s attributes of Ἐννοια (Ennoia) and μήτρα (womb). These appellatives have been used in other Gnostic texts, such as *ApJohn* II, 4, 26 – 5, 11, and they indicate the active involvement of the female highest being in the generative process.⁵⁰ There is, however, a major difference between *ApJohn* and *GN*. In *ApJohn*, Barbelo/Ennoia is considered the active force of the Virginal Spirit, who is hindered by his transcendence in being involved in the generation of the Pleroma. She therefore plays an active role in the generation of the Pleroma, realising the will of the Virginal Spirit. In particular,

⁴⁹ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 1, 1: Συνυπάρχειν δ’ αὐτῷ καὶ Ἐννοίαν, ἣν δὴ καὶ Χάριν, καὶ Σιγὴν ὀνομάζουσι· καὶ ἐννοηθῆναι ποτε ἅφ’ ἑαυτοῦ προβαλέσθαι τὸν Βυθὸν τοῦτον, ἀρχὴν τῶν πάντων καὶ καθάπερ σπέρμα, τὴν προβολὴν ταύτην, ἣν προβαλέσθαι ἐνενοήθη, καὶ καθέσθαι ὥς ἐν μήτρᾳ τῇ συνυπαρχούσῃ ἑαυτῷ Σιγῇ· ταύτην δὲ ὑποδεξαμένην τὸ σπέρμα τοῦτο καὶ ἐγκύμονα γενομένην, ἀποκυῖσαι Νοῦν.

⁵⁰ *Supra* II.1.2.

the appellative Ennoia in *ApJohn* suggests that the highest pleromatic female being functions as one of the media through which the incomprehensible Father generates the Pleroma and is intellectually known by it.⁵¹ Contrariwise, in *GN*, the association between Silence and a womb is taken literally, making Silence a mere generative matrix and a passive container.⁵² Although Silence is considered the “Thought” of the Father, she does not possess any intellectual function either in the generation or in the disclosure of the Father’s will to the Pleroma. It is indeed the Abyss who produces the σπέρμα from which the Pleroma was generated, and Silence plays no part in this emission. Irenaeus’ narrative is corroborated by Tertullian’s account, which narrates the episodes with similar terminology.⁵³ In this regard, it is worth noting that while *ApJohn* employs Galen’s theory of conception, *GN* seems to share Aristotle’s theory of conception. According to Aristotle, as we saw earlier,⁵⁴ the man provides the seed, which contains the form, whereas the woman provides the substratum, that is, the material element.⁵⁵ In this regard, I disagree with De Conick who claims that the Valentinian mythology seems to presuppose the existence of a male strong seed and a female weak one.⁵⁶ In Valentinianism, the female element is conceived as mere provider of the “material” substratum of the offspring, whilst the male one produces the seed (σπέρμα) to be sown in the female womb (μήτρα).⁵⁷ Moreover, it is worth mentioning that, although the pleromatic generation is always described as an intellectual act of intercourse, the language adopted in heresiological accounts is more sexual than that used in other pleromatic accounts, thus functioning as an anti-heretical device.⁵⁸

⁵¹ The Father/Abyss is described in Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 1, 1 as: ‘a perfect aeon that was before all, the First-Father and the Abyss. He is invisible and incomprehensible. And since he is incomprehensible and invisible, eternal and ingenerated, he existed in deep quiet and stillness through countless ages.’

⁵² So much so that Simonetti 1999, 285 preferred to translate μήτρα with ‘matrice’ (matrix) rather than ‘utero’ (womb).

⁵³ Tertullian, *AdVal* 7.

⁵⁴ *Supra* II.3.1.

⁵⁵ Moreover, this theory of conception is explicitly applied to Achaemot’s generation in Hippolytus, *El* VI, 30, 6-9.

⁵⁶ De Conick (2003), 321-324. Although her explanation of Sophia’s generation might appear correct, it does not fit within the overall pleromatic generative process of the 30 aeons.

⁵⁷ A significative parallel can be found in *ExTheod* 2, 1-2.

⁵⁸ On this regard, see De Conick (2003), 318-320.

Another interesting element of Irenaeus' account is the separation between Holy Spirit and Silence/Ennoia. As we have observed in the previous chapter, it is not unusual for other Gnostic texts to link the Holy Spirit with the highest female pleromatic being. Once again, the most striking example would be *ApJohn* II, 4, 26 – 5, 11.⁵⁹ This does not seem to be the case with Ptolemy's account, where the Holy Spirit (Πνεῦμα ἅγιον) is envisioned as an independent aeon, who is united in syzygy with a male aeon named Christ (Χριστός). Therefore, although the Holy Spirit is still presented as a female being and one of the pleromatic aeons, it does not have any connection with the highest female aeon, but it is rather relegated to the inferior ranks of the pleromatic hierarchy.⁶⁰ From a theological perspective, by separating the Holy Spirit from Silence, Valentinian Gnostics are re-shaping the Trinity conceived as Father-Mother-Son proper to the Sethian, Ophite and Barbeloite theologies, in which the role of Mother and Holy Spirit coincides. If the Trinitarian person of the Mother and the Holy Spirit are no longer the same, Silence loses most of its importance as the acting force of the Father's will. Furthermore, by relegating the Holy Spirit to the lowest Pleromatic ranks, Valentinian Gnostics were not only affirming its liminality, but also diminishing its divinity.⁶¹ In Ptolemy's version of the Valentinian myth, the Holy Spirit works with Christ to disclose the knowledge of the Father to the rest of the Pleroma, but it does not have any special generative role as in other Gnostic mythologies. Indeed, the most interesting connection between the Holy Spirit and the feminine is due to its role of strengthening and stabilizing the Pleroma following Sophia's restoration in the Pleroma, which will be discussed in the next section.⁶² At this

⁵⁹ See also Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 29, 1. *Supra* II.2.

⁶⁰ Interestingly, in Ptolemy's system, the syzygy Christ/Holy Spirit is generated by Monogenes after the generation of the thirty aeons (thus, generating the contradictory number of thirty-two aeons in the Pleroma) to avoid that what had happened to Sophia could happen to other aeons.

⁶¹ It is worth anticipating that, although Ptolemy deprives Silence of her Trinitarian role of "Mother" of the Son (Μονογενής) and Holy Spirit, he partially recuperates the Trinitarian function of the "Mother" by attributing some revealing functions of the Holy Spirit to Sophia, thus making Sophia "Mother". For the role of the Holy Spirit and Christ as disclosers of the Father's knowledge to the rest of the Pleroma and for Sophia's role of "Mother", *infra* III.3.2.2.

⁶² Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 2, 5: εἰς πᾶσιν καὶ στηριγμὸν τοῦ Πληρώματος. For an insightful investigation of the syzygy Christ/Holy Spirit, see Orbe (1977), 10-13. Therefore, the Holy Spirit does bear some connection with the fallen feminine, but this will be discussed in the following section, *infra* III.3.2.2.

stage in my research, it is possible to conclude that Ptolemy's system, as described by Irenaeus, could be seen as a Gnostic attempt to normalize previous doctrines in order to make them more similar to mainstream Christian Trinitarian beliefs. If Irenaeus' account is trustworthy, Ptolemy would have achieved this by expunging the scandalous female element of the "Mother" of the Son (Μοῦνη) from the Trinity and attributing the role of mediator between the world and God to the Holy Spirit.⁶³

In summary, the *GN* confirms and integrates the information about Silence found in the *ExVal*, where the feminine is important insofar as it functions as a generative power within the boundaries of the syzygy. Furthermore, the *GN* provides two additional pieces of information about the evaluation of the feminine in Valentinianism, particularly according to Ptolemy's system. First, the subordination of female characters to male characters is acknowledged as the subordination of materiality/femininity to the spirituality/masculinity. The analysis of the metaphorical use of the generation language to explain the coming into existence of the Pleroma has proved that Ptolemy assimilates the feminine with a matrix, that is, the divine "material" substratum onto which a male element imprints form and spirit. Secondly, an overview of Ptolemy's understanding of the Holy Spirit as the syzygial mate of Christ has shown a significant shift in the Trinitarian role attributed to this female aeon in Valentinianism. Whereas other Gnostic movements conceive the Holy Spirit as one of the names of the highest pleromatic female being, Ptolemy denies to it the role of "Mother" of the Son (Μοῦνη).

III.2.3 Concluding Remarks on the Feminine in the Godhead

In spite of the many Valentinian texts, the information regarding the pleromatic feminine are quite scarce, especially if compared with what has previously been found in Ophite, Barbeloite and Sethian accounts.

⁶³ See Quispel (2008a).

Both in the *ExVal* and the *GN*, the highest female pleromatic being is named Silence. She is not conceived as emanating from the Father, but rather as coexistent in syzygy with the Father Abyss. They are the protological syzygy that generates the entire Pleroma. Given their syzygial union, they act in unity but they do not partake equally in the generative process. A thorough investigation of the metaphorical language of generation employed to describe the unfolding of the Pleroma has shown that the male element has an active procreative function, giving form to the offspring by means of his seed, whereas the female element is relegated to the passive role of matrix. Hence, at a pleromatic level, the dichotomy between masculine and feminine becomes indicative of a rigid division of roles and functions: maleness corresponds to activity and femaleness corresponds to passivity. Whereas the pleromatic feminine held an active generative role in the Ophite, Barbeloite and Sethian traditions, such a quality is not present in Valentinian pleromatologies. Furthermore, both *ExVal* and *GN* prove that Holy Spirit is not used by Valentinian Gnostics as an appellative of the highest female aeon, for they interpret the Holy Spirit as production of Monogenes and the σύζυγος of Christ. Although it maintains a female nature, its femaleness is restrained by Christ, to whom all main soteriological functions are indeed attributed. Hence, by limiting the generative role of the feminine to the provision of a substratum and by distancing the Holy Spirit from Silence/Ennoia, these accounts prove that the pleromatic feminine becomes a synonym of inactivity and of container of male power. Furthermore, it must be noted that the rules of the syzygy imply a certain subordination of the feminine to the masculine, for only the latter contains the true generative power.

III.3 The Fallen Feminine: Sophia in the “Myth of Separation”

The doctrine of an intra-divine fracture is the core of all Gnostic mythologies. The representation of the myth of the fall bears mythological and theological implications that are revealing of soteriological and eschatological doctrines distinctive of individual Gnostic groups. Within Valentinianism, the fallen feminine myth becomes, if possible, even more central, for I believe it reveals the deeply Christian identity of the Valentinian movement. As in other Gnostic myths, the fallen feminine is personified in the character of Sophia, who is generally considered as the youngest among the aeons of the Pleroma, and the one who causes the intra-divine breach that disrupts the Pleroma’s rest. Before turning our attention to the differences between Valentinian accounts, it is worth highlighting an element that is common to all Valentinian versions of the fall and which does not appear in other Gnostic accounts: the so-called ‘myth of separation’.⁶⁴ The myth is named after the separation that takes place between Sophia’s untainted part and that part of her which is dominated by unlawful desires, eventually severing the fallen Sophia from her better self. Hence, the Valentinian Sophia is separated into two selves: the part that remains in the Pleroma represents her better self, whilst that which dwells outside coincides with her defectiveness. This section aims at understanding and explaining the theological doctrines behind the ‘myth of separation’, focusing on how the different Valentinian teachers portrayed the character of Sophia.

While the myth of separation is common to all Valentinian accounts, each Valentinian teacher restructures the myth in an original way. A first distinction ought to be made between those Valentinian Gnostics who identify the fallen aeon with Sophia and those who do not. By contrast with most Valentinian accounts, *TriTrac* and *GosTruth* attribute different names to the aeon

⁶⁴ This definition has been borrowed from Thomassen (2006), 248. In one of his previous articles, Thomassen had already highlighted how this myth was influenced by philosophical traditions, particularly Pythagorean ones. For more information regarding the philosophical and cultural background of the Valentinian myth of Sophia, see Stead (1969); Painchaud – Thomassen (1989), 337.

responsible for the intra-divine rupture. As previously mentioned, *TriTrac* does not present any relevant female character and, consequently, the fall is attributed to a male aeon named Logos.⁶⁵ Similarly, the *GosTruth* does not provide a description of the intra-divine rupture, but it mentions that ‘Error (ΤΠΛΑΝΗ) became powerful and it worked its own matter foolishly not having known the truth’, without providing additional information about Error.⁶⁶ Hence, these two treatises represent the Valentinian exception to the identification of the fallen aeon with Sophia and they will therefore not be included in the following analysis. A second distinction between Valentinian accounts concerns the identity and ontological status of Sophia’s severed part. Some accounts – such as *GN* and *GosPhil* – report that Sophia splits into two different selves, usually named Sophia Echamot and Sophia Echmot/Achamot. Others identify her son, Christ, with Sophia’s better self; among them, it is worth mentioning *AdHaer* I, 11, 1, *ExVal* and *ExTheod* A and B. Contemporary scholarship has adopted the standard definitions of ‘two Sophias systems’ and ‘one Sophia systems’ to distinguish the two schemes. Although I will conform to this use, I would like to stress that in the one Sophia systems, the figure of Christ can rightfully be considered Sophia’s better self, for he is generated by his mother’s spiritual power. This is indeed an important element, for it shows how the soteriological agency of Sophia is being transferred to a male being. It is clear that this internal Valentinian distinction will be a primary concern for my investigation, since the differences in interpreting the separation of the fallen aeon are revealing of Trinitarian, soteriological and eschatological doctrines.⁶⁷ Before analysing the two schemes, I would like to clarify one last point. To a certain extent, the topic discussed in this section might appear similar to the separation of Sophia’s character that occurs in *HypArch*. In this treatise, Sophia’s functions are hypostatized into two different characters, namely Sophia and Zoe, with the latter taking on most soteriological functions of Sophia and thus becoming her better self.

⁶⁵ *TriTrac* I, 77, 11 – 85, 15.

⁶⁶ *GosTruth* I, 17, 14-20. It is interesting that the Greek word chosen to indicate “Error” bears also the meaning of “wandering”, a theme which is often associated with Sophia.

⁶⁷ This difference between Valentinian accounts has been discussed by scholarship mainly by Stead (1969), Simonetti (1999), 486 and Thomassen (2006), 248-262. I will explore the scholarly debate in more detail in the course of this section.

Nonetheless, the case of *HypArch* differs from Valentinian ‘separation’ in both mythological dynamics and theological meaning. First of all, in *HypArch*, Sophia and Zoe are two fully pneumatic beings who operate both inside and outside the Pleroma. On the contrary, when the Valentinian Sophia is separated, her lower self is tainted by the darkness into which it fell, thus losing her pleromatic status. Secondly, the roles of Sophia and Zoe are so strictly intertwined that it is often very difficult to separate one from the other. Contrariwise, the pleromatic Sophia – especially in the person of Christ – and the inferior Sophia become two utterly opposing beings. Lastly, by separating Sophia’s two hypostases, *HypArch* attempted to cope with the paradoxical role of Sophia as both defective and soteriological being at the same time. Although this element is present also in the Valentinian tradition, it results here in the partial removing of the soteriological agency from Sophia.

This chapter is divided into two parts: the first analyses the one Sophia systems, whereas the second part discusses the two Sophia systems.

III.3.1 Sophia and Christ

The choice to discuss first this version of the Valentinian separation myth depends on the fact that this version of the myth is probably anterior to that of the two Sophias.⁶⁸ This is, however, only an educated hypothesis, based on two elements: a) the Gnostic trend to evolve from less complex mythologies to more complex mythologies; b) the inference based on Irenaeus’ description of Valentinus’ and Ptolemy’s systems, according to which the introduction of two Sophias was an innovation of Ptolemy, since Valentinus’ system had only one Sophia.

III.3.1.1 Sophia in the *Valentinian Exposition* (NHC XI, 2)

Considering the poor status of conservation of the codex, understanding the role of the fallen feminine in *ExVal* is quite similar to reconstructing a puzzle.

⁶⁸ This claim is supported by Stead (1969), 88 and Thomassen (2006), 266-268.

One of the main focuses of *ExVal* is the description of Sophia's repentance and correction:

[...] She repented ($\alpha\varsigma\rho\eta\epsilon\tau\alpha\nu\omicron\epsilon\iota$) [and she] besought the Father of the [truth], saying: “Granted that I have [renounced] my consort ($\bar{\nu}\kappa\omega\epsilon\iota \bar{\mu}\pi\alpha\varsigma\chi\upsilon\gamma\omicron\varsigma$). Therefore [I am] beyond confirmation as well ($\epsilon\tau\beta\epsilon [\pi\epsilon\epsilon\iota \dagger]\bar{\mu} \bar{\pi}\beta\alpha\lambda \bar{\nu}\pi\kappa\epsilon\tau\alpha\chi\rho\omicron$). I deserve the things (i.e., passions) I suffer ($\dagger\bar{\mu}\pi\omega\alpha \text{ } \bar{n}\bar{n}\epsilon\epsilon\iota \epsilon\dagger\omega\pi\iota \bar{\mu}\mu\alpha\gamma \bar{n}\epsilon \epsilon\iota\omega\sigma\omicron\theta\iota$). I used to dwell in the Pleroma putting forth the Aeons and bearing fruit ($\kappa\alpha\rho\pi\omicron\varsigma$) with my consort.” And she knew what she was and what had become of her. So they both suffered; they said she laughs ($\bar{\epsilon}\bar{\epsilon}\omega\beta\epsilon$) since she remained alone and imitated the Uncontainable One, while he said she [laughs] since she cut herself off from her consort ($\pi\alpha\chi\epsilon\bar{\alpha} \bar{\epsilon}[\bar{\epsilon}\omega\beta]\epsilon \bar{\nu}\Delta\epsilon \epsilon\pi\epsilon\iota \alpha\varsigma\omega\alpha\alpha\bar{\tau}\bar{\epsilon} \Delta\beta\alpha\lambda [\bar{?}\bar{\mu} \pi]\epsilon\varsigma\chi\upsilon\gamma[\omicron\varsigma]$).⁶⁹

The topic of Sophia's repentance – that is, when she confesses her guilt and begs the Father to bring her back to Pleroma – is extremely common among Valentinian and non-Valentinian texts alike.⁷⁰ Within this narrative, Sophia's repentance results from her inability to save herself, for she is now 'beyond confirmation' because of her misdeed. In this regard, the text is very specific: by cutting herself off from her consort, Sophia rejects the pleromatic law of 'bringing forth' in couples and falls outside of the divine plenitude.⁷¹ It would thus seem correct to assume that Sophia's guilt consists in her desire to bring forth by herself, without the help of her consort. If so, *ExVal* would be in line with Hippolytus' account of Valentinian system, rather than the *GN* or *ExTheod*, confirming Sophia's desire to act like the Father.⁷² In this regard, it is worth highlighting the intriguing and mysterious element of Sophia's laugh. There are several instances in which Gnostic texts present a female character laughing. In *HypArch* II, 90, 17-28, the spiritual Eve's laugh erupts to mock the vain attempt of the psychic archons to grab a spiritual and luminous woman.⁷³

⁶⁹ *ExVal* XI, 34, 33-34.

⁷⁰ See the *GN* (Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 4, 2) and *ApJohn* II, 14, 1-13.

⁷¹ For the importance of the ‘law of the syzygy’ in *ExVal*, see *supra* III.2.1.

⁷² Hippolytus, *El* VI, 30, 6–9. It is worth reminding that this version of the myth has already been observed also in *ApJohn* II, 9, 25 – 10, 5.

⁷³ *Supra* II.4.2.

In the description of Sophia's passions in the *GN*, Sophia's laugh causes the luminous substance to come into being – that is, the substance of which the pneumatic humans are made.⁷⁴ Similarly, in *GosPhil* II, 74, 25 – 75, 2, the unknown author affirms that those who enter the Kingdom of Heaven will do so 'laughing'. In an interesting study on laughter, Stroumsa claimed that the laugh of these female figures is an imitation of Christ's laugh, which is also a popular theme in Gnostic imagery.⁷⁵ His hypothesis would indeed corroborate the idea that soteriological features proper to the Saviour were attributed to these pneumatic female characters. Nevertheless, *ExVal*'s case represents an exception. Contrarily to the abovementioned instances, Sophia's laugh seems here related to her inability to contain her passions, since her laugh metaphorically reiterates the nature of her 'sin', the incontinence that caused her expulsion from the Pleroma. If so, this would mean that there has been a significant shift in the roles and functions attributed to the fallen feminine, which is no longer represented as a soteriological character.

The other focus of *ExVal* consists in the relation between Sophia and Christ: *ExVal* provides indeed precious evidence about Christ's roles as Sophia's son and her syzygial companion. Concerning the role of Christ as Sophia's son, the information about his separation from Sophia is given in a very synthetic way: 'And these things (i.e. passions) Sophia suffered after her son ascended from her (Ν<Ε>ΕΙ ΝΔΕ ΑΖΑΤΟQΙΑ ΨΑΠΟΥ ΝΤΑΡΕQΠΩΤ ΑΤΠΕ ΑΒΑΛ Ν ΖΗΤ̄C ΝΘ[Ι] ΠΕCΨΗΡΕ)'.⁷⁶ This brief sentence suggests that Sophia brought forth Christ after she had suffered passions and, probably, had already been expelled from the Pleroma, since the text asserts that Christ ΝΤΑΡΕQΠΩΤ ΑΤΠΕ (lit. '(he) run to the heaven'). The details of this separation are not available to us because of a consistent lacuna in the page. Nevertheless, more insights about the Sophia-Christ relationship is given by their syzygial bond. As often happens in Valentinian texts, the roles of the son and that of the syzygial companion correspond to such an extent that Christ's main role consists in correcting his mother's deficiency: 'Her correction will not occur through

⁷⁴ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 4, 4. This topic will be deepened in the following chapter, *infra* III.4.2.2.

⁷⁵ Stroumsa (2004).

⁷⁶ *ExVal* XI, 33, 35-36.

anyone except her own son (ἐπει[Δ]η τεσαυρωσις να ὤπη εν ζιτῆ λαγε εἰμητι ζιτῆ πῶρηε).⁷⁷ In this regard, I disagree with Thomassen, who claims that Limit is Sophia's partner based on his different translation of this passage: 'For the correction could not come about by means of his own son'.⁷⁸ Although Thomassen's translation is also possible, it is worth noting that the attribution of the role of Sophia's partner to Limit is usually proper to two-Sophias systems. Given the difficulty in retrieving the text of the significant *lacuna* in that section, I would be inclined to dismiss the claim that Limit is Sophia's eschatological partner, thus attributing this role to Christ.⁷⁹

To further understand Sophia's role, it would also be helpful to discover the "identity" of the Christ generated by Sophia. Indeed, Valentinian texts have usually a three-fold Christology, which envisions a spiritual Saviour who takes on a visible and an invisible psychic body.⁸⁰ In his commentary and French translation of *ExVal*, Ménard interpreted Sophia's son as the psychic Christ.⁸¹ Nevertheless, I believe that the identification of Sophia's son with the psychic Christ makes little sense within the Sophia/Christ paradigm, in which Christ represents Sophia's spiritual part, whilst it fits well within the two Sophias paradigm, where Christ derives from the lower Sophia. In *ExVal*, Christ is the

⁷⁷ *ExVal* XI, 33, 28-30.

⁷⁸ Thomassen (2006), 238-240. In truth, Thomassen (2006), 255-256 himself admits that the identification of Sophia's partner with Limits is quite peculiar.

⁷⁹ Deconick (2003) gives for granted the couple Sophia/Jesus as a spousal couple.

⁸⁰ Valentinian Christology is a very complex issue, especially since there are internal differences between different trends of the Valentinian schools, see Hippolytus, *El* VI, 35, 5-7. For a complete survey of Gnostic Christology, see Orbe (1977) and Orbe (1995), 100-122; Thomassen (2006), 39-45. Concerning the body of the Saviour, most scholars would agree that Valentinian Gnostics have a docetic Christology, according to which Christ has a spiritual body and two psychic bodies (one invisible and one visible), see Thomassen (2006) and Simonetti (1999). Recently, Dubois (2017) has argued that the alleged Docetism of the Valentinian schools derives from a biased reading of Valentinianism through the lens of heresiological accounts. Although Dubois has rightly pointed out the necessity of investigating further the Christology of the Nag Hammadi treatises, I disagree with his conclusion that assimilates the 'chair sensible du corps psychique' with a carnal body in its own right, for the passions of Christ's psychic body do not imply the redemption of the material substance, but merely of the psychic nature. At most, one could argue that, since Gnostic Docetism does not work on a binary distinction (spiritual vs material) but in a threefold ontology (spiritual, psychic and material), it is incorrect to use the word "Docetism" to describe the Gnostic doctrine. Nonetheless, the peculiarity of Gnostic Docetism is well documented in the scholarship, thus allowing the use of such terminology without the risk of misunderstanding. Such differences are, however, tangential for this research and they will be discussed only when necessary.

⁸¹ See Ménard (1985), 73-74.

fullness of divinity (ΠΛΗΡΩΜΑ ΝΤΗΝΤΝΟΥΤΕ), he who is ‘a perfect form [that should] ascend into [the Pleroma], he did not [at all] want to consent to the suffering, [but he was detained] [*lacuna*] him by Limit’.⁸² Hence, I would rather identify Sophia’s son with the pneumatic Christ. If my hypothesis is correct, Sophia gains the role of Mother of the Saviour which is usually held by the higher pleromatic female character in Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite texts.⁸³ Thus, even if the author of *ExVal* had dismissed the Trinitarian role of Silence as ‘Mother’, this element is now retrieved and attributed to Sophia. Unlike Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite accounts, Sophia is not only ‘mother’ of the spiritual substance in the world, but she is the Mother of the Redeemer. If the defective Sophia is the Mother of the Redeemer, then the divine defectiveness has reached the core of the Valentinian Godhead. Since Sophia is both the Mother of the pleromatic Christ and in need of salvation herself, the paradoxical stand of the fallen feminine is even more marked within Valentinian theology than in any other Gnostic system, resulting in a divinity that is tainted by this intra-divine sin to its very core. Hence, *ExVal* is the perfect testimony of the dramatic Valentinian tension between two opposite poles: the philosophical need to preserve the divine transcendence and the need to give a protological and pleromatic dignity to the biblical story of the original sin.

Although Sophia is the Mother of the Saviour, no soteriological functions have been attributed to her. On the contrary, Jesus is the only salvific figure:

The seeds [of] Sophia are incomplete [and] formless (ΟΥΝ ΝΣΠΕΡΜΑ [ΝΤ]ΣΟΦΙΑ ΣΕΟΕ[Ι] ΝΑΤΧΩΚ ΑΒΑ[Χ ΑΥ]Ω ΝΑΜΟΡΦΟΣ), Jesus [contrived] a creature of this sort and made it of the seeds while Sophia worked with him (ΑΙΗ[Σ Ρ]ΕΠΙΝ[ΟΕΙ Ν]ΟΥΚΤΙΣ Ν[Τ]ΜΙΝΕ ΑΙΩΩΩ[ΩΝΤ] ΜΜΑΥ ΝΝΣΠΕΡΜΑ ΕΡ[ΕΤΣ]ΟΦΙΑ ΡΖΩΩ ΝΜΜΕΩ). For since they are seeds and [without form], he descended [and brought] forth that Pleroma [of aeons]

⁸² *ExVal* XI, 33, 21-26. For a similar interpretation of this passage, see Thomassen (1989), 232 and Thomassen (2006), 255-256.

⁸³ *Supra* II.2.1.

which are in that place, [since even the uncreated ones of] those [aeons are of] the pattern of the [Pleroma] and the [uncontainable] Father.⁸⁴

Moreover, this Jesus created the creature, and he worked from the passions surrounding the seeds (Ϟοοπ πεει θε η̅ι̅ς α̅ϙ̅ϙ̅ω̅ν̅τ̅ η̅τ̅κ̅τ̅ι̅ϙ̅ι̅ϙ̅ι̅ν α̅ϣ̅ω α̅ϙ̅δ̅η̅μ̅ι̅ο̅ϣ̅ρ̅γ̅ε̅ι α̅β̅α̅λ ζ̅η̅ η̅πα̅θ̅ο̅ς ε̅τ̅η̅ η̅κ̅ω̅τ̅ε η̅η̅ς̅π̅ε̅ρ̅μα̅). And he separated them from one another and the better passions he introduced into the spirit and the worse ones into the carnal (α̅ϣ̅ω α̅ϙ̅π̅ω̅ρ̅χ̅ η̅μα̅ϣ̅ α̅β̅α̅λ η̅η̅νο̅ϣ̅ε̅ρ̅η̅ϣ̅ α̅χ̅ω η̅πα̅θ̅ο̅ς ε̅τ̅ς̅α̅τ̅η̅ α̅ζ̅ο̅ϣ̅η̅ν α̅π̅π̅ν̅ε̅ϣ̅μα̅ η̅ε̅θ̅α̅ϣ̅ η̅δ̅ε α̅ζ̅[ο̅]ϣ̅η̅ν α̅ν̅ς̅α̅ρ̅κ̅ι̅κ̅ο̅ν).⁸⁵

Here, *ExVal* is identifying the redeeming figure with Jesus, thus posing the additional question of whether the pleromatic Christ and the Saviour Jesus correspond. Given that these passages suggest that this Jesus is the syzygial partner of Sophia – for his actions conform to what one would expect from the male element of a syzygy, according to my discoveries concerning *ExVal* pleromatology⁸⁶ – I am inclined to identify “Jesus” with Christ, thus assuming that the author of *ExVal* is using the name η̅ι̅ς when referring to the extra-pleromatic existence of Christ. In an historical perspective, Jesus is both the one who makes the spiritual seed and the one who gives form to Sophia’s passions, separating the spiritual from the carnal ones. Hence, while Sophia and Jesus work together in the world, from an eschatological perspective, Sophia will be united to her own son, Christ, as stated in *ExVal* XI, 33, 28-30. Notwithstanding the Christological complexities, this text confirms once more that the female part of the syzygy has a passive and ancillary role, whereas the male element of the syzygy carries out the active and performative role. It would therefore appear that the author of *ExVal* is here employing the same metaphorical and linguistic register which is used usually to describe the syzygy Valentinian pleromatologies.

Overall, *ExVal* provides relevant information about the fallen feminine in spite of its numerous *lacunae*. First, it confirms once more that Valentinian Gnostics

⁸⁴ *ExVal* XI, 35, 12-23.

⁸⁵ *ExVal* XI, 35, 30-37.

⁸⁶ *Supra* III.2.1.

used feminine imagery to indicate the inferior and passive levels of divinity, whereas they used masculine imagery to indicate its active and superior levels. Secondly, *ExVal* identifies the defective Sophia with the Mother of the Saviour, thus envisioning a defective being in the very core of the Godhead. Unlike Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite works, Sophia does not perform any soteriological actions, which are carried forth by her Son.

Although *ExVal* provides a sufficiently clear picture of the protological and eschatological status of Sophia, as well as her centrality in the Valentinian system, it does not illustrate in detail the separation between Christ and Sophia, which will be therefore clarified in the following section regarding *ExTheod*.

III.3.1.2 The Fallen Feminine in Eastern Valentinianism (*Excerpta ex Theodoto*, frag. 1-42)

ExTheod is a very fragmentary work and, as I have already underlined, there have been some concerns regarding the internal coherence and identity of the author of the collection of fragments.⁸⁷ Due to these methodological uncertainties, I have resolved to consider the figure of the fallen feminine as represented in sections A, B and D, thus illustrating how Sophia is conceived in eastern Valentinianism, without attributing my findings specifically to Theodotus. As far as section C is concerned, I will discuss it in the following section on the doctrines of Ptolemy and his disciples, for it constitutes a valid parallel to the *GN*.

One of the most relevant fragments of *ExTheod* about Sophia and Christ affirms:

Indeed Christ became an adopted son as he became elect among the pleromatic beings and First-Born of the realities there. [...] They say that when Christ fled that which was foreign to him and was drawn back into the Pleroma, after he had been begotten from his mother's thought, the

⁸⁷ *Supra* III.1.

Mother again produced an Archon of the economy as a type of Him who had deserted her, according to her desire for him, who was better, since he was a type of the Father of All.⁸⁸

From a narrative perspective, this fragment mostly confirms what has already been observed in *ExVal*. After being born from the Mother's better parts (namely, her *ἐννοία*), Christ ascended into the Pleroma, abandoning his mother below. As a consequence, the fragment describes the birth of a second child, the Demiurge. Once Christ had left Sophia, she had another child, an Archon, whom she generated in ignorance as an inferior copy of her firstborn.⁸⁹ From a theological perspective, this fragment confirms the existence of a typological mechanism in *ExTheod*, according to which the inferior world and its events are merely a faded copy of the divine realities and events. As a matter of fact, the author specifies that the Archon is molded as a type ('τύπος') of Christ who, for his part, is type of the Father of All. Moreover, being the Demiurge or creator of the inferior world, it follows that also the inferior world is τύπος of pleromatic realities, just as is its ruler.⁹⁰

However, the most striking element of *ExTheod* lies in the Christology and in the theological implications that it has for the fallen feminine. The fragment I have quoted presents a Christology of adoption, since it affirms that Sophia's son Christ has merely been adopted by the Pleroma (υἱόθετος), rather than being considered as a full-fledged member of it. By marking his extra-pleromatic birth, *ExTheod* presents a different Christology from *ExVal* since Christ seems to be in need of redemption too, as confirmed by the following fragment:⁹¹

⁸⁸ *ExTheod* 33, 1-3: Υἱόθετος μέντοι γέγονεν ὁ Χριστός, ὡς πρὸς τὰ πληρώματα «Ἐκλεκτός» γενόμενος καὶ «Πρωτότοκος» τῶν ἐνθάδε πραγμάτων. [...] Χριστοῦ, φασί, τὸ ἀνοίκειον φυγόντος <καὶ> συσταλέντος εἰς τὸ Πλήρωμα, ἐκ τῆς μητρῶας γενομένου ἐννοίας, ἡ Μήτηρ αὖθις τὸν τῆς οἰκονομίας προηγάγετο Ἄρχοντα, εἰς τύπον τοῦ φυγόντος αὐτήν, κατ'ἐπιπόθησιν αὐτοῦ, κρείττονος ὑπάρχοντος, ὃς ἦν τύπος τοῦ Πατρὸς τῶν ὅλων. Similarly, see *ExTheod* 32, 1.

⁸⁹ The generation of the Demiurge is further expanded in *ExTheod* 39, where it is said that the Mother was unable to generate something 'whole' after Christ.

⁹⁰ This is particularly clear in *ExTheod* 7,5.

⁹¹ On Theodotus' Christology and soteriology, I therefore agree with Thomassen (2006), 28-38. He calls Theodotus' soteriological model one of 'mutual participation', for Christ never assumes a psychic body but only a spiritual one. It is indeed this spiritual body that needs to be

“Father,” he says, “I deposit into thy hands my spirit.” Sophia, he says, put forth a receptacle of flesh for the Logos, the spiritual seed; clad in it the Saviour descended. Hence, at the Passion, he deposited Sophia with the Father, in order that he might receive her from the Father and not be held back here by those who have the power to unclad him. Thus, by the word already spoken of, he deposits the whole spiritual seed, the elect ones.⁹²

Within this Christology of adoption, the fallen feminine plays an essential role for it becomes a ‘receptacle of flesh’, Christ’s σαρκίον. Henceforth, Sophia is here identified with the material and visible part of the Logos – that is, the divine matter which is assumed by the Saviour in his descent and that suffers during the Saviour’s Passion. In other words, Sophia *is type* of the body of Christ. In this context, the Saviour’s body ought not to be envisioned as a material or fleshy one, rather as a divine body made out of the spiritual seed (τὸ πνευματικὸν σπέρμα).⁹³ This identification of the fallen feminine with the body of Christ gives an utterly new perspective about the role and functions of feminine imagery within Valentinianism. Although the superiority of the male aeon is maintained, since Christ is superior to Sophia, the feminine assumes the function of *sub-stratum* in the Latin sense of the word, that is, ‘what acts as a support’.⁹⁴ Thus, Sophia’s role can only be understood as inextricably intertwined with that of Christ, since her power works only insofar as Christ operates through her: ‘The visible part of Jesus was Sophia and the Church of the superior seeds and he put it on through the flesh, as Theodotus says; but the

redeemed, thus presenting paradoxically a Saviour who is in need of Salvation himself, whence the ‘mutual participation’. On the contrary, Pagels (1974), 43, seems to envision a Christology in which Christ assumes a psychic body.

⁹² *ExTheod* 1, 1-2: «Πάτερ», φησί, «παρατίθεμαί σοι εἰς χεῖρας τὸ Πνεῦμά μου.» Ὁ προέβαλε, φησί, σαρκίον τῷ Λόγῳ ἢ Σοφία, τὸ πνευματικὸν σπέρμα, τοῦτο στολίσάμενος κατήλθεν ὁ Σωτήρ. Ὅθεν ἐν τῷ πάθει τὴν Σοφίαν παρατίθεται τῷ Πατρί, ἵνα αὐτὴν ἀπολάβῃ παρὰ τοῦ Πατρός, καὶ μὴ κατασχεθῇ ἐνταῦθα ὑπὸ τῶν στερίσκειν δυναμένων. Οὕτως πᾶν πνευματικὸν σπέρμα, τοὺς ἐκλεκτούς, διὰ τῆς προειρημένης φωνῆς παρατίθεται.

⁹³ It seems likely that this comes from a Valentinian exegesis of Paul *1Cor* 12.

⁹⁴ It is worth remarking once more that this does not change the pleromatic hierarchy, but it simply explains in what terms the inferiority of the feminine imagery should be understood.

invisible part is the Name, which is the Only-Begotten Son.⁹⁵ With Sophia being the visible part of Christ, two major soteriological and ecclesiological consequences arise. If Sophia is the Logos' body in the inferior and material world, she is the one who acts and suffers passion for the redemption of the spiritual seed, thus assuming a major soteriological function. In this respect, it is worth specifying that Sophia does not become Jesus, but simply the Saviour 'cladded in her', assuming in himself the spiritual substance that is in need of redemption. As such, the ecclesiological implication of Sophia's συμ-πάθεια should also be underlined, for *ExTheod* is probably the most explicit source regarding Sophia's identification with the Church. Here, Sophia also represents the totality of the 'spiritual seed' that has been informed by the Saviour.⁹⁶ Sophia is, therefore, the perfect and restored Church of the elect, of which she is Mother, since the spiritual seed united in her and in Christ will enter the Pleroma through their Passion. I believe it is important to highlight that this identification of Sophia with the Church clarifies also what I have attempted to explain regarding Sophia as type of the "body" of Christ. It is likely that the Valentinian teacher of *ExTheod* derived this theory from an allegorical exegesis of the Scripture. Indeed, the belief that Sophia represents the 'body of Christ' fits well the Pauline theology of *Eph* 5:30, where the Church is identified with the body of Christ. Furthermore, these fragments align within the well-known tradition of the spousal metaphor as representative of the relationship between God and his Church.⁹⁷

From an eschatological perspective, the passions suffered by Sophia, or the 'original sin' which disrupted the pleromatic order, are destroyed by means of her Passion on the cross with Christ:

Moreover, if he who came down was the object of the desire of the All
 ("for the entire Pleroma assumed a bodily form") and the Passion was

⁹⁵ *ExTheod* 26, 1: Τὸ ὁρατὸν τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ἡ Σοφία καὶ ἡ Ἐκκλησία ἦν τῶν σπερμάτων τῶν διαφερόντων, ἣν ἐστολίσατο διὰ τοῦ σαρκίου, ὥς φησιν ὁ Θεόδοτος· τὸ δὲ ἀόρατον <τὸ> Ὄνομα, ὅπερ ἐστὶν ὁ Υἱὸς ὁ Μονογενής. On Sophia's dependence upon Christ, see also Orbe (1977), 21-26.

⁹⁶ *ExTheod* 42.

⁹⁷ For an overview of the Christian and non-Christian traditions about the marriage with Sophia/Wisdom, see Horsley (1979).

his, it is clear that the [spiritual] seeds in him shared his passion, and that through them the “Whole” and the “All” are found to be suffering. In addition, they say that the All suffered with him, instructed by the passion of the twelfth aeon.⁹⁸

Not only does *ExTheod* suggest that Sophia is sharing Christ’s sufferings during passion, but it even implies that the entire Pleroma is suffering with Christ through them.⁹⁹ According to the typological mechanism which governs the Gnostic cosmos, the myth of Sophia represents therefore the protological antecedent of Christ’s Passion on the cross, as the suffering of the divine is transposed to an intra-divine level, thus intertwining the redeemer with the redeemed. Hence, in a Valentinian logic, the theologoumenon of Sophia’s subjection to passions reveals the Christian mystery of God’s sufferings. Just as Sophia’s passionate desire to imitate the Father caused the intra-divine disruption, so she contributed to her own redemption by sharing Christ’s passion.¹⁰⁰

In conclusion, these fragments show that the fallen feminine plays a major role in the theology of eastern Valentinian schools. Notwithstanding the subordination of female aeons to male aeons – since feminine imagery is used to indicate the defective part of the divine, whilst masculine imagery is used to indicate its perfect status – the character of Sophia gains a primary role within this form of Valentinianism. Being type of the visible and material part of God and sharing the sufferings of the Saviour in the Passion, her myth reveals the Christian mystery of divine and human redemption. Therefore, feminine

⁹⁸ *ExTheod* 31, 1-2: Ἀλλὰ καὶ εἰ ὁ κατελθὼν εὐδοκία τοῦ Ὁλοῦ ἦν («ἐν αὐτῷ γὰρ πᾶν τὸ Πλήρωμα ἦν σωματικῶς»), ἔπαθεν δὲ οὗτος, δῆλον ὅτι καὶ τὰ ἐν αὐτῷ σπέρματα συνέπαθεν, δι’ ὧν τὸ Ὅλον καὶ τὸ Πᾶν εὐρίσκεται πάσχον. Ἀλλὰ καὶ διὰ τῆς τοῦ δωδεκάτου Αἰῶνος πείσεως τὰ Ὅλα «παιδευθέντα», ὥς φασι, συνεπάθησεν.

⁹⁹ Similarly, see Simonetti (1999), 509 and Orbe (1976), 283.

¹⁰⁰ In a very interesting comment on this Valentinian perspective on Christ’s passion, Clement does not fail to notice in *ExTheod* 30, 1-2 how this doctrine is the most unforgivable heresy of the Valentinian school: ‘Then, forgetting the glory of God, they impiously say he suffered. For inasmuch as the Father shared in suffering, though he is, says Theodotus, rigid and unyielding in nature, by showing himself yielding, in order that Silence might understand this, it was suffering. For sympathy is the suffering of one for the sake of another’s suffering. Moreover, when the Passion took place, the whole shared in the same suffering for the recovery of the sufferer.’ On the discussion about God’s subjection to passions in Valentinianism, see Lettieri (2017) and (2012).

imagery becomes the metaphorical and philosophical way to express the existence of a divine principle which mingles with the material world. Indeed, my analysis reveals how Valentinian Gnostics understand the myth of Sophia's passion as an archetype of the Passion of the Saviour, which they transpose to a protological level due to their typological way of interpreting the evangelical narrative. Therefore, the myth of Sophia becomes the core of Valentinian theology, for it is an attempt to make sense of the Christian mystery of the Saviour's suffering.¹⁰¹

III.3.1.3 The Controversial Account of Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* I, 11, 1

This chapter of Irenaeus' work is one of the most controversial Valentinian sources, for the attribution of these doctrines to Valentinus has been contested by several scholars.¹⁰² Nevertheless, it presents a very peculiar Valentinian doctrine of the fallen feminine, which shows that there is a linguistic change in the use of gender categories in intra-pleromatic and extra-pleromatic discourses.

According to Irenaeus, the founder of the Valentinian movement believed the following:¹⁰³

Christ was not emitted by the aeons in the Pleroma, but he was brought forth from the knowledge of better things by the Mother among the shadows, while she was out (of the Pleroma). He, being male, severed the shadow from himself, thus ascending to the Pleroma. Having left his

¹⁰¹ This way of interpreting feminine imagery could have important implications also for early Christian studies in general, particularly for the use of symbolic imagery for the Church and later for the Virgin Mary. In this regard, see Tsironis (2000) and Brubaker – Cunningham (2016).

¹⁰² Among those scholars who have rejected the attribution of this chapter to Valentinus, see Marksches (1992), 364-369 and Thomassen (2006), 23-27.

¹⁰³ In my reconstruction of the Sophia myth in Valentinus, I am in strong disagreement with Marksches (1992), who denied the existence of a Sophia myth in Valentinus. Marksches' argument has been developed further by Dunderberg (2008), who has however admitted a form of continuity between Valentinus and his follower. Against Marksches and Dunderberg, see Quispel (1947) and Chiapparini (2012). In particular, Chiapparini has put Valentinus in strong continuity with the following Valentinian tradition.

Mother among the shadows and devoid of spiritual substance, she generated another son.¹⁰⁴

Sophia/Mother is described as a fallen aeon who dwells in the midst of ‘shadows’ (σκιά), the inferior world in which she fell after leaping out of the Pleroma. The Pleroma is indeed separated from the world by Limit (Ὁρος),¹⁰⁵ the peripheral aeon that prevents Sophia from going back into the divine fullness. Following her fall, Sophia/Mother generated two sons: Christ and the Demiurge. In order to generate Christ – the perfect spiritual child – Sophia/Mother exhausted her spiritual self and remained deprived of spiritual substance (τῆς πνευματικῆς ὑποστάσεως), of which Christ was made. Since he was both spiritual and male, he abandoned his mother in the shadows and ascended to the Pleroma. Only after Sophia/Mother had been severed from her spiritual part did she generate the Demiurge.

Although the name Sophia is not explicitly mentioned, the appellative Μήτηρ ought to be interpreted as referring to her, since it is specified that the Mother is fallen and ‘dwells into the shadows’. Although the concept of Μήτηρ occurs in other Gnostic texts as well, the use of this word in reference to Sophia bears particularly significant meanings in Valentinian theology. For instance, in Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite texts, the fallen aeon is called ‘mother’ mainly in reference to the pleromatic ‘Mother’, thus underlining the connection between the two characters. However, in the previous section, it has been argued that the highest female pleromatic being is not known with the name of Μήτηρ in Valentinianism, thus stressing the connection between the Father and the Son. How should one then interpret the attribution of this appellative to Sophia? It is undeniable that the name carries some Trinitarian implications, as

¹⁰⁴ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I,11, 1: Καὶ τὸν Χριστὸν δὲ οὐκ ἀπὸ τῶν ἐν τῷ Πληρώματι Αἰώνων προβεβλήσθαι, ἀλλὰ ὑπὸ τῆς Μητρὸς, ἔξω [suppl. δὲ] γενομένης, κατὰ τὴν γνώμην τῶν κρείττονων ἀποκεκυῆσθαι μετὰ σκιάς τιнос. Καὶ τοῦτον μὲν, ὅτε ἄρρενα ὑπάρχοντα, ἀποκόψαντα ἀφ’ ἐαυτοῦ τὴν σκιάν, ἀναδραμεῖν εἰς τὸ Πλήρωμα. Τὴν δὲ Μητέρα ὑπολειφθεῖσαν μετὰ τῆς σκιάς, κεκενωμένην τε τῆς πνευματικῆς ὑποστάσεως, ἕτερον υἱὸν προενέγκασθαι.

¹⁰⁵ *AdHaer* I, 11, 1 informs us that Valentinus believed in the existence of two Limits: one between the Father and the Pleroma and one between the Pleroma and Sophia. If Irenaeus’ information is correct, Valentinus attempted to preserve the transcendence and unknowability of the Father by making his alienation from the Pleroma marked by the Limit.

underlined by her involvement in Christ's generation. In this regard, having more information about the Christology of Valentinus might have helped the enquiry about Sophia's role as Mother of Christ. Unfortunately, Irenaeus' account of Valentinus' doctrines is not sufficient to speculate further on this topic, which will instead be expanded in regard to *ExVal* and Ptolemy's theological system.¹⁰⁶

Regardless of the Christological issue, the narrative of the myth of separation is illustrated in this passage clearly, where the separation between Sophia's spiritual and material parts happens by means of filiation. Hence, Sophia's inferiority to male beings is stressed by underlining her inferiority to her own son. By bringing forth Christ on her own, Sophia remains utterly devoid of spiritual substance and she is forced into the darkness, while her own son abandons her to move upward. It seems to me that, in this text, Sophia is bound to the darkness precisely because of her femaleness; otherwise, Christ's ascent would not have any explanation. Indeed, before bringing forth Christ, Sophia was unable to raise herself above the shadows that trapped her, albeit she had maintained her spiritual nature. Contrariwise, Sophia's spiritual offspring did not remain trapped in the inferior world, since – as the text specifies – ‘he was male (ἄτε ἄρρενα ὑπάρχοντα)’ and thus able to sever himself from the shadows and to ascend to the Pleroma. Both Sophia and Christ are spiritual beings, but only the latter is able to rescind the bond with the shadows and save himself. Therefore, in this account, we encounter once more the idea that female gender carries with it some attributes that make female pleromatic beings inferior to male ones, thus marking two levels within the pneumatic nature.

This interpretation of the separation as filiation leaves, however, one open matter, for *AdHaer* I, 11, 1 seems to suggest that Sophia has utterly been devoid of her spiritual substance through the generation of Christ. If so, does that imply that Sophia – being now a psychic being herself – can bring forth only another psychic such as the Archon? This would contradict what has been observed in the *ExTheod*, where Sophia seems to maintain a certain spirituality

¹⁰⁶ *Supra* III.3.1.1 and *infra* III.3.2.2.

after Christ has abandoned her.¹⁰⁷ Nonetheless, the text of *AdHaer* I, 11, 1 seems quite clear in this regard. Therefore, if Sophia becomes a psychic being, two issues arise. First, it raises the issue of the fixity of the three Valentinian natures, for it is unclear how she could have been saved by Christ.¹⁰⁸ Secondly, it opens a new possible interpretation for the literary and philosophical use of gender categories, since outside of the Pleroma, the metaphorical language of generation changes and it is no longer based on the opposition between male/active and female/passive. Outside of the Pleroma, Sophia seems to have the power to generate a healthy offspring on her own, for she is able to supply the spiritual substance by herself. Indeed, the account claims that Sophia brought forth Christ from τὴν γνώμην τῶν κρείττονων, thus in a status of knowledge of the higher realities and not in one of ignorance, as in the case of the Demiurge, her second son. Thus, Sophia generated a spiritual being insofar as she was a spiritual being herself; on the contrary, she generated a psychic being when she had become a psychic being. It seems therefore plausible to hypothesize that, in this account, the difference between bringing forth a spiritual or defective offspring lies in the ontological nature of the parent rather than in the syzygial union. It would appear that this Valentinian myth employs two different metaphorical and linguistic registers; one applies to intra-pleromatic divine beings whilst the other applies to extra-pleromatic being. In this second register, the feminine is no longer synonymous with passivity, which does suggest that the feminine gains *some* active role in the generation, since Sophia seems able to generate on her own a formed spiritual substance outside of the Pleroma.

Henceforth, if one trusts Irenaeus' account, one has to admit that Valentinus' doctrine of the generation of Christ reveals a great deal about the representation of the fallen feminine. Although this account confirms the

¹⁰⁷ For instance, *ExTheod* 21, 1-3 in which Sophia is equated with the spiritual Church.

¹⁰⁸ The debate regarding the fixity of the three natures in Valentinianism is still very much open. In this regard, the main problem concerns the eschatological destiny of the psychic nature; particularly, if the psychic nature will be saved as it is or if it needs to change into a pneumatic nature in order to achieve salvation. For more information about the proponents of the fixity of natures, see Simonetti (1966) and (1999); Magris (1997); Lettieri (2017). For those scholars who hypothesize the fluidity of natures, see Thomassen (2013); Löhr (1992); Pagels (1974).

superiority of pleromatic male over pleromatic female beings, it also suggests that the metaphorical and linguistic register employed to discuss the *extra-pleromatic* events partially subverts the philosophical meanings attributed to gender categories in *intra-pleromatic* events.

III.3.2 Two Sophia System

The version of the Valentinian myth of separation that presents the doubling of Sophia is characteristic of two major Valentinian texts: the *GN* of Irenaeus and the *GosPhil*. These two texts could be considered as representing two opposite Valentinian schools: while *GosPhil* presents mostly eastern Valentinian teachings, the *GN* informs us about the teachings of Ptolemy, one of the most prominent western Valentinian teachers, and his disciples.¹⁰⁹ The presence of the two Sophias system in both eastern and western Valentinianism confirms that the one Sophia and two Sophias systems are not specific of either eastern nor western Valentinianism.

III.3.2.1 Sophia Echmot and Sophia Echamot in the *Gospel of Philip* (NHC II, 3)

In *GosPhil*, the feminine plays a major and prominent role, since the gospel is filled with feminine and nuptial imagery.¹¹⁰ It is worth mentioning that, although I am convinced of the internal coherence of *GosPhil*,¹¹¹ the use of an allusive and metaphorical language makes it sometimes difficult to interpret. The text does not follow a definite narrative, but often resorts to Pindaric flights. For instance, *GosPhil* does not describe how the separation between the

¹⁰⁹ For the attribution of the *GN* to Ptolemy, see Thomassen (2006), 17-22 and Marksches (2000).

¹¹⁰ For this reason, the feminine in *GosPhil* has attracted the attention of many scholars, see particularly Sfameni Gasparro (1977), Buckley (2000); Pagels (2000).

¹¹¹ As previously noted in III.1, there are some uncertainties regarding the internal coherence of *GosPhil*. In spite of the doubts illustrated by Turner (1996) and (1997), I believe that this treatise represents a coherent and unitary Valentinian work. My thesis is also supported by Sfameni Gasparro (1977), Simonetti (1999) and Thomassen (1997).

two Sophias happened, but it just assumes the existence of two distinct characters:

The “Father” and the “Son” are single names (ΠΕΙΩΤ ΜΝ ΠΩΗΡΕ ΝΖΑΠΛΟΥΝ ΝΕ ΡΡΑΝ), the “Holy Spirit” is a double name (ΠΠΝΑ ΕΤΟΥΑΛΒ ΟΥΡΑΝ` ΠΕ ΝΔΙΠΛΟΥΝ). [...] The Holy Spirit is in the revealed: it is below. It is in the concealed: it is above.¹¹²

Echamot is one thing and Echmot another (ΚΕΟΥΑ ΠΕ ΕΧΛΜΩΘ ΑΥΩ ΚΕΟΥΑ ΠΕ` ΕΧΜΩΘ). Echamot is Sophia simply (ΤΣΟΦΙΑ ΖΑΠΛΩΣ), but Echmot is the Sophia of death (ΤΣΟΦΙΑ ΜΠΜΟΥ) which is the one which knows death, which is called “the little Sophia”.¹¹³

Both passages indicate that Sophia – here also identified with the Holy Spirit – is distinct in two opposed selves. In the first case, *GosPhil* stresses that, unlike the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit’s liminality between worlds results in an ontological duality: the Holy Spirit ‘above’ and the Holy Spirit ‘below’. In the second passage, *GosPhil* personifies these two characters in two Sophias, namely Sophia Echmot and Sophia Echamot, one that dwells in the unknown pleromatic world and one that works in the visible world.¹¹⁴ Therefore, one could summarise the main features of the two Sophias in the following manner:

- a) Sophia Echmot personifies the *lower and defective Sophia*, who is awaiting the coming of the Saviour to give her life.¹¹⁵ Although she is called ΤΣΟΦΙΑ ΜΠΜΟΥ (‘Sophia of death’), Echmot is also ‘Holy Spirit’

¹¹² *GosPhil* II, 59, 11-19.

¹¹³ *GosPhil* II, 60, 10-15.

¹¹⁴ Sfameni Gasparro (1977), 264-265 underlines how there is merely a vocalic difference between the two names, since they do not differ from a semantic perspective.

¹¹⁵ The imagery of life/death and light/darkness is essential to understand the different works of the two Sophias, especially since they are often used by the author of *GosPhil* as a metaphor for the separation between the redeemed and the forsaken ones, see *GosPhil* II, 75, 2-14. In this regard, see also *GosPhil* II, 52, 6-15: ‘Those who are heirs to the dead are themselves dead, and they inherit the dead. Those who are heirs to what is living are alive and they are heirs to both what is living and the dead. The dead are heirs to nothing. For how can who is dead inherit? If he who is dead inherits what is living he will not die, but he who is dead will live even more.’

and ‘Mother’ insofar as she generates the pneumatic seed that is hidden in the world when she is in syzygy.

- b) Echamot is called **ΤΣΟΦΙΑ ΖΑΠΛΩΣ** (‘simply Sophia’) and corresponds to the *pleromatic and redeemed Sophia*, that is, the Sophia who has been restored to her pleromatic status by the Saviour.

In order to understand better the opposition between the two characters, I will start with the identification of Sophia Echamot as salt and Sophia Echamot as barren:

The apostles said to the disciples, “May your offering obtain salt.” They called [Sophia] “salt.” (**ΖΜΟΥ**) Without it no offering [is] acceptable. But Sophia is barren [without] child (**ΟΥΣΤΕΙΡΑ ΤΕ ΑΧΝ ΨΗΡΕ**). For this reason, she is called “[trace] of salt.” (**ΠΚΕΣΕΠΕΙ ΝΖΜΟΥ**)¹¹⁶

As for Sophia whom they call barren, she is the mother of the angels (**ΤΣΟΦΙΑ ΕΤΟΥΜΟΥΤ[Ε ΕΡΟ]Σ ΧΕ ΤΣΤΙΡΑ ΝΤΟΣ ΤΕ ΤΜΑΛΥ ΝΗΑΓΓΕΛΟΣ**). And the companion of the [*lacuna*] Mary Magdalen (**ΑΥΩ [Τ]ΚΟΙΝΩΝΟΣ ΗΠΙΣ [... ΜΑ]ΡΙΑ ΤΜΑΓ[ΔΑ]ΛΗΝΗ**).¹¹⁷

Sophia Echmot is here described by a paradox: she is a barren mother. I believe that the interpretative key to this obscure passage ought to be found in the Valentinian notion of the deformity of Sophia’s children. Echmot is **ΤΣΤΙΡΑ** insofar as she is unable to produce a formed offspring as long as she is on her own.¹¹⁸ As a matter of fact, the deformity of those who are generated only by a woman is explained by the author of *GosPhil* by the use of several examples. In one instance, the author affirms that the union of male and female should be considered as ‘a case of strength complemented by weakness’;¹¹⁹ consequently, the children of a woman should be identified as weak, for they have not received the paternal strength. In another instance, *GosPhil* stresses that it is the mother who provides the material substance of which the child is made,

¹¹⁶ *GosPhil* II, 59, 27-34.

¹¹⁷ *GosPhil* II, 63, 30-33.

¹¹⁸ This topic will be explained later on in this section.

¹¹⁹ *GosPhil* II, 76, 6-9. This passage finds a perfect parallel in *ExTheod* 68.

since a child is moulded after the man that the woman loves and of whom she thinks while having intercourse.¹²⁰ Consequently, even if she provides the matter of which the foetus is made, the form is given by the male of whom she is thinking. Although these examples refer to normal human procreation, they can apply to Sophia in virtue of the typological mechanism, which is clearly stated also in *GosPhil*.¹²¹ Hence, just as women, Sophia is deemed to generate only in syzygy; if she does not do so, she is called ‘barren’ for her children are unformed. On the contrary, Sophia Echmot is described as salt, which I think is a metaphor for the spiritual nature, since Irenaeus uses the same image in *GN*.¹²² It is indeed in her capacity as spiritual ‘salt’ that Sophia can rightly be called ‘Holy Spirit’, whereas the visible Sophia cannot be called ‘salt’, but merely ‘trace of salt’, because she is imperfect and defective.

The contrast between Echmot and the spiritual Echamot is further confirmed by the association between Sophia Echmot and a prostitute. In order to understand such meaning, it is worth looking at *GosPhil*’s understanding of prostitution:

If a marriage is open to the public, it has become prostitution (ΟΥΓΑΜΟΣ ΕΦΑΚΩΚΑΖΗΥ ΑΦΩΠΕ ΙΠΟΡΝΕΙΑ), and the bride becomes the harlot not only when she is impregnated by another man but even if she slips out of her bedroom and is seen (ΑΥΩ ΤΩΕΛΕΕΤ’ΟΥ ΜΟΝΟΝ ΕΣΦΑΧΙ ΠΣΠΕΡΜΑ ΙΚΕΖΟΥΤ’ ΑΛΛΑ ΚΑΝ ΕΣΦΑΝΡ ΠΒΟΛ ΙΠΕΣΚΟΙΤΩΝ ΙΣΕΝΑΥ ΕΡΟΣ ΑΣΠΟΡΝΕΥΕ). Let her show herself only to her Father (ΙΠΕΣΕΙΩΤ) and her Mother (ΤΕΣΜΑΛΥ) and to the Friends of the bridegroom (ΠΩΒΗΡ ΙΠΝΥΜ’ΦΙΟΣ) and the Sons of the bridegroom (ΙΝΩΗΡΕ ΙΠΝΥΜ’ΦΙΟΣ). These are permitted to enter every day into the bridal chamber. But let the other yearn just to listen to her voice (ΕΤΕΣΜΗ) and enjoy her ointment (ΙΠΕΣΣΟΒΙ), and let them feed from the crumbs that fall from the table, like the dogs. Bridegroom and bride belong to the bridal chamber (ΟΥΝ

¹²⁰ *GosPhil* II, 78, 12-24.

¹²¹ *GosPhil* II, 84, 20-21; II, 85, 14-15.

¹²² This association had already been noticed by Sfameni-Gasparro (1977), 260-261.

Ζἄννυμ'φιος ἦν Ζἄννυμφι ἡπ'ἐπνυμφῶν). No one shall be able to see the bridegroom with the bride unless [he becomes] such a one.¹²³

This passage is inserted into a long digression about the Valentinian bridal chamber and, at first glance, it might appear to have little in common with Sophia Echmot.¹²⁴ On the contrary, I believe that this passage confirms that the secret hidden by the bridal chamber is indeed the story of Sophia's fall and redemption. Like Lettieri, I am inclined to consider this passage as a Valentinian exegesis of the book of the *Sos*.¹²⁵ Sophia, just like the bride of the *Sos*, became a prostitute when she abandoned her bedroom. Consequently, she was the one who 'slipped out of the bedroom' – that is, outside of the bridal union which is the syzygy – and prostituted herself by refusing to be united with her spouse and by being seen in the inferior world. Just like the bride of the *Sos*, Echmot is a prostitute who wanders outside of her bedroom, since she has abandoned the divine plenitude and has shown herself to the world. In truth, she ought to be seen only by other members of the Pleroma – that is, her 'Father', her 'Mother', the 'Friends of the bridegroom' and the 'sons of the bridegroom'.¹²⁶ Being a pleromatic being, Sophia should be seen only by her Father (that is, the abyssal aeon who originates the Pleroma), her Mother (the Father's syzygial companion), the 'friends of the bridegroom' who – according to *ExTheod* – are the 'angels' that are with the Logos, and, lastly, the 'sons of the bridegroom'. These latter are the spiritual human beings who are born in the syzygy, thus being the only human beings to be 'imperishable'.¹²⁷ Only the 'Sons of the bridegroom' and the bride will be admitted to the bridal chamber, whereas the others will remain outside, listening to Sophia's 'voice' and smelling her 'anointment', but being deprived of her presence.¹²⁸

¹²³ *GosPhil* II, 82, 10-26.

¹²⁴ The topic of the bridal chamber will also be discussed later, *infra* III.4.2.

¹²⁵ Lettieri (2008). For the importance of the *Sos* for Valentinian exegesis, see also Meloni (1975), 60-69.

¹²⁶ According to *ExTheod* 65, 1, the friends of the Bridegroom are the angels who rejoice when he enters the bridal chamber with the Bride.

¹²⁷ *GosPhil* II, 75, 10-14.

¹²⁸ In this regard, it is interesting to note Sfameni-Gasparro's interpretation of the anointment as the odour of immortality which is left by Christ in Sophia, see Sfameni-Gasparro (1977), 253. This theme is also discussed at length in Meloni (1975), 60-69.

The parallels between Sophia and the bride of *Sos* become even more meaningful if one considers that Sophia is rescued by Jesus/bridegroom, for it reveals the connection between Sophia Echmot and Echamot. Being the fallen Echmot, Sophia is the pleromatic Echamot only insofar as she is rescued by a male Saviour. *GosPhil* clarifies that Sophia needs a male counterpart in order to be rescued and to be mother of the saved: ‘When we were Hebrews we were orphans and had only our mother, but when we became Christians we had both father and mother.’¹²⁹ Hence, as in the other Valentinian accounts, the actions of female beings require the intervention of a male figure who fulfils them:

If the woman had not separated from the man, she would not die with the man (ΝΕ Μ'ΠΕ' Τ'ΣΖΙΜΕ ΠΩΡΧ ΕΦΟΟΥΤ ΝΕCΝΑΜΟΥ ΑΝ ΠΕ ΜΝ ΦΟΟΥΤ). His separation became the beginning of death (ΠΕCΠΩΡΧ ΝΤΖΑC'ΩΠΠΕ ΝΑΡΧΗ ΜΠΜΟΥ). Because of this Christ came to repair the separation which was from the beginning and again united the two (ΔΙΑ ΤΟΥΤΟ ΑΠΕΡΧΡ̄C ΕΙ ΧΕΚΑΛC ΠΠΩΡΧ ΝΤΑΖΩΠΠΕ ΧΙΝ' ΩΠΠ' ΕCΝΑCΕΖΩC ΕΡΑΤC' ΠΑΛΙΝ' ΝCΖΟΤΡΟΥ ΜΠCΑΝΥ), and gave life to those who died as a result of the separation and united them (ΑΥΩ ΝΕΝΤΑΖΜΟΥ ΖΜ ΠΠΩΡΧ' ΕCΝΑ† ΝΑΥ ΝΝΟΥΩΝΖ ΝCΖΟΤΡΟΥ). But the woman is united to her husband in the bridal chamber (ΖΜ ΠΠΑCΤΟC). Indeed, those who have been united in the bridal chamber (ΖΜ ΠΠΑCΤΟC) will no longer be separated.¹³⁰

Although this passage is inserted by the author into the discussion regarding the separation between Adam and Eve, it is clear that such a separation is merely a type of the pleromatic separation of Sophia and her partner. This separation contaminated the Pleroma, by causing separation within God, which only the Saviour's coming will mend. As the woman will be united with her husband in the bridal chamber, so Sophia will be saved by Christ. In this

¹²⁹ *GosPhil* II, 52, 21-24. It is interesting to note that this passage finds a clear parallel in *ExTheod* 68: ‘For as long as we were children of the female only, as if of a base intercourse, incomplete and infants and senseless and weak and without form, brought forth like abortions, we were children of the woman, but when we have received from the Saviour, we have become children of the groom and the bridal chamber.’

¹³⁰ *GosPhil* II, 70, 10-19.

regard, I strongly disagree with Ménard,¹³¹ since I have not found any evidence to suggest that Sophia may not be redeemed. On the contrary, it would appear that the restoration of the syzygial unity is represented primarily by Christ's union with Sophia:

Indeed, one must utter a mystery (ΝΟΥΜΧΣΤΕΡΙΟΝ). The Father of Everything united with the virgin who came down (ΑΠΕΙΩΤ' ἸΠΠΗΡΩ ΖΩΤΡ' ΑΤ' ΠΑΡΘΕΝΟΣ ΝΤΑΖΕΙ ΑΠΙΤΝ), and a fire shone from him on that day. He appeared in the great bridal chamber (ἸΠΠΑΣΤΟΣ). [...] It left the bridal chamber as one who came into being from the bridegroom and the bride (ΑΦΕΙ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΗ ΠΠΑΣΤΟΣ ΝΘΕ ἸΠΠΕΝ' ΤΑΖΩΠΕ ΕΒΟΛ ΖἸ ΠΝΥΜΦΙΟΣ ΜΝ ΤΝΥΜΦΗ). So Jesus established everything in it through these.¹³²

Henceforth, it would seem to me that the myth of Sophia and the sacrament of the bridal chamber are strictly intertwined, for the Valentinian sacrament finds its theological meaning in the mythological story of Sophia's fall and redemption.

Having established that Sophia's destiny is the core of the sacrament of the bridal chamber, there is still one question that needs to be addressed. If Sophia Echmot is a 'barren mother' and a 'prostitute', as it would appear from the previous analysis, to what extent can she be identified with the Trinitarian person of the 'Holy Spirit'? In this regard, *GosPhil* specifies that:

The saints are served by evil powers, for they are blinded by the Holy Spirit into thinking that they are serving an ordinary man whenever they do so for the saints (ΣΕΟ ΓΑΡ ΝΒΛΛΕ ΖΙΤἢ ΠΝΑ ΕΤΟΥΛΛΕ' ΧΕΚΑΑΣ ΕΥΝΑΜΕΕΥΕ ΧΕ ΕΥΡΖΥΠΗΡΕΤΕΙ ΝΝΟΥΡΩΜΕ ΖΟΠΟΤΕ ΕΥΕΙΡΕ ΝΝΕΤΟΥΛΛΕ). Because of this a disciple asked the Lord one day for something of this world. He said to him: "Ask your Mother (ΠΕΧΑΩ ΝΑΩ'

¹³¹ Ménard (1967).

¹³² *GosPhil* II, 71, 3-13.

ⲕⲉ ⲉⲣⲓⲁⲓⲧⲉⲓ ⲛⲧⲉⲕⲙⲁⲁⲩ), and she will give you of the things which are another's (ⲁⲓⲱ ⲙⲛⲁⲓⲱⲧⲧ ⲛⲁⲕ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ ⲉⲛ ⲁⲗⲗⲟⲧⲣⲓⲟⲛ)"¹³³

Regardless of her collocation in the Gnostic cosmos, Sophia/Holy Spirit is able to give her 'sons' (in this instance, they are the saints who are worthy of the bridal chamber) 'the things which are another'. *GosPhil* stresses that Sophia acts covertly in this world, tricking and subjugating evil powers to do her work.¹³⁴ The theme of Sophia's acting secretly in this world is also common among many Gnostic traditions,¹³⁵ but it emerges in a very prominent way in this Valentinian text. Unlike *ApJohn*, where Sophia tricks Yaldabaoth to blow the spirit into Adam, *GosPhil* uses the examples of saints – that is, those who are inspired by Sophia/Holy Spirit – as a testimony of Sophia's actions in the world below. This narrative choice underlines the different theological priorities of the two Gnostic authors. While the author of *ApJohn* aimed at stressing the protological redeeming actions of Sophia, the Valentinian author of *GosPhil* rejects – or, at the very least, overlooks – the involvement of female characters in protological events to focus on Sophia's role as spiritual agent in the world below. As in *ExTheod*,¹³⁶ the role of Sophia is primarily ecclesiological: she is the church of saints, that is, the Church of the Spiritual Seed. In this regard, *GosPhil* is an additional testimony of the Valentinian intent to re-think the Trinitarian role of 'Holy Spirit', since Sophia is assimilable to the Holy Spirit only insofar as she is both 'mother' of the spiritual seed and fallen female being. On the one hand, the spiritual seed is redeemed because Sophia is redeemed, for she is the bride whom the bridegroom will marry. On the other hand, she is Holy Spirit insofar as she dwells outside of the Pleroma, intervening in human affairs. In this regard, it is interesting to mention her role in the conception of Christ from Mary:

Some said: "Mary conceived by the Holy Spirit (ⲡⲉⲕⲉ ⲉⲃⲟⲓⲛⲉ ⲕⲉ ⲁ ⲙⲁⲣⲓⲁ ⲱ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ ⲉⲛ ⲡⲓⲛⲁ ⲉⲧⲟⲩⲁⲗⲉ)" They are in error. They do not

¹³³ *GosPhil* II, 59, 19-27.

¹³⁴ *GosPhil* II, 60, 29-31: 'The Holy Spirit shepherds everyone and rules [all] the powers, the "tame" ones and the "wild" ones, as well as those which are unique.'

¹³⁵ Especially *ApJohn* II, 14, 13 – 19, 33, see *supra* II.3.1.

¹³⁶ *Supra* III.3.1.2.

know what they are saying. When did ever a woman conceive by a woman? (ΑΨ ΝΖΟΟΥ ΕΝΕΖ ΠΕΝΤΑ ΣΖΙΜΕ Ω ΕΒΟΛ` ΖΝ ΣΖΙΜΕ) Mary is the virgin whom no power defiled. (ΜΑΡΙΑ ΤΕ ΠΑΡΘΕΝΟΣ ΕΤΕ ΜΠΕ ΔΥΝΑΜΙΣ ΧΟΖΜΕΣ) She is a great anathema to the Hebrews, who are the apostles and [the] apostolic men. This virgin whom no power defiled [...] the powers defiled themselves. And the Lord [would] not have said “My [father who is in] heaven” unless he [had] had another Father, but he would have said simply “[My father]”.¹³⁷

Like Sfameni-Gasparro, I would be inclined to interpret this passage in reference to an intra-Valentinian polemic between those who believed Christ had a psychic body and those who claimed he was utterly spiritual.¹³⁸ While the author of *GosPhil* denies the involvement of Sophia Echmot – that is, the Holy Spirit who dwells in the world – he seems to combine the characters of Mary, Sophia Echamot and Eve. In particular, the last reference to Mary as the undefiled virgin resembles very closely the story of the spiritual Eve in *HypArch*.¹³⁹ This separation between Echmot and Echamot in regard to the conception of Jesus reveals the radical duplicity of the fallen feminine in *GosPhil*. On the one hand, by excluding the involvement of Echmot/Holy Spirit in the conception of Jesus, *GosPhil* denies that Jesus might have had a psychic body. On the other hand, by associating so closely Mary, Sophia Echamot and the spiritual Eve by means of types, the author is stressing the role of the pleromatic Sophia in the bringing forth of Jesus. Contrariwise, it seems to me that in this passage, Mary should be identified with the pleromatic Sophia, whereas the role of Echmot is utterly denied. My interpretation is also confirmed by *GosPhil*’s affirmation that Christ was born from ‘a virgin’ (ΟΥΠΑΡΘΕΝΟΣ) rather than from two virgins like Adam (ΠΑΡΘΕΝΟΣ ΣΝΤΕ).¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ *GosPhil* II, 55, 23-32.

¹³⁸ On this intra-Valentinian debate, see Hippolytus, *Ref.* VI, 35, 5-7. See Sfameni-Gasparro (1977), 270-271.

¹³⁹ *HypArch* II, 90, 17-28.

¹⁴⁰ *GosPhil* II, 71, 16-21: ‘Adam came into being from two virgins, from the Spirit and from the virgin earth. Christ, therefore, was born from a virgin to rectify the fall which occurred in the beginning.’ This passage will be discussed further, *infra* III.4.2

In this regard, I disagree with both Thomassen and Foster, who claim that Christ had to be born from two virgins as Adam was.¹⁴¹

In conclusion, *GosPhil* presents female characters that play a primary role within the mythology. This analysis has revealed two major functions of the fallen feminine. First, the myth of Sophia's fall and redemption is the theologoumenon which underlies the Valentinian sacrament of the bridal chamber. Insofar as she is Echmot, she archetypically represents the division which occurred within the syzygy, whilst insofar as she is Echamot she archetypically represents the reunion in the bridal chamber between the bride (Sophia) and bridegroom (Jesus). Secondly, Sophia Echmot and Sophia Echamot are shown acting in their capacities as 'Mother' and 'Holy Spirit'. On the one hand, Sophia is mother to the spiritual seed which is in this world, which she embodies as the Church of the spiritual seed. On the other hand, she is Holy Spirit, that is, she who acts covertly in this inferior world. In both of these two capacities, she has the soteriological role to guide secretly the spiritual seed to its ascent to the Pleroma, for she is to be reunited in the bridal chamber with the bridegroom.¹⁴² In this regard, I would like to suggest that my findings refute Ménard's theory about the negativity of Sophia in *GosPhil*.¹⁴³ Although the language used by this Valentinian gospel is very "negative", I hope to have shown that Sophia constitutes the core of the Valentinian theological system of redemption.

III.3.2.2 The *Grande Notice* and *Excerpta ex Theodoto* 43-65: Pleromatic Sophia and Sophia Achamot

Unlike Valentinus, Ptolemy portrays Sophia as separating into a superior Sophia and an inferior one: the former is usually called 'Sophia', whereas the latter is often referred to as 'Sophia Achamot'. In his system, the cause of

¹⁴¹ See Thomassen (2006), 90-93 and Foster (2007), 422-423.

¹⁴² In this regard, I agree with the study of Sfameni-Gasparro (1977), who had already underlined that Sophia seems to possess a certain soteriological relevance, even if her actions are not sufficient for the salvation of the seed.

¹⁴³ Ménard (1967).

Sophia's separation is identified in the intellectual guilt of wanting to know the Father, who is instead unknowable.¹⁴⁴ As a consequence of her reckless actions, Sophia is said to suffer passions, which contaminates the rest of the Pleroma, and to produce a οὐσίαν ἄμορφον (unformed substance). As we have observed in many other Valentinian texts, the reason for the uniformity is found in her female gender, for she brings forth 'a substance that a woman can bring forth'.¹⁴⁵ Therefore, Ptolemy seems to adhere to the well-attested Valentinian doctrine according to which the generation of the woman is weak and incomplete if it is not complemented by a male being. In order to avoid the contamination of the Pleroma because of Sophia's guilt, the Father separates her from the rest of the Pleroma by means of Limit:

Having fallen subject to these passions, she had a change of heart and tried to return to the Father, but she had pushed herself to a certain limit and remained without strength, thus she begged the Father. [...] Afterwards the Father, by means of the Only-Begotten, emitted the abovementioned Limit as part of no syzygial couple, without the female element. This Limit they call Cross, Redeemer, Reaper, Limiter and Restorer. They claim that Sophia was purified by this Limit and strengthened and restored in the syzygy. Indeed, having separated from her the Enthymesis (Intention) with the subsequent passions, she remained within the Pleroma. On the contrary, the Enthymesis with the passions was expelled and casted out (of the Pleroma), thus constituting the spiritual substance, since she had the natural impulse of the Aeon, but it was deprived of form and shape since Sophia had not understood anything. For this reason, they call her a weak feminine fruit.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ *AdHaer* I, 2,1.

¹⁴⁵ *AdHaer* I, 2, 3.

¹⁴⁶ *AdHaer* I, 2, 3-4: Ἐγκαταγενομένην δὲ τοῖς πάθεσι λαβεῖν ἐπιστροφὴν, καὶ ἐπὶ τὸν Πατέρα ἀναδραμεῖν πειρασθῆναι, καὶ μέχρι τινὸς τολμήσασαν, ἐξασθενῆσαι, καὶ ἰκέτιν τοῦ πατρὸς γενέσθαι. [...] Ὁ δὲ Πατὴρ τὸν προειρημένον Ὅρον ἐπὶ τούτοις διὰ τοῦ Μονογενοῦς προβάλλεται ἐν εἰκόνι ἰδίᾳ, ἀσύζυγον, ἀθήλυντον. Τὸν γὰρ Πατέρα ποτὲ μὲν μετὰ συζυγίας τῆς Σιγῆς, ποτὲ δὲ καὶ ὑπὲρ ἁρρὲν, καὶ ὑπὲρ θηλυ εἶναι θέλουσι. Τὸν δὲ Ὅρον τούτον καὶ Συλλυτρωτὴν [l. Σταυρὸν καὶ Λυτρωτὴν], καὶ Καρπιστὴν, καὶ Ὁροθέτην, καὶ Μεταγωγέα καλοῦσι. Διὰ δὲ τοῦ Ὁρου τούτου φασὶ κεκαθάρθαι καὶ ἐστηρίχθαι τὴν Σοφίαν, καὶ ἀποκατασταθῆναι τῇ συζυγίᾳ· χωρισθείσης γὰρ τῆς Ἐνθυμώσεως ἀπ' αὐτῆς σὺν τῷ ἐπιγινόμενῳ πάθει, αὐτὴν μὲν ἐντὸς πληρώματος εἶναι· τὴν δὲ ἐνθυμήσιν αὐτῆς σὺν τῷ πάθει ὑπὸ τοῦ Ὁρου ἀφορισθῆναι καὶ ἀποστερηθῆναι [l. ἀποσταυρωθῆναι], καὶ ἐκτὸς αὐτοῦ γενομένην, εἶναι μὲν πνευματικὴν οὐσίαν, φυσικὴν τινα Αἰῶνος ὁρμὴν τυγχάνουσαν· ἄμορφον

There are three innovative elements in this account which deserve to be highlighted. First, the separation between the two Sophias and the generation of a formless substance happen in the Pleroma, rather than outside of it. This element is of pivotal importance for it shows a radical contamination of the divine world, which is tainted and threatened by Sophia's recklessness. By assuming that Sophia's actions affect the Pleroma, Ptolemy is extending her passion to the rest of divine world, which is in an un-godly state of disruption. In this regard, Ptolemy's account seems to be in neat disagreement with the Valentinian teacher of *AdHaer* I, 1, 11, that envisions Sophia's generation of her sons as a consequence of her fall outside of the Pleroma, thus preserving the transcendence and purity of the divine world.¹⁴⁷ Secondly, the character of Limit assumes here a prominent role, since its purpose is double: on the one hand, it seems to be the spouse of the pleromatic Sophia, since he restrains her and keeps her in the Pleroma; on the other hand, it clarifies the meaning of Sophia's sufferings in the Pleroma. In this regard, it is worth noting the ambiguity of his name: he is both Ὁρος (Limit) and Σταυρός (Cross).¹⁴⁸ He is not only the means through which the Father – through Monogenes – restrains the passions of the superior Sophia, but he is also the cross which absolves her mistakes. Hence, as in Theodotus' doctrine,¹⁴⁹ this account presents the theme of Sophia's passion as a typological antecedent of Christ's sufferings on the cross. Regardless, Sophia's mistake is still corrected by a male character, which is a typological antecedent of the Saviour who will rescue the inferior Sophia – here identified with Enthymesis – for only a male being has the power to restrain the weak female product. Interestingly, Ptolemy believes Sophia's condition is evangelically represented by the woman who suffers from bleeding (*Mk* 5:21-34).¹⁵⁰ As the woman's illness is cured by Jesus, so are Sophia's passions cured exclusively by the intervention of a male Redeemer. Therefore, the work of Limit is to restrain Sophia and to expel the error from

δὲ καὶ ἀνείδεον διὰ τὸ μηδὲν καταλαβεῖν· καὶ διὰ τοῦτο καρπὸν ἀσθενῆ καὶ θήλυν αὐτὸν λέγουσι.

¹⁴⁷ In this regard, Orbe underlined also the bond between Monogenes and the unformed matter emitted by Sophia, see Orbe (1997), 145-146.

¹⁴⁸ *AdHaer* I, 3, 5.

¹⁴⁹ *Supra* III.3.1.2.

¹⁵⁰ *AdHaer* I, 3, 3.

the divine world, functioning as a veil between the Pleromatic world and the inferior world. Finally, the separation between the two Sophias is represented as a separation between Sophia and her misguided Intention and passions. Such separation is here described as an intellectual act: it is the separation of a spiritual being from her intellectual intention, thus underlining how all Valentinian actions, including the procreative ones, should always be intended as intellectual acts.¹⁵¹

The inferior Sophia, who is called Achamot, is described as follows:

The Enthymesis of the Sophia above, whom they also call Achamot, was separated from the Pleroma with her passions and she was seething according to the necessity of the places of shadow and emptiness. She was casted out of the light and of the Pleroma and she was formless and shapeless, as an abortion, having learned nothing. Christ had pity on her and by his own power, having stretched himself beyond the Cross, he gave her form according to the substance, but not according to knowledge. When he had accomplished this, having withdrawn his power, he returned upward and so forsook her, in order that she, being aware of her passion which had been caused by her separation from the Pleroma, might desire the better things, since she retained some fragrance of immortality which had been left in her by Christ and Holy Spirit. Therefore, she too is given two names: Sophia patronomically, for her father is Sophia, and Holy Spirit due to the Spirit of Christ.¹⁵²

In primis, the Enthymesis of Sophia is unformed matter. Thus, Achamot is a formless being, subject to passions and in need of male redemption, so much so

¹⁵¹ Deconick (2003), 324-327.

¹⁵² *AdHaer* I, 4, 1: Τὴν Ἐνθύμησιν τῆς ἄνω Σοφίας, ἣν καὶ Ἀχαμῶθ καλοῦσιν, ἀφορισθεῖσαν τοῦ [ἄνω] πληρώματος σὺν τῷ πάθει λέγουσιν, ἐν σκιαῖς καὶ σκηνώματος [κενώματος] τόποις ἐκβεβράσθαι κατὰ ἀνάγκην. Ἐξω γὰρ φωτὸς ἐγένετο καὶ Πληρώματος, ἄμορφος καὶ ἀνείδεος, ὥσπερ ἔκτρωμα, διὰ τὸ μηδὲν κατελιφέναι· οἰκτεῖραντά τε αὐτὴν τὸν [ἄνω] Χριστὸν, καὶ διὰ τοῦ Σταυροῦ ἐπεκταθέντα, τῇ ἰδίᾳ δυνάμει μορφῶσαι μόρφωσιν τὴν κατ' οὐσίαν μόνον, ἀλλ' οὐ τὴν κατὰ γνῶσιν· καὶ πράξαντα τοῦτο ἀναδραμεῖν συστείλαντα αὐτοῦ τὴν δύναμιν, καὶ καταλιπεῖν, ὅπως αἰσθομένη τοῦ περὶ αὐτὴν πάθους διὰ τὴν ἀπαλλαγὴν τοῦ Πληρώματος, ὀρεχθῇ τῶν διαφερόντων, ἔχουσα τινα ὁδὴν ἀφθαρσίας, ἐγκαταλειφθεῖσαν αὐτὴν [1. αὐτῇ ὑπὸ] τοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου Πνεύματος. Διὸ καὶ αὐτὴν τοῖς ἀμφοτέροις ὀνόμασι καλεῖσθαι, Σοφίαν τε πατρωνυμικῶς, (ὁ γὰρ πατὴρ αὐτῆς Σοφία κληῖζεται), καὶ πνεῦμα ἅγιον ἀπὸ τοῦ περὶ τὸν Χριστὸν πνεύματος.

that she is called an ἑκτρωμα, a term which other Gnostic mythologies attributed to the psychic and ignorant Ruler of the inferior world.¹⁵³ Her deformity is due to three factors: a) her female gender, which is weak; b) the absence of a syzygial partner; c) her ignorance. It is only because Christ takes pity on her, thus acting as her companion *pro tempore*, that she is given form. However, he gives her form only κατ'οὐσίαν (according to the substance), thus separating the three substances that appeared because of Sophia's passions. First, the spiritual substance is formed out of her laugh and because of the 'fragrance of immortality' which Christ left in her when he formed her. Secondly, the psychic substance – including the Demiurge – is formed from Sophia's ἐπιστροφή (conversion) towards him who formed her. Lastly, the passions which remain from her ἐπιστροφή form the hylic substance.¹⁵⁴ In this first formation, Sophia is not sanctified, but she is formed by Christ, who stabilizes Sophia's substance. This explains why she possesses merely a 'fragrance of immortality' before being rescued and sanctified by the intervention of the Saviour.¹⁵⁵ Receiving formation κατὰ γνῶσιν (according to knowledge) means to be able to know the realities of the Pleroma, which Ahamot, instead, ignores. Hence, the distinction between the formation κατ'οὐσίαν and κατὰ γνῶσιν is essential to understand Ptolemy's system, for the former is a formation of individual substances, while the second grants the divinization of beings.¹⁵⁶ Furthermore, the sanctification κατὰ γνῶσιν is fruitful from an ontological perspective. For instance, Ahamot is able to bring forth her pneumatic offspring out of the spiritual substance only when the Saviour forms her κατὰ γνῶσιν. Consequently, she produces a female offspring, which is the spiritual seed, and a male offspring, which is the angelic one.¹⁵⁷ This is also confirmed by *ExTheod* 45, 3: 'Thus through the appearance of the Saviour, Sophia was freed from passion and created all things which are outside (of the Pleroma): "For all things were made by him and without him

¹⁵³ See *HypArch* II, 94, 5-18; *OrigWorld* II, 99, 23 – 100, 5.

¹⁵⁴ *AdHaer* I, 4, 1-5; *ExTheod* 46, 1-2 and 54, 1-3

¹⁵⁵ For a deeper analysis of the metaphor see Orbe (1977), 16-17 and Meloni (1979), 60-69.

¹⁵⁶ For a detailed explanation of these different formations see Orbe (1995), 117-118.

¹⁵⁷ *AdHaer* I, 4, 5.

was not anything made””.¹⁵⁸ These beings are considered syzygial couples that are separated insofar as they dwell in the inferior world, but they will be again one in the eschatological times.¹⁵⁹ As in *GosPhil* and *ExTheod*, Achamot’s bringing forth of the spiritual substance makes her both ‘Mother’ and spiritual Church.¹⁶⁰ However, in Ptolemy’s system, this appellative is dependent upon her redemption by the hands of the Saviour, since only once she is united in syzygy with her partner, she can properly be called a ‘Mother’. Once again, this appellative is explicative of Sophia’s paradoxical status: insofar as she has received the formation κατ’οὐσίαν, she is mother to all substances, whereas insofar as she has been formed κατὰ γνῶσιν, she is Mother of the spiritual seed.¹⁶¹

In this regard, it worth explaining how Sophia can be called both ‘mother’ and ‘father’. In the previous passage, Achamot is called Sophia insofar as her “father” is Sophia, whereas she is called Holy Spirit insofar as she is touched by the Spirit of Christ. These appellatives are the perfect example of the paradoxical nature of the feminine in Valentinianism. According to the Pleromatic standards, Sophia is a weak and defective being both in her pleromatic and inferior selves. However, once the pleromatic Sophia has been restored and purified by Limit, she can act as πατήρ to the inferior Sophia, who is instead confined in the inferior world. In this inferior reality, the pleromatic Sophia represents the pneumatic being from which the inferior Sophia receives the φυσικὴν ὁρμήν¹⁶² (natural impulse), thus making her male. It is indeed this seed of maleness that allows her to receive the ‘Spirit of Christ’, which is, therefore, a female force acting in the world. In this case, the male gender is used to represent the perfection proper to the Pleromatic status, whereas the female gender is used to indicate its complement. In this instance, the gender categories of femaleness and maleness indicate abstract philosophical concepts

¹⁵⁸ *ExTheod* 45, 3: Οὕτως διὰ τῆς τοῦ Σωτῆρος ἐπιφανείας, ἡ Σοφία <ἀπαθής> γίνεται, καὶ τὰ ἔξω κτίζεται· «Πάντα γὰρ δι’ αὐτοῦ γέγονεν, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ γέγονεν οὐδέν.»

¹⁵⁹ On the union between the female spiritual seed and the angels, see Orbe (1977), 26-30.

¹⁶⁰ *AdHaer* I, 5, 3: ‘They call the Mother also Ogdoad, Wisdom, Earth, Jerusalem, Holy Spirit and Male Lord.’

¹⁶¹ For more detail, see Orbe (1997), 148-149.

¹⁶² See the passage quoted above: *AdHaer* I, 2, 3-4.

and they are unrelated to the physical gender of the mythological characters. Unlike the pleromatic Sophia, Achamot is not called ‘father’, but she is called ‘Mother’ and ‘Holy Spirit’, like in *GosPhil* and *ExTheod*. Hence, Ptolemy interpretes Sophia’s duplicity as her being both female and male: she is male insofar as she is restored by Limit in the Pleroma, whilst she is female insofar as she is mother of the elect seed and Holy Spirit acting in the world.¹⁶³ Having received both the formation κατ’οὐσίαν and κατὰ γνῶσιν, she becomes a soteriological agent who originates the three substances and covertly guides the spiritual substance back to the Pleroma to which it belongs. As a matter of fact, when the pneumatic seed – that is, her offspring – will re-enter the Pleroma, she will be eschatologically re-united in syzygy with the Saviour who formed her κατὰ γνῶσιν.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, Achamot is rescued by the coming of a Christ-like figure called the Saviour,¹⁶⁵ who comes down with his angels:

They say that when their Mother had endured every passion and had with difficulty raised herself up, she turned to supplicate the Light, that is Christ, who had left her. Having returned to the Pleroma, he was unwilling to descend a second time, thus he sent an advocate to her – that is a Saviour – [...] He was sent to her with the angels, his companions. They say that when Sophia met him, she first covered herself out of reverence, but, having gazed on him with all his revenue (angels), she took courage from his appearance and ran towards him. Then, he formed her according to knowledge [...] They teach that when Achamot had been freed from passion and had received with joy the contemplation of the lights which were with him – that is, of the angels that were with him – and had yearned after them, she brought forth fruits after their image, a spiritual offspring born after the likeness of the Saviour’s companion.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ Similarly, Orbe (1977), 20.

¹⁶⁴ *AdHaer* I, 7,1.

¹⁶⁵ The Christology of the GN is particularly complicated, see Thomaseen (2006), 119-127.

¹⁶⁶ *AdHaer* I, 4, 5: Διοδεύσασαν οὖν πᾶν πάθος τὴν Μητέρα αὐτῶν, καὶ μόγις ὑπερκύψασαν, ἐπὶ ἱκεσίαν τραπήναι τοῦ καταλιπόντος αὐτὴν φωτός, τουτέστι τοῦ Χριστοῦ, λέγουσιν· ὃς ἀνελθὼν μὲν εἰς τὸ πλήρωμα, αὐτὸς μὲν εἰκὸς ὅτι ὤκνησεν ἐκ δευτέρου κατελθεῖν, τὸν Παράκλητον δὲ ἐξέπεμψεν [εἰς] αὐτὴν, τουτέστι τὸν σωτῆρα [...] ἐκπέμπεται δὲ πρὸς αὐτὴν μετὰ τῶν ἡλικιωτῶν αὐτοῦ τῶν Ἀγγέλων. Τὴν δὲ Ἀχαμῶθ ἐντραπεῖσαν αὐτὸν λέγουσι πρῶτον μὲν κάλυμμα ἐπιθέσθαι δι’ αἰδῶ, μετέπειτα δὲ ἰδοῦσαν αὐτὸν σὺν ὅλῃ τῇ καρποφορίᾳ αὐτοῦ, προσδραμεῖν αὐτῷ, δύναμιν λαβοῦσαν ἐκ τῆς ἐπιφανείας αὐτοῦ· κἀκεῖνον μορφῶσαι αὐτὴν μόρφωσιν τὴν κατὰ γνῶσιν [...] Τὴν τε Ἀχαμῶθ ἐκτὸς πάθους γενομένην, καὶ συλλαβοῦσαν τῇ

As in the case of *GosPhil*, this part of the myth represents almost a systematic exegesis of the *Sos*.¹⁶⁷ First, the longing and union between Ahamot and the Saviour is represented as the longing of the bride for the bridegroom in the biblical book. Just as the bride of the *Sos* begs for her spouse to come back to her, here Sophia begs Christ to return to her.¹⁶⁸ Secondly, the myth says that when Sophia first saw Christ, she ‘covered herself out of reverence’. Similarly, the theme of the concealing of the bride and bridegroom is constantly present in the *Sos*. Moreover, the veiling of Ahamot ought also to be considered as hinting to the restriction the pleromatic beings have undergone by means of Limit, which is also interpreted as the veil between the two worlds.¹⁶⁹ Thirdly, this account affirms that Sophia ‘took courage from his appearance and ran towards him’, just as the bride runs after the bridegroom’s fragrance in *Sos* I, 3. Lastly, as in the *Sos*, the ‘friends of the bridegroom’ are matched by the ‘maidens’ who surround the bride; here the angelic companions of the Saviour are considered the eschatological mates of Ahamot’s offspring. Henceforth, the nuptial imagery of the union between the bridegroom and the bride is indeed essential to understand the dynamics of generation of the spiritual seed, that is, of those pneumatic beings hidden in the world who need to find their way back to the Pleroma.¹⁷⁰ In this regard, I am inclined to agree with Orbe, who notes that the feminine nature of the spiritual seeds mirrors their mothers’ feminine nature, just as the masculinity of the angels is mirrored in Christ’s maleness.¹⁷¹ Consequently, just as Christ is salvific mediator for Sophia, so the angels are salvific partner for the spiritual seed, thus reproducing typologically the union between the true Bride and Bridegroom.

χαρᾷ τῶν ἐν αὐτῷ φώτων τὴν θεωρίαν, τουτέστι τῶν Ἀγγέλων τῶν μετ’ αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἐγκισήσασαν αὐτοὺς, κεκυηκέναι καρποὺς κατὰ τὴν εἰκόνα διδάσκουσι, κῆμα πνευματικὸν καθ’ ὁμοίωσιν γεγονότως [γεγονός] τῶν δορυφόρων τοῦ Σωτῆρος. I would like to underline that these mythological events are described in a very similar manner in *ExTheod* 44-45.

¹⁶⁷ Thus, once again, I agree with Lettieri (2008).

¹⁶⁸ *Sos* 3, 1-4.

¹⁶⁹ *AdHaer* I, 3, 5.

¹⁷⁰ This exegesis of the *Sos* is further confirmed by Sophia’s appellative as ‘Jerusalem’ in *AdHaer* I, 5, 3.

¹⁷¹ Orbe (1997), 148.

Overall, the representation of the intra-pleromatic Sophia in Ptolemy's account could be defined as quite negative, for she does not possess any function other than that of causing the disruption of the Pleromatic rest. This is further confirmed by the clear distinction between the pleromatic Sophia and the aeon of the Holy Spirit. According to Irenaeus' account, the syzygy Christ/Holy Spirit is emitted by the Father to strengthen the Pleroma after Sophia's sin. The work of the Holy Spirit is limited to making the aeons equals and introducing them to the eternal rest of the Pleroma. In particular, the work of the Holy Spirit consists in making all male aeons equal to the male elements of the primordial Ogdoad and all female aeons equal to the female elements of the Ogdoad. In this regard, I agree with Orbe, who shows how this aeon bears the sanctifying function of the Holy Spirit, whereas the inferior Sophia seems to maintain the ecclesiological role of the Holy Spirit.¹⁷² In conclusion, the fallen feminine in the *GN* and *ExTheod* 43-65 shows three main features of western Valentinianism. First, it shows that Ptolemy and his followers radicalized the notion of Sophia's intra-divine rupture by envisioning the separation between the two Sophias as an intra-pleromatic event. As a result, the divine Pleroma is contaminated by Sophia's passions to its very core, making Sophia the most prominent character of this Valentinian account. Secondly, by separating Sophia's formations κατ' οὐσίαν and κατὰ γνῶσιν, Sophia's inferiority to Christ and her need of male redemption are revealed, since all her actions require male fulfillment to be salvific and effective. Lastly, as well as the eastern Valentinian sections of *ExTheod*, they envisioned Sophia's passion as a typological antecedent of Christ's Passion on the cross. It is indeed this element of subjection to passions that reveals the intrinsic Christian nature of Valentinianism.

II.3.3 Concluding Remarks on the Fallen Feminine and the Two "Myths of Separation"

In this section on the fallen feminine in Valentinianism, it has been shown that the myth of separation knows different variants according to the different

¹⁷² Orbe (1997), 145.

Valentinian systems. Regardless of which system the Valentinian teachers used, all accounts confirm that they consider the fallen feminine to be the cause and beginning of the disruption of the divine order. Furthermore, in both systems, Sophia is a defective needing male redemption, since she is always bound to the intervention of a male figure – whether her son or her spouse – to give her and her offspring form. However, I hope to have proved that it would be superficial to limit one’s investigation about the fallen feminine to this aspect since, in Valentinian more than in other Gnostic accounts, it is possible to glimpse the theological reason that underlies the myth of the fallen feminine: the impossibility – and yet the necessity – of conceiving the passion of God. In the Valentinian system, the tension between a Platonic philosophical paradigm that understood the divinity as a transcendent and immutable reality and an evangelical paradigm of a God who suffers passion is expressed in a complex mythology which explains the actions of God in the world. The ‘separation’ of Sophia results from the impossibility of holding together the perfect rest of the Pleroma and the dynamic history of salvation of the biblical narrative. In this regard, the role of Sophia as Holy Spirit reveals the Christian quintessence of Valentinianism – as well as of the Gnosticism overall – for it shows the process through which the acting force of God is thought to work in the world. As it has been observed, the connection between Sophia and Christ is manifest in both accounts of the myth. Although she is subordinated to him, Christ could not perform his work if Sophia had not made the extra-pleromatic world accessible to him by her mingling with it. In brief, the fallen feminine is the Christian essence of Valentinianism, for it illustrates by means of myths the story of the Passion of the divine in his attempt to rescue the world.

III.4 The Incarnated Valentinian Feminine

It has already been observed that Gnostics often consider Eve as type of Sophia. In Sethian, Ophite and Barbeloite texts, the two female characters are so strictly intertwined that they could sometimes be confused. Overall, Valentinianism follows the same mythological paradigm of the other Gnostic movements. Nevertheless, the theological implications of the typological relationship between Eve and Sophia are highly innovative when it comes to the Valentinian sacrament of the bridal chamber.

In order to illustrate the similarities and differences regarding the figure of Eve between the Valentinian systems and that analysed in the previous part, I deem it necessary first to discuss the theory of the creation of humankind in *ExTheod*; after this, I will explore its theological implications for the bridal chamber as presented in *GosPhil*.

III.4.1 The Creation of Eve in the *Excerpta ex Theodoto*

In Valentinian literature, the creation of humankind is mainly discussed in the *ExTheod*, particularly in sections A, B and C. Although C belongs to a different Valentinian tradition – for it is usually associated with western Valentinianism – I will occasionally refer to it since some fragments help to clarify some important passages found in part A and B. Nevertheless, this section is mainly concerned in discussing the creation of Eve in eastern Valentinianism.

One of the clearest passages in this regard is *ExTheod* 21:

The Valentinians say that the finest emanation of Sophia is spoken of in “He created them in the image of God, male and female created he them.” (*Gen.* 1:27) Now the male elements from this emanation are the “election,” but the female elements are the “calling”. They call the male elements “angelic”, and the females – that is, themselves – “the superior seed”. So also, in the case of Adam, the male element remained in him,

but all the female seed was taken from him and became Eve, from whom the female elements are derived, as the males are from him. Therefore, the male elements are drawn together with the Logos, but the female ones, becoming men, are united to the angels and pass into the Pleroma. Therefore, the woman is said to be changed into a man, and the Church here on earth into Angels.¹⁷³

Sophia's spiritual emanation – that is, the emanation that she brought forth after receiving the formation κατὰ γυνῶσιν – is constituted by some male and some female elements. Agreeing with Buckley against Pagels,¹⁷⁴ I interpret this emanation as happening in cooperation with Christ, who is the one to give form to Sophia's offspring. The male elements constitute the totality of the angels that were emanated with a higher level of perfection, whence the attribution of a male gender. Being male, they are usually identified with the companions of the bridegroom.¹⁷⁵ Contrariwise, the female elements are identified with the spiritual seed – that is, the Church of perfect ones who dwell in the inferior world – which strives to be united with the male element in order to reach the required level of perfection to enter the Pleroma. They are less perfect than their male counterparts – hence the female gender. According to a typological mechanism, Sophia's emanation mirrors the formation and composition of the Pleroma, since she brought forth syzygial couples in which the male part represents the strong element, whereas the female element represents the weak one. Furthermore, consistently with what it has been observed in this chapter, this passage shows that it would be incorrect to understand female or male genders as the physical sexes. The angels' maleness does not correspond in any way to a physical status and neither does the femaleness of the spiritual seed. It would be equally incorrect to interpret the

¹⁷³ *ExTheod* 21, 1-3: Τῷ «κατ' εἰκόνα Θεοῦ ἐποίησεν αὐτούς, ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ ἐποίησεν αὐτούς» τὴν προβολὴν τὴν ἀρίστην φασὶν οἱ Οὐαλεντινιανοὶ τῆς Σοφίας λέγεσθαι, ἀφ' ἧς τὰ μὲν ἄρρενικὰ ἢ ἐκλογή, τὰ δὲ θηλυκὰ ἢ κλησίς. Καὶ τὰ μὲν ἄρρενικὰ ἀγγελικὰ καλοῦσι, τὰ θηλυκὰ δὲ ἑαυτούς, τὸ διαφέρον σπέρμα. Οὕτως καὶ ἐπὶ τοῦ Ἀδάμ, τὸ μὲν ἄρρενικὸν ἔμεινεν αὐτῷ, πᾶν δὲ τὸ θηλυκὸν σπέρμα ἀρθὲν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ Εὐὰ γέγονεν, ἀφ' ἧς αἱ θήλειαι, ὡς ἀπ' ἐκείνου οἱ ἄρρενες. Τὰ οὖν ἄρρενικὰ μετὰ τοῦ Λόγου συνεστάλη· τὰ θηλυκὰ δὲ ἀπανδρωθέντα ἐνοῦται τοῖς Ἀγγέλοις καὶ εἰς Πλήρωμα χωρεῖ. Διὰ τοῦτο ἡ γυνὴ εἰς ἄνδρα μετατίθεσθαι λέγεται καὶ ἡ ἐνταῦθα Ἐκκλησία εἰς Ἀγγέλους.

¹⁷⁴ See Buckley (1986b), 63; Pagels (1974), 42.

¹⁷⁵ *ExTheod* 65, 1.

passage about the transformation of women into men as some sort of gender shifting or a specific ritual – as Buckley did in reference to Logion 114 in the *Gospel of Thomas* – since neither the allegorical language of Valentinian texts nor their sacramental theology provide any evidence that suggests the existence of rituals of gender transformation.¹⁷⁶ As a matter of fact, the female spiritual seed constitutes the spiritual Church, in which there are both men and women; consequently, all those who belong to the spiritual Church, regardless of their birth sexes, should be considered “female”. On the contrary, the “male” represents a different emanation from that of the spiritual seed, a superior emanation which resembles Christ – that is, the male part of the syzygy that brought them forth – rather than Sophia. The transformation of the “female” into a “male” will happen when the syzygy will be re-united. When the pneumatic human beings will be eschatologically married to the angels and the syzygy Sophia-Christ will be constituted once again, the female pneumatic beings will be ‘changed into male’ for it will be one with the male angels.

This interpretation of the passage goes strongly against Buckley’s interpretation, since I claim that Sophia’s emanation is a spiritual emanation in both its male and female form; otherwise, one would be compelled to admit that the female seed, which constitutes the church of the Valentinians, is mostly made of psychic beings.¹⁷⁷ Furthermore, it would mean that Sophia herself is not being sanctified by the intervention of Christ, thus remaining a psychic being.¹⁷⁸ I believe that these misunderstandings regarding the philosophical use of gender categories in this text is caused by two factors: a) the continuing shift of terminology between the Pleromatic world and the inferior world, which has already been observed in regard to Sophia’s appellative of father;¹⁷⁹ b) the presence of two contrasting models of Valentinian anthropology. The Valentinian system of *ExTheod* – and of

¹⁷⁶ *Gospel of Thomas*, Logion 114, 51:18 – 51:26. See Buckley (1985).

¹⁷⁷ However, this possibility is strongly refuted in Gnostic texts, since one of the most renowned features of Gnostic communities is the belief that they were the elected seed. For instance, see Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 6, 4, where he affirms that Valentinian Gnostics used to consider themselves as the ‘elect’.

¹⁷⁸ See Buckley (1986b).

¹⁷⁹ *Supra* III.3.2.2.

Valentinianism in general – seems to oscillate between two different anthropological models, even within the same texts. On the one hand, it would appear that they propose a tripartite anthropology, according to which human beings are constituted by spirit (πνεῦμα), soul (ψυχή) and material body (ὕλη). This is indeed the case of the abovementioned passage of *ExTheod* 21 and others, such as *ExTheod* 2, 51 and 63. In particular, *ExTheod* 2 specifies that while the spirit has been sown in Adam by the Logos, the soul and material body are a creation of Sophia.¹⁸⁰ On the other hand, Valentinian Gnostics seem to divide human beings into three categories that correspond to the three natures: πνευματικοί (pneumatic/spiritual ones), ψυχικοί (psychic ones) and, lastly, the ὑλικοί (material ones). In this model, the categories seem fixed and each human being seems to be born into a particular nature, thus being bound to the eschatological destiny of the nature to which he or she belongs. This is indeed the anthropological model that is exemplified in *ExTheod* 56.¹⁸¹ The integration of these two models in a single doctrine has proven to be highly problematic, particularly concerning the use of gender categories. According to the first anthropological model, the male element is represented by the spirit in Adam, whereas the female element is represented by Adam's soul. Contrariwise, according to the second anthropological model, the male element is represented by the higher class of spiritual beings, whereas the female element is constituted by the psychic beings. In the abovementioned *ExTheod* 21, these two anthropological models clash one against the other. In the first part, the author opts for the second anthropological model, using however the genders opposition to indicate two levels of perfection within the spiritual nature (that is, angels and spiritual seed). Here, the feminine is associated with the pneumatic nature, rather than the psychic nature as claimed by Buckley,

¹⁸⁰ *ExTheod* 2, 1-2: 'But the followers of Valentinus maintain that when the animal body was fashioned a male seed was implanted by the Logos in the elect soul while it was asleep and that this is an effluence of the angelic seed, in order that there may be no deficiency. And this worked as leaven, uniting what appeared to have been divided – that is, soul and flesh – which had also been put forth separately by Sophia. And Adam's sleep was the soul's forgetting, so that the soul was restrained from dissolution by the spiritual seed which the Saviour inserted into it. The seed was an effluence of the male and angelic [element]. Therefore, the Saviour says, "Be saved, thou and thy soul."'

¹⁸¹ As I mentioned before, these conflicting anthropological models have been object of many studies, especially concerning the debate about whether the psychic nature will be saved eschatologically. *Supra* III.3.1.3.

since it strives to be reunited with the male angels, who represent the better emission of Sophia.¹⁸² This association is confirmed by the difference between the ‘election’ (ἐκλογή) and the ‘calling’ (κλήσις): while the male angelic beings are already elected for they possess a higher status of perfection, the pneumatic seed is κλήσις insofar as it has not yet reached the status of perfection proper to the ἐκλογή.¹⁸³ By contrast, the second part applies the first anthropological model, according to which Adam retains the male and angelic part of the human being (τὸ ἀρρενικὸν) – that is, the πνεῦμα – whilst Eve bears the feminine part of the threefold anthropology (τὸ θηλυκὸν), that is, the ψυχή. A possible explanation of the shift from one anthropological model to the other can be found in section C of *ExTheod*. Here, the three races of human beings are traced back to Adam’s and Eve’s offspring: Cain is the forefather of the hylic human beings; Abel is the forefather of the psychic human beings; lastly, Seth is the forefather of the spiritual seed.¹⁸⁴ Although the tradition of Seth as the initiator of a seed of elect pneumatic beings is well attested also in other Gnostic movements, the myth according to which Cain and Abel were the initiators of the races of psychic and hylic human beings does not appear to find any further confirmation either in Valentinian or in other Gnostic works. Consequently, this remains an open problem in Valentinian studies.¹⁸⁵

Regardless of which anthropological models one refers to, it is worth noting that, in *ExTheod*, the apex of human life must be identified in the reunion of masculine and feminine elements:

Henceforth the spiritual elements having put off their souls, together with the Mother who leads the bridegroom, also lead bridegrooms – their angels – and pass into the bridal chamber within the Limit and attain to

¹⁸² See Buckley (1986b), 61-70. In addition, I believe this is confirmed by *ExTheod* 2, 1-2.

¹⁸³ Like Simonetti (1999), 506, I note here the anomaly of using the terms ἐκλογή and κλήσις to indicate two different stages of perfection, rather than the opposition of between pneumatic and psychic as in the *GN* (*AdHaer* I, 6, 4) and in Heracleon’s fragments (Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* X, 33).

¹⁸⁴ *ExTheod* 54, 1-3.

¹⁸⁵ The complex integration of these two models has been discussed, but not solved, by Thomassen (2013).

the vision of the Father, – having become intellectual Aeons, in the intellectual and eternal marriages of the syzygies.¹⁸⁶

Hence, *ExTheod* considers unity as the goal of human life, for the separation between masculine and feminine is not accepted within the Pleroma. In the final times, the rest of the Pleroma will be restored and, then, only syzygies will exist in the divine realm. Therefore, this union between male and female is conceived as a spousal union, which will happen in the ‘bridal chamber’. How should we then deem the ‘bridal chamber’ to be, according to the two anthropological models? In the threefold anthropological model, the bridal chamber will happen when the masculine spirit and the psychic soul become one, that is, when Adam and Eve are united in syzygy as they were in the original creation. This is well exemplified in *ExTheod* 80, 1-2, which discusses the role of Christ in giving life to the death which came into being because of Eve’s separation from Adam.¹⁸⁷ Similarly, in the second anthropological model, the bridal chamber will be realized when the angels will be eschatologically married to the spiritual seed. In this regard, *ExTheod* 86, 3 is particularly clear, for it uses the parable of the wise and foolish virgins (*Mt.* 25, 1-13) as an allegory of the reunion of the masculine and feminine elements.¹⁸⁸

In summary, notwithstanding the terminological differences due to the different anthropological models, the use of gender categories remains consistent with what has been observed in other cases: maleness represents the better and higher status of perfection, whereas femaleness indicates the status of those who need to be perfected. However, these two stages are either applied to the opposition between two natures – that is, pneumatic versus psychic

¹⁸⁶ *ExTheod* 64: Τὸ δὲ ἐντεῦθεν, ἀποθέμενα τὰ πνευματικὰ τὰς ψυχάς, ἅμα τῇ Μητρὶ κομιζομένη τὸν Νυμφίον, κομιζόμενα καὶ αὐτὰ τοὺς νυμφίους, τοὺς Ἀγγέλους ἑαυτῶν, εἰς τὸν Νυμφῶνα ἐντὸς τοῦ Ὁροῦ εἰσίσαι, καὶ πρὸς τὴν τοῦ Πατρὸς ὄψιν ἔρχονται, Αἰῶνες νοεροὶ γενόμενα, εἰς τοὺς νοεροὺς καὶ αἰωνίους γάμους τῆς συζυγίας.

¹⁸⁷ *ExTheod* 80, 1-2: ‘He whom the Mother generates is led into death and into the world, but he whom Christ regenerates is transferred to life into the Ogdoad. And they die to the world but live to God, that death may be loosed by death and corruption by resurrection.’ This finds a perfect parallel in *GosPhil* II, 68, 22-26.

¹⁸⁸ *ExTheod* 86,3: ‘These are the children who are now resting in bed and “the wise virgins,” with whom the others, who are late, did not enter into the goods which have been prepared, on which the angels desire to gaze.’

nature – or to two different levels of divine perfection – that is, a higher level of divinity versus a lower level of divinity. Therefore, the threefold Valentinian anthropology does not seem to share the same mythologoumenon of the Sethian, Ophite and Barbeloite tradition, according to which Eve separates into two different beings: a spiritual Eve and a carnal Eve. Concerning the mythologoumenon of Eve's creation, in *ExTheod* Eve is the psychic part of Adam which is taken away from him, whilst in Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite traditions Eve is considered to be the incarnated manifestation of Sophia's spirit. Hence, while Eve and Sophia are strictly intertwined in the Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite texts that I have analyzed due to their spiritual nature, the Valentinian system of *ExTheod* links the two characters primarily by means of their defectiveness: just as Sophia is the inferior and defective part of God, Eve is the imperfect part of Adam. Nevertheless, from a theological perspective, the other anthropological model of *ExTheod* maintains the doctrine according to which the feminine is an allegorical representation of the inferior level of divinity, that is, the spiritual seed. In this case, Eve and Sophia are linked ecclesiologically since they are metaphors of the eschatological Church of the elect. In conclusion, I believe that the representation of the incarnated feminine in *ExTheod* confirms the paradoxical nature of the feminine in Valentinianism, for Eve is both allegory of Adam's soul and the entirety of the spiritual seed. Furthermore, it is worth noting that *ExTheod* displays the properly Valentinian doctrine of the bridal chamber, which is envisioned as the eschatological reunion of masculine and feminine elements.

III.4.2 Eve in the Bridal Chamber in the *Gospel of Philip* (NHC II, 3)

In *GosPhil*, the connection between the incarnated feminine and the bridal chamber is even more strict than it is in *ExTheod*, since most quotations about the first woman in *GosPhil* concern the sacrament of the bridal chamber.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁹ Scholars have discussed the rituals implied by this sacrament, but the debate remains very much open. The scholarly debate focuses mainly on two points, namely the liturgical and social role of sex in the performance of the ritual of the bridal chamber and the theological purpose of the ritual. While the latter topic will be the focus of the chapter, I believe it is worth giving the reader a brief overview of the scholarly debate regarding the former. In this regard, there are three scholarly trends. Some scholars, such as Segelberg (1960), believe that the

Consequently, I believe that a brief – albeit not exhaustive – outline of this sacrament is necessary in order to understand the role of Eve in Valentinian imagery.

Valentinian Gnostics employed a strong sexual imagery to express the mystery of the bridal chamber and it is in this context that the creation of Adam and Eve is discussed:

The soul of Adam (ΤΦΥΧΗ ΝΑΑΔΑΜ) came into being by means of a breath. The partner of his soul (ΠΕCΖΩΤΡ) is the spirit (ΠΠ[Ν]Α). His mother (ΤΕΦΜΑΛΥ) is the thing that was given to him. His soul (ΦΥΧΗ) was taken from him and replaced by a [spirit] (ΠΝΑ). When he was united (to the spirit), [he spoke] words incomprehensible to the powers. They envied him [...] spiritual partner (ΖΩΤΡ ΠΠΝΕΥΜΑ[ΤΙΚ...]) [...] hidden [...] opportunity [...] for themselves alone [...] bridal chamber ([...Π]ΑCΤΟC) so that [...]¹⁹⁰

Although the passage is fragmentary, two elements emerge clearly. First, Adam was endowed with a soul ‘by means of breath’, namely through the works of the Demiurge. Secondly, since this soul was imperfect, it needed a partner who belonged to a superior nature, that is, the spirit. Thus far, the information deducible from *GosPhil* confirms those provided by *ExTheod*. However, the interpretation of this passage becomes trickier when one compares the second part of the passage with other Gnostic mythologies, particularly that of *ApJohn*, *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*, where Eve is identified with the spirit. As a matter of fact, *GosPhil* presents the myth of Adam speaking incomprehensible words in the presence of ‘powers’ once he is filled by this spirit, which is the partner of his soul. This mythologoumenon

bridal chamber represents an utterly non-sexual ritual, whereas others contemplate the possibility that this ritual implied some sort of sexual union, particularly Grant (1961a); Ménard (1967) and Buckley (1980). Following Brown (1988) and Pagels (1991), a third interpretation has been proposed by De Conick (2003) and (2011), who has claimed that the ritual was different for psychic and pneumatic couples respectively. While marriage is a carnal affair for psychic men and women, the sexual union between a pneumatic woman and a man is considered a matter of ‘will’, therefore it is not finalised to procreation and accepted. Among these unions, Valentinians preferred the latter.

¹⁹⁰ *GosPhil* II, 70, 22-33.

resembles very closely that of *HypArch* and *OrigWorld* in which Adam speaks with the spiritual Eve who is awakening him.¹⁹¹ Hence, these elements suggest that *GosPhil* is here following the tradition of Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite texts according to which there is a spiritual Eve hidden in Adam. Moreover, this would also be confirmed by other passages of *GosPhil*, such as: ‘Adam came into being from two virgins (ἡΠΑΡΘΕΝΟΣ), from the spirit (ΖἸ ΠΠΝΑ) and from the virgin earth (ΖἸ ΠΚΑΖ ἡΠΑΡΘΕΝΟΣ)’.¹⁹² Here, I am inclined to identify the two virgins as Sophia Echamot and Sophia Echmot: while the latter contributes to the material and psychic substance of which Adam’s body and soul are made, the former – that is, Eve – is its spiritual substance. In this instance, *GosPhil* follows a different trend to that of *ExTheod*, for it does not employ gender categories as philosophical categories where maleness indicates spiritual and pneumatic nature, whilst femaleness indicates the deficient and inferior nature, regardless of whether it is psychic or hylic. Contrariwise, *GosPhil* follows the mythologoumena proper to the Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite traditions.

Despite the mythological similarities with Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite traditions presented so far, *GosPhil* does not display any of the theological implications according to which Eve is a pneumatic and soteriological agent. Nevertheless, it does equate Eve to Adam’s pneumatic life principle:

When Eve (ΕΥΖΑ) was still in Adam (ΑΔΑΜ) death (ΜΟΥ) did not exist. When she was separated (ΝΤΑΡΕCΠΩΡΧ) from him death came into being. If he enters again and attains his former self, death will be no more.¹⁹³

If the woman (CΖΙΜΕ) had not separated (ΠΩΡΧ) from the man (ΕΦΟΟΥΤ), she would not die with the man (ΦΟΟΥΤ). His separation became the beginning of death. Because of this Christ came to repair the separation which was from the beginning and again unite the two and give life to

¹⁹¹ See *HypArch* II, 88, 15 and *OrigWorld* II, 115, 30 – 116, 25, which I have already discussed in *supra* II.4.2 and II.4.3.

¹⁹² *GosPhil* II, 16-21.

¹⁹³ *GosPhil* II, 68, 22-26.

those who died as a result of the separation and unite them. But the woman is united to her husband in the bridal chamber (Ζῆ ΠΠΑΣΤΟΣ). Indeed, those who have been united in the bridal chamber (Ζῆ ΠΠΑΣΤΟΣ) will no longer be separated. Thus, Eve (ΑΕΥΖΑ) separated (ΠΩΡΧ) from Adam (ΑΑΔΑΜ) because it was not in the bridal chamber (Ζῆ ΠΠΑΣΤΟΣ) that she united with him (ἸΤΑΣΖΩΤΕΡ).¹⁹⁴

On the one hand, this passage confirms that, in accordance to the majority of Gnostic stories about the creation of humankind, human beings are created as androgynous beings, since the separation into two sexes comes at a later time. On the other hand, it shows the paradoxical nature of the feminine. Although Eve is identified with the pneumatic presence who gives life to Adam, her separation from him also represents the beginning of death.¹⁹⁵ Indeed, due to a typological reading of Genesis, Sophia is type of Eve. Just as the order of the Pleroma is disrupted by Sophia's separation from her syzygial partner, so the separation of Eve from Adam causes death to exist among human beings. Following this logic, one could say that just as Sophia is the origin of evils for the divine world, Eve is the beginning of evil in the material world. From a soteriological perspective, Christ's coming ought to be effective for Eve's disruption as well as for that of Sophia: if Sophia is eschatologically reunited with her partner, so must Eve be reunited. Hence, this passage seems to suggest that the final purpose of human life is to rebuild the protological androgynous unity of human beings. If this is the case, how should we then interpret this androgynous unit? I propose to interpret it as an allegory of the union which will be realized in the bridal chamber between the male element and the female element, which are here intended – however – in the opposite way compared to the rest of the Valentinian works.¹⁹⁶ In this regard, I agree with Grant,¹⁹⁷ who was the first scholar to reflect on the 'archetypical unity', thus connecting the bridal chamber with the creation of Adam and Eve.

¹⁹⁴ *GosPhil* II, 70, 10-22. This passage has been analysed in the previous chapter, *supra* III.3.2.1.

¹⁹⁵ See Pagels (2000), 198-206.

¹⁹⁶ On the importance and sacramental value of the verb 'ΖΩΤΕΡ' (unite) in *GosPhil* see Buckley – Good (1997), 12-13.

¹⁹⁷ Grant 1961, 134-135; Thomassen (2006), 394-396.

In summary, the incarnated feminine in *GosPhil* presents Valentinian theologoumena, although it employs mythologoumena that are closer to Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite traditions. The most striking Valentinian feature consists in its doctrine of the bridal chamber. *GosPhil* claims that the separation between Adam and Eve does not happen in the Pleroma and that it does not take place in the bridal chamber. On the contrary, it would appear that the separation causes them to lose the status required to enter the bridal chamber, since the text is extremely clear regarding the idea that the separation of Eve from Adam is the beginning of evils for human beings. The goal of human life remains therefore the annulment of the separation which happened in the beginning, since Christ came into the world to make one out of the two. Moreover, this is valid both in the case of Sophia and in that of Eve, since both separations cause division in syzygial unions: just as Eve is separated from Adam, thus Sophia is separated from the Saviour. Hence, this analysis has led me to the conclusion that the bridal chamber is a Valentinian sacrament that mimicked typologically the re-constitution of the syzygial unity between men and women. However, unlike *ExTheod*, *GosPhil* considers Eve as the spiritual substance that vivifies Adam, thus resembling the mythologoumena proper to the Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite traditions. By uniting these two different trends, *GosPhil* accentuates the paradoxical nature of the feminine, which is both spirit in human beings and the cause of human disgrace.

III.4.3 Concluding Remarks on the Incarnated Valentinian Feminine

The representation of Eve in Valentinianism is more unitary than it appears at first glance. With regard to the two works that we have studied in this chapter, it is sufficient to summarize briefly their different anthropologies. On the one hand, *ExTheod* is characterized by two different anthropological models, in which Eve is type of either the psychic soul in human beings or of the totality of the spiritual seed. On the other hand, *GosPhil* makes Eve type of spiritual nature in Adam. Although it is true that *ExTheod*'s and *GosPhil*'s mythologoumena and theologoumena differ to a certain extent, the two texts share a fundamental Valentinian theologoumenon: the idea that the status of

perfection is gained by means of reunion of the masculine and feminine parts in a unity, which is considered as the spousal union that takes place in the 'bridal chamber'. Furthermore, both texts envision this union as the re-composition of the protological unity between Adam and Eve; consequently, they envision a very close connection between Eve and Sophia, since both Eve and Sophia are the brides waiting to be reunited with their lawful spouse in the bridal chamber. It is indeed this close connection between Sophia, Eve and the mystery of the bridal chamber that marks the specificity of the Valentinian way of conceiving the incarnated feminine.

III.5 Conclusion

The analysis conducted in this part of my work has shown that, although the feminine principle is generally interpreted as subordinate to the masculine, it nevertheless plays a fundamental role in Valentinianism.

From a pleromatological perspective, it has been observed that female characters – for example, Silence – perform primarily a generative role. In the so-called pleromatologies of type B, Silence works in syzygy with the Father to generate the totality of the pleromatic aeons, which are also emanated in couples, thus resembling the primordial syzygy. This syzygial structure – that is, the organization of the Pleroma into male/female couples – has been found to be the basic rule which governs pleromatic activities, which are always performed by two entities. Nevertheless, the male and female entities do not equally partake in the act of generation, for the male elements perform an active role, whereas the female elements are relegated to a passive role. In particular, it has been stressed that Silence partakes in the Father's intellectual generation of the Pleroma by assuming the passive role of spiritual substratum, which the *GN* specified as that of μήτρα (matrix). As such, Silence works as a container of the Father's power; consequently, I have concluded that Valentinian pleromatic female characters do not show any of the active generative roles that are proper to female characters in Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite movements, for Valentinian Gnostics stress primarily the syzygial subordination of the female to the male element.

Notwithstanding the importance of Valentinian pleromatologies, I have identified the core of Valentinianism in the myth of the fallen feminine. In this regard, the peculiarity of Valentinianism consists in the representation of Sophia through a 'myth of separation', according to which the fallen feminine is always distinguished in two characters: a superior pleromatic entity and an inferior defective being. However, this myth is known in two different versions in Valentinian sources. The first version is represented by the one Sophia system, detectable in *ExVal*, *ExTheod* (section A-B-D) and Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 11, 1. Here, the separation of Sophia happens by means of filiation, for

Sophia's better self is identified with her son Christ. All three accounts underline the subordination of female beings to male ones, envisioning Sophia as a defective being needing redemption, which will happen through Christ, being him both her son and her syzygial partner. My analysis of the subordinate role of Sophia to her son Christ has resulted in two important findings. First, I have found that some Valentinian Gnostics incorporate Sophia's defectiveness within the Godhead, since they envision Sophia's passion as the mythological and pleromatic archetype of the historical Christ's passion. Secondly, I have underlined that other Valentinian Gnostics personify in Sophia the totality of the spiritual seed, insofar as they identify Sophia with the visible part of Christ. In particular, *ExTheod* attributes to Sophia the main ecclesiological functions of the third person of the Trinity, namely the Holy Spirit. Hence, Sophia gains both a Christological function (archetype of Christ's passion) and an ecclesiological function (totality of spiritual seed), but never a soteriological function, in the Christ/Sophia Valentinian myth. The second version of the myth of separation is represented by two Sophias system, expressed in *GosPhil* and the *GN*. In these cases, Sophia's separation is conceived as the separation between a pleromatic Sophia (named either Sophia Echamot or simply Sophia) and a defective Sophia (named either Sophia Echmot or Sophia Achamot). The originality of the two Sophias systems consists in affirming that the defective feminine is the active force of God, acting covertly in the world and guiding the spiritual seed back into the Pleroma. Moreover, I have highlighted that these accounts stress Sophia's need of male intervention, for her male partner is the one who can give form – either κατ'οὐσίαν or κατὰ γνῶσιν – to Sophia Achamot. Therefore, the fallen feminine maintains the same Christological and ecclesiological functions despite the different versions of the separation myths. Lastly, I have shown that *GosPhil* and the *GN* also reveal the myth of Sophia as the theological core of the Valentinian practice of the bridal chamber, since this sacrament finds its *raison d'être* in the protological story of Sophia's fall.

Since the myth of Eve's creation is directly linked to the sacrament of the bridal chamber in both *ExTheod* and *GosPhil*, the bridal chamber constitutes the main theological and mythological link between the fallen feminine and the

incarnated feminine. In this regard, I have highlighted that Valentinian Gnostics believe that the separation between Adam and Eve, who were originally created as one androgynous human being, is the beginning of death among humans, for it causes the loss of the original status of perfect syzygial unity. Consequently, according to the Valentinian anthropological doctrine, the separation of Eve from Adam is equated to Sophia's separation from her syzygial companion. Moreover, just as Sophia is restored after her sin by the intervention of the Saviour, so the separation between Adam and Eve needs to be mended. This is indeed the purpose of the sacrament of the bridal chamber.

Moreover, according to my interpretation of *ExTheod*, Valentinian Gnostics understand the re-constitution of the original unity between Adam and Eve in two ways: one is based on a threefold anthropological model – according to which human beings are constituted by spirit, soul and body – and the other is based on a classification of humankind into three classes – pneumatic, psychic and hylic. In the anthropological model in which Eve is considered the psychic part of human beings, the re-composition of the syzygy is interpreted as the harmonisation of the spiritual and psychic part of the human being, where the spiritual part is probably conceived as leading the psychic part. On the contrary, in the anthropological models in which Eve is considered as an allegory of the feminine pneumatic seed striving to be reunited with its angelic male counterpart, the re-constitution of the syzygy is envisioned as the eschatological union of Sophia's male and female emissions. In this regard, I would like to bring some attention to the philosophical use of gender categories that is used by Valentinian teachers. Indeed, the attribution of female or male gender to a specific being do not necessarily correspond to the physical and biological sex of the being itself. This is primarily demonstrated by the feminine character attributed to the spiritual seed, that is, the totality of men and women that constitute Sophia's lower emission. As a matter of fact, the use of gender categories corresponds to a specific philosophical intent, which associated maleness with perfection and femaleness with imperfection.

In conclusion, Valentinian Gnostics employ feminine imagery in order to describe the mystery of the divine in its many forms. From a Trinitarian

perspective, the different interpretations of the feminine reveal the shift from a Trinitarian speculation which considers the third person of the Trinity as the mother of the Saviour to one of the first Trinitarian doctrines of the Holy Spirit as an acting force of God. From a Christological perspective, the interpretation of the feminine as type of Christ's body shows the difficulties found by Valentinian Gnostics in dealing with the idea of God's suffering. Lastly, from a theological and soteriological perspective, the feminine reveals the underlying principle of the Valentinian sacrament of the bridal chamber, which envisions the restoration of the divine and the unity between the male and female elements in God.

IV. Gnostic Case-Studies: The Feminine in Other Gnostic Traditions

In the previous sections of my work I have discussed the representation of the three aspects of the feminine in well-known and widely studied Gnostic traditions. In this last section, my research addresses the less studied Gnostic texts which present a peculiar or significant feminine imagery. Given the multi-faceted nature of the Gnostic movement, it is essential to include these texts into my investigation of the feminine to give voices to those texts which have been underestimated in the study of such a complex religious phenomenon, since they provide precious insights for understanding feminine imagery in Gnostic circles. However, unlike the previous traditions, these texts do not belong to any specific Gnostic tradition. Consequently, they have been grouped together in this section mostly because of their originality within Gnosticism, rather than because they present specific similarities.

In the first chapter, I will explore the representation of the feminine in the so-called Simonian Gnosis. In particular, I will focus on the character of Helena of Tyre, the alleged prostitute who was Simon Magus' companion. In the second chapter, I will analyse the *Book of Baruch*, which is known to us in the transcription of Hippolytus. This text presents a unique Gnostic mythology in which feminine imagery plays a fundamental and, yet, unique role. In the third chapter, I will discuss the role of the feminine in the Nag Hammadi treatise entitled *The Exegesis of the Soul*. This Coptic treatise is centred on a female character, the soul, and its journey towards salvation, thus representing one of the most significant examples of Gnostic feminine imagery.

IV.1 Helena of Tyre in the so-called Simonian Gnosis

The character of Simon Magus is one of the most controversial of all times.¹ Although he is mentioned only once in the New Testament,² he had an unusual success among early Christian authors. As a matter of fact, he is widely mentioned in ancient Christian literature, where he is often depicted as the first Gnostic heretic.³ Due to the extremely polemical nature of ancient sources on his life, it has not been possible to determine with certainty who he was. Some sources claim he was an opponent of Peter's power in Jerusalem;⁴ others that he was one of the many magicians who dwelled in Palestine during the first century;⁵ all heresiological sources agreed he was the founder of a Gnostic movement.⁶ Many scholars have investigated this topic and many different conclusions have been reached so far. As Haar's research has proved,⁷ it is not possible to find a definitive, conclusive and uniform answer to the question of

¹ The bibliography on Simon Magus is quite extensive. I will mention here only the few that have dedicated some attention to the character of Helena: Beyschlag (1974); Filoramo (1990), 143-152; Adamik (1998), 52-64; Haar (2003). Ferreiro (2005) has the merit to have highlighted first the lack of scholarly investigation on Helena. See also Lettieri (2008).

² *Acts* 8:9-25.

³ On the possible Samaritan origin of Gnosticism, see Fossum (1985).

⁴ Such as the *Acts of Peter*.

⁵ The description of his magical deeds is well attested in the *Pseudo Clemenine Literature*; both *Hom* and *Rec*. In particular, see *Hom* II, 22-24; *Hom* II, 32; and *Rec* II, 9.

⁶ See Justin, *ApPr* 26, 1-3; Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 23, 1-5; Hippolytus, *El* VI, 9-18. In this chapter, I will only analyse in details these three heresiological sources; whereas others (such as Epiphanius, *Pan* I, 22, 1-7 or Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* II, 12, 3 – 15, 1) will be used only as a general reference, since they do not add any additional information to previous sources.

⁷ See Haar (2003), 294-307. In his conclusions, he addressed the question regarding Simon's identity from three different perspectives: 1) If one considers the definition of Gnosticism agreed in 1966 at the Colloquium of Messina, then Simon should not be regarded as a Gnostic. Nevertheless, he was forced to admit that 'from the viewpoint of Messina there are sufficient grounds to answer a tentative "yes" to him being a pre-Gnostic in the terms of the definition; yet, as noted, there are non-compliant factors in the reports of Simon's teaching and activities which question this apparent correspondence'. 2) If one considers the accounts of ancient writers from their own perspective, then he was the 'Father of all heresy [...] and only "first Gnostic" by implication'. 3) Haar attempted to unveil the historical Simon and, in this regard, he concluded that 'from the viewpoint of "Simon," or at least from the evidence of his reconstructed teachings, there are reasons to conclude he was a charismatic figure adept in the traditions of the *Magoi*, who exercised considerable ability, authority, and influence. A self-proclaimed expert in divine things, Simon would not have rejected the notion of being a "Gnostic;" at least not in the original classical sense of the word. He taught a source of truth and salvation that differed from mainstream Jewish thought and practice; he claimed the preeminent role of "Standing One"—some called him the "first God," Christians viewed him as a "Christ pretender"—and he enjoyed public favour and widespread respect from Samaria to Rome'. From the reading of Haar's work, his personal preference for the latter options appears clear.

the historical Simon's identity. However, this should not discourage Gnostic scholars from dedicating due attention to Simonian gnosis, which remains a religious phenomenon that has interested many heresiologists and theologians of later centuries.⁸ In this chapter, I will focus on the testimonies regarding Helena, Simon's companion, since I am convinced that her character can cast some light on the core doctrines of the so-called Simonian gnosis. Indeed, I aim at demonstrating that her portrayal in heresiological sources groups together all three aspects of Gnostic feminine imagery: first, she is portrayed as the feminine in the Godhead for she is identified with Ennoia, the female companion of Simon's First-God; secondly, she is represented as the fallen female figure, since she lost her divine position and entered the historical cycle of re-incarnation; lastly, she is identified with the carnal woman who went about with Simon. In this respect, it is worth underlining that the affiliation of the historical Simon Magus to Gnosticism falls beyond the scope of my research, for the chapter aims at discussing the place of Helena within the Simonian gnosis, as presented in ancient accounts.

Although Helena is not mentioned in any of the early sources regarding Simon – that is, *Acts of Apostles* and *Acts of Peter* – she assumes a prominent role in all accounts after the second half of the second century; so much so that Jerome, in his *Letter to Ctesiphon*,⁹ listed an apostolic and heretical succession of women that started with Helena. Her absence from earlier sources is indeed puzzling and one might argue that the story of Simon and Helena's illicit love relationship played a major role in discrediting Simon's character in heresiological accounts.¹⁰ In this regard, one must remember that Helena's relationship with Simon has a significant role also in non-heresiological narratives, such as the *Pseudo-Clementine Literature*, thus suggesting that she has some ulterior purpose within the Simonian system. If she is not merely a

⁸ In truth, he also had a discrete success during the Middle and Modern Age: see Ferreiro (2005), 201-319.

⁹ Jerome, *Epistula* 133. To deepen this topic, see Ferreiro (1993).

¹⁰ Another chapter could be written to investigate the reasons why this illicit relationship would have helped heresiologists to discredit Simon Magus. Due to brevity, it is only worth noting that the idea of the superiority of celibacy over marriage (especially in its illegitimate forms) was beginning to spread as early as the first century, see Paul *1Cor* 7, 32-38. See Brown (1988).

cunning ploy to discredit Simon, what makes Helena so important as to be always mentioned in relation to Simon? By reading the sources on Simon's life, it is only possible to formulate an educated guess: either she was carefully fashioned by heresiologists in order to make Simon a credible Gnostic teacher¹¹ or she was indeed originally part of the Simonian system. Either way, it is clear that Simon's connection to this woman was essential to recognise him as Gnostic teacher.¹² Whether she was a historical figure or not and whether Simon's adversaries super-imposed these features on her character or even fashioned her from scratch, it remains noteworthy that her character has been exploited to make Simon a credible Gnostic teacher. The focus of my research will therefore be on the representation of Helena within the Simonian Gnostic cosmos and on how the character of Simon was skilfully fashioned by ancient writers with the purpose of creating the archenemy *par excellence*, the forefather of the biggest heretical threats of the first centuries. In summary, the Gnostic Simon is – probably unwillingly – the main example of how meaningful and inescapable the feminine is for Gnostic mythology.

IV.1.1 The Character of Helena in Ancient Accounts of Simonian Gnosis

Justin Martyr informs the reader in depth about the immorality of Simon's life. In Justin's *ApPr* 26, 1-3,¹³ Simon is presented as a Samaritan from the town of Gitto who lived under the emperor Claudius (41-54 AD). Supposedly, he was not only active in Samaria, but in Rome as well, where he was even venerated as a god. He was popular to such degree that people dedicated a statue to his cult, the cult of the 'First God'.¹⁴ Simon's fame gained him many followers, who appeared to have created a sect of magic-practitioners.¹⁵ Among them,

¹¹ If so, it is unfortunately impossible to determine with absolute certainty whether they had re-fashioned a real woman or invented her entirely.

¹² This aspect of the Simonian gnosis has been mainly overlooked by previous scholarly investigations. As far as I am aware, the only exception is Quispel (1951).

¹³ Justin's apology was probably written not many years before his death (165 CE), since it addressed the roman emperor Antoninus Pius (138-161 CE) but it contained also a letter of Marcus Aurelius (161-180 CE). For the Greek text, see Minns – Parvis (2009); the translation is mine.

¹⁴ According to Justin, the statue bared an inscription *Simoni Deo Sancto*. A statue with such an inscription was indeed recovered in Rome in 1574 near the island of Tiber, but archaeologists believe it was dedicated to the cult of the Sabine deity *Semo Sancto*.

¹⁵ Justin, *ApPr* 26, 3.

Justin lists Menander, whom he accuses of '[having] deceived many while he was in Antioch by his magical art'.¹⁶ Justin concludes his account apologising to the reader for the scarcity of information and mentioning another of his work, probably his lost *Syntagma*, in which 'all heresies', including that of Simon, were discussed at length.¹⁷

It is noteworthy that Justin does not explicitly refer to Simon as a Gnostic teacher in his *ApPr*. Nonetheless, all of the accusations which Justin moves against Simon seems to point in that direction, especially Simon's self-proclamation as 'first God'. It appears reasonable that this appellative implicitly presupposes the existence of other gods that seem to be inferior to Simon-First God; consequently, it seems that Simon's doctrine proposed a rough form of dualism, similar to the Gnostic one, which postulated the existence of a superior God (the Father-Abyss) and an inferior God (the Demiurge). Moreover, it is interesting to note that Simon First-God presents most characteristics of the Christian redeemer: he is an *incarnated* divine being who comes to redeem and save those who believe in him. However, all doubts that one might have about Justin's opinion on Simon's identity should be cleared by Justin's portrayal of Helena:

And nearly all the Samaritans and a few from other nations even now still confess him to be the first God, and worship him. And a certain Helen, who went about with him at that time, and who had formerly been placed in a brothel in Tyre of Phoenicia, they call the first thought (ἔννοια) that came to be from him.¹⁸

Here, Helena is presented as a female divine entity, namely the ἔννοια (First Thought) of Simon-First God. Since the use of such an appellative to describe the highest female divinity has numerous and interesting parallels in Gnostic

¹⁶ Justin, *ApPr* 26, 3.

¹⁷ Justin, *ApPr* 26, 8: 'But I have a treatise against all the heresies that have existed already composed, which, if you wish to read it, I will give you.'

¹⁸ Justin, *ApPr* 26, 3: καὶ σχεδὸν πάντες μὲν Σαμαρεῖς, ὀλίγοι δὲ καὶ ἐν ἄλλοις ἔθνεσιν, ὡς τὸν πρῶτον θεὸν ἐκείνον ὁμολογοῦντες ἐκείνον καὶ προσκυνοῦσι· καὶ Ἑλένην τινά, τὴν περινοστήσασαν αὐτῷ κατ'ἐκεῖνο τοῦ καιροῦ, πρότερον ἐπὶ τέγους σταθεῖσαν, τὴν ὑπ'αὐτοῦ ἔννοιαν πρώτην γενομένην λέγουσι.

literature, Justin is willingly attributing to Helena a Gnostic feature. As a matter of fact, this is the appellative of the companion of the Abyss in the Ptolomean system,¹⁹ in *ApJohn*,²⁰ and in the Ophite system described in Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 30. Furthermore, Justin's statement that Helena was 'going about with him at that time' suggests that Simon and Helena were presenting themselves as the incarnation of the original divine couple of Gnostic systems, which were indeed composed by a First God and his Ennoia. If needed, an additional confirmation of their divine status of couple can be found in the fact that the text clearly states that Helena was worshipped by Simon's followers as well. In this respect, it is worth underlining that describing Simon as a higher god and Helena as the first thought produced by this First God corresponds to Simon and Helena being a Gnostic syzygy. As a matter of fact, a few decades later, Irenaeus would describe the primordial Gnostic syzygy of the Valentinian movement as composed by a 'perfect pre-existent Eon called Pre-Origin, Pre-Father and Abyss', who was not alone since an 'Ennoia exists together with him, and she is also called Grace or Silence'.²¹

In addition to the appellative of Ennoia and the syzygial unity, Justin's identification of Helena with a prostitute is a further indicator of a Gnostic framework. On the one hand, her status of prostitute links Helena to Sophia – that is, she who caused the intra-divine fracture due to her lust and her refusal to act within the lawful union with her partner. On the other hand, Helena's promiscuity with men puts her in the position of needing salvation, which is promptly provided by the arrival of Simon-First God, who thus assumes also the feature of a Redeemer.

Justin's portrayal of Helena is also confirmed by the second account on Simon's life and doctrines: Irenaeus' *AdHaer* I, 23, 1-5.²² This account about

¹⁹ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 1, 1.

²⁰ *ApJohn* II, 4, 27 – 5, 11 where Barbelo is identified with the 'Forethought of All', 'First Thought', 'Womb of Everything'.

²¹ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 1, 1: Λέγουσιν γάρ τινα εἶναι ἐν ἀοράτοις καὶ ἀκατονομάστοις ὑψώμασι τέλειον Αἰῶνα προόντα· τοῦτον δὲ καὶ [προαρχὴν καὶ] προπάτορα καὶ Βυθὸν καλοῦσιν. [...] συνυπάρχειν δ' αὐτῷ καὶ Ἐννοίαν, ἣν δὴ καὶ Χάριν, καὶ Σιγὴν ὀνομάζουσι. For more information, *supra* III.2.2.

²² Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 23, 1-5.

Simon seems to confirm that of Justin. However, Irenaeus is far more generous regarding details about Helena:

Now Simon, the Samaritan, from whom all sorts of heresies got their start, proposed the following sort of heretical doctrine. Having himself redeemed a certain Helen from being a prostitute in Tyre, a city of Phoenicia, he was in the habit of carrying her about with him, saying that she was the First Ennoia (Thought) of his Mind, the Mother of All, through whom, in the beginning, he conceived in his mind to make angels and archangels. For he asserted that this Ennoia leaped forth from him, since she knew what he, the Father, wanted, and descended to the lower regions, and gave birth to angels and powers, by whom also this world was made. But after she had given birth to them, she was detained by them out of envy, since they were unwilling to be looked upon as the progeny of any other being. For he was entirely unknown to them. His Ennoia, however, who was detained by those powers and angels who had been produced by her, also suffered all kinds of abuses at their hands, so that she could not return upwards to her Father. She suffered eventually to the extent of being imprisoned in a human body, and of transmigrating for ages into other female bodies, as from one vessel into another.²³

According to Irenaeus, Helena perfectly resembles the female aeons of some Gnostic mythologies, for he attributes to her all those features that are typical of Gnostic female figures. First, as ἔννοια – the ‘First Thought of his Mind’, produced by the Father as an extension of his own power – she represents the feminine in the Godhead. Secondly, as ‘the Mother of All’ who leaps out of the Pleroma and remains trapped in matter, Helena represents the fallen feminine; so much so that Irenaeus interprets Helena’s status of a prostitute as a

²³ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 23, 2: *Simon autem Samaritanus, ex quo universae hereses substituerunt, habet huiusmodi sectae materiam. Hic Helenam quondam, quam ipse a Tyro civitate Phoenices quaestuariam cum redemisset, secum conducebat, dicens hanc esse primam mentis eius conceptionem, matrem omnium, per quam in initio mente concepit angelos facere et archangelos. Hanc enim Ennoiam exsilientem ex eo, cognoscentem quae vult pater eius, degredi ad inferior et generare angelos et potestates, a quibus et mundum hunc factum dixit. Posteaquam autem generavit eos, haec detenta est ab ipsis: Ennoiam autem eius detentam ab iis quae ab ea emissae essent potestates et angeli; et omnem contumeliam ab iis passam, uti non recurreret sursum ad suum patrem, usque adeo ut et in corpore humano includeretur et per saecula veluti de vase in vas transmigraret in altera muliebria corpora.*

typological reproduction of Sophia's celestial promiscuity with evil powers.²⁴ Lastly, she also represents the incarnated feminine by remaining trapped in the inferior world and being forced to assume several material forms, the last of which is the prostitute Helena. In this regard, I believe it is necessary to highlight that both Justin's and Irenaeus' accounts rely on the Gnostic typological structure of the cosmos, that is, the fact that the inferior level of reality mirrors the superior one. The characters of Simon and Helena are always described as types of celestial reality: the fact that Simon, the Gnostic teacher, claimed to be the First God whilst Helena, his companion, was identified with *Ennoia* means that they identified themselves with protological divine beings. Hence, they were both the protological First-God and Ennoia who originated the cosmos, and the man and the woman who preached about the celestial events. However, in Simonian accounts, the different ontological levels of reality – that is the celestial and earthly ones – are not only intertwined, but are even overlapped one with the other. In all these accounts, Helena is not only type of the higher female divinity, but she *is* the higher female divinity. Equally Simon is, at the same time, First God and type of the First-God. In this perspective, Simon's deeds are subject to a double interpretation: on the one hand, Simon's actions are merely human acts; on the other hand, these actions have always a deeper meaning, a divine one, where Simon is not only a man but the First God. In other words, whereas the human Simon was merely making Helena his lover, Simon-First God was instead righting the wrong caused by his companion's prostitution. Consequently, Helena is essential to the history of redemption, for freeing Helena from the dominion and slavery of evil powers is indeed the reason why Simon-Saviour abandoned his celestial form to assume a material one:²⁵

He himself came for this reason that he might first take her to himself, free her from the bonds, and then bring salvation to humankind by his own knowledge. The angels governed the world badly, because each one

²⁴ This portrayal of Helena is extremely similar to the one of the female protagonist of *ExSoul*, *infra* IV.3. For the relation between this text and the so-called "Simonian gnosis", see Arai (1981).

²⁵ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 23, 1: 'He represented himself, in a word, as being the loftiest of all powers, that is, the Being who is the Father over All.'

desired to be sovereign. So he came, he said, to set matters right; having been transformed and made like the principalities and powers and angels, he appeared in turn as a man, though he was not a man. He appeared to suffer in Judaea, though he did not suffer.²⁶

Simon, just as the Christ of Valentinian myth,²⁷ is the male divine principle incarnated to save his female counterpart, to restore her to her previous self so that she may regain her rightful place inside the Pleroma. Descending into the inferior world, he is forced to assume a material appearance, but also to make himself known to humans, which can now be saved because of their knowledge.²⁸ In this scenario, Helena is the evangelical ‘lost sheep’²⁹ that wanders alone, losing her way back home. In order to regain her celestial status, she has to be united with Simon-First God, thus reproducing in the inferior world, in which they dwell, the divine unity of the First God and his Thought. Hence, once one has highlighted Simon’s relation with Helena and identified the typological mechanism of Simonian mythology, one can appreciate all Helena’s hues: she is ‘Ennoia’, ‘Mother of All’ and ‘prostitute’ all at once, becoming a peculiar figure within Gnostic mythologies, since all aspects of the feminine are grouped in a single character.

Another account of Simon’s teachings is found in Hippolytus’ *El VI*, 5-20. Here the author claims to be in possession of the *Great Announcement*,³⁰ an original work of Simon Magus.³¹ This book is supposed to contain a detailed account of Simonian doctrines. Simon’s system was based on ‘pairs’,³²

²⁶ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 23, 3: *Quapropter et ipsum venisse, uti eam assumeret primam et liberaret eam vinculis, hominibus autem salutem praestaret per suam agnitionem. Cum enim male moderarentur angeli mundum, quoniam unusquisque eorum concupisceret principatum, ad emendationem venisse rerum et descendisse eum transfiguratum et assimilatum virtutibus et potestatibus et angelis, ut et in hominibus homo appareret ipse, cum non esset homo, et passum autem in Iudaea putatum, cum non esset passus.*

²⁷ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 2, 4.

²⁸ Similarly, Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 2, 5: ‘For they claim that Christ taught them the nature of their conjugal union, that they would be able to know the comprehension of the Ingenerate.’

²⁹ *Lk* 15:1-7.

³⁰ Hippolytus, *El VI*, 11-18.

³¹ This text has been largely commented by scholarship, I will only list here the major contributions: Frickel (1968); Salles-Dabadie (1969); Aland (1973).

³² Hippolytus, *El VI*, 12, 1-4: ‘The world, therefore, that which is generated, was produced from the unbegotten fire. It began, however, to exist, he says, according to the following manner. He who was begotten from the principle of that fire took six roots, and those primary

opposite sex couples (very similar to the Gnostic ‘syzygy’) that emanate all other divine entities. Hippolytus stresses two major ‘errors’ of the Simonian movement: a) that Simon’s teachings were deduced from an erroneous exegesis of the Scriptures; b) that Simon’s teachings depended greatly on Greek philosophies. As a matter of fact, Hippolytus presents Simon’s doctrine in a highly philosophical form, where Greek mythology, literature and philosophy are mixed with Gnostic elements.³³ This highly syncretistic representation of Simon’s doctrines suits well the intent of *El*, which wants to connect each heresy with a different philosophical movement.

Interestingly, this philosophical reading of Simonian doctrines does not seem to affect Helena’s description:

He gives an allegorical meaning to the wooden horse and to Helena with the torch and to many other elements. He lies for he refers them to himself and to Epinoia (Helena). (He said) she was the lost sheep and she was always abiding among women; she troubled the powers in the world by reason of her surpassing beauty; whence also the Trojan war arose, because of her. As a matter of fact, in the Helena born at that time dwelled Epinoia; and thus, because all the powers were disputing about her, sedition and war arose, during which he (Simon?) was manifested to people. [...] The angels and the powers below – who, he says, created the world – caused her (Helena’s) transference from one body to another; and subsequently she stood on the roof of a house in Tyre, a city of Phoenicia. Once (Simon) descended, he found her. He stated that he first came down looking for her, in order to rescue her from the bondage. And after having thus redeemed her, he was in the habit of conducting her about with himself, alleging that this [Helena] was the lost sheep, and affirming himself to be the Power above all things. But the liar, since he was in

ones, of the originating principle of generation. And, he says that the roots were made from the fire in pairs, which roots he terms “Mind” and “Intelligence,” “Voice” and “Name,” “Ratiocination” and “Reflection.” And that in these six roots resides simultaneously the entire indefinite power potentially, (however) not actually. And this indefinite power, he says, is he who stood, stands, and will stand.’

³³ For instance, Hippolytus claims that, according to Simon, the origin of everything should be found in the element of fire. None of the other source about Simon ever mention such theory; therefore, it is more likely that Hippolytus is overlapping Stoic and Empedoclean doctrines into Simon’s system. To deepen Hippolytus’ use of Greek philosophy, see Simonetti (2011).

love with this woman called Helena, took her as his wife, after having ransomed her; being ashamed in front of his disciples (because of this), he created this myth.³⁴

Notwithstanding the presence of a syncretistic touch – according to which Helena of Troy is a precedent incarnation of Simon’s lover – the account of *El* is extremely similar to that of Irenaeus. Just as the latter, the former describes Helena as Simon’s Ennoia, that somehow fell into a condition of slavery and was forced to dwell among women, assuming different bodies. At the time Simon found her, she was incarnated in a prostitute from Tyre. As in the previous heresiological account, Helena regained her rightful and proper status becoming Simon’s companion. It is worth noting that none of the heresiological accounts gives an explanation of Helena’s fall outside of the Pleroma. Such an omission is indeed interesting for it creates a significant gap in the plot.³⁵ Once again, this representation of Helena fits perfectly the Gnostic representation of the feminine within Gnostic myth. However, the *Great Announcement* in *El* does not add any new elements to previous descriptions of the character of Helena.

In summary, according to Irenaeus’ and Justin’s description, Simon was undoubtedly a Gnostic teacher. The typological interpretation given by Irenaeus – according to which Simon was the original male principle and Helena his female companion – listed Simon within the Gnostic movement. In particular, one cannot fail to notice some similarities between the Simonian myth and the Valentinian one; and, consequently, to wonder whether Irenaeus’

³⁴ Hippolytus, *El* VI, 19, 1-5: καὶ γὰρ τὸν δούρειον ἵππον ἀλληγορεῖ, καὶ τὴν Ἑλένην ἅμα τῇ λαμπάδι, καὶ ἄλλα πλεῖστα ὅσα μεταγγί(σας περ)ί τε αὐτοῦ καὶ τῆς Ἐπινοίας πλαστολογεῖ. εἶναι <δ>έ γε ταύτην τὸ πρόβατον τὸ πεπλανημένον, ἣτις ἀεὶ καταγινομένη ἐν γυναιξὶν ἐτάρασσε τὰς ἐν <τῷ> κόσμῳ δυνάμεις διὰ τὸ ἀνυπέρβλητον αὐτῆς κάλλος. ὅθεν καὶ ὁ Τρωϊκὸς πόλεμος δι’ αὐτὴν γεγένηται· ἐν γὰρ τῇ κατ’ ἐκεῖνο καιροῦ γενομένη Ἑλένη ἐνέκησεν [ἐν αὐτῇ] ἡ Ἐπίνοια, καὶ οὕτως πασῶν ἐπιδικαζομένων αὐτῆς τῶν ἐξουσιῶν στάσις καὶ πόλεμος ἐπανεστὶ ἐν οἷς ἐφάνη ἔθνεσιν. [...] Μετενσωματουμένην <δὲ αὐτὴν καί> ὑπὸ τῶν ἀγγέλων καὶ τῶν κάτω ἐξουσιῶν – οἱ καὶ τὸν κόσμον, φησὶν, ἐποίησαν –, ὕστερον ἐπὶ τέγους ἐν Τύρῳ τῇ(ς) Φοινίκῃ πόλει στήναι. ἦν κατελθὼν εὗρεν· ἐπὶ γὰρ τὴν τα(ύ)τ(η)ς πρώτης ζήτησιν ἔφη παραγεγονέναι, ὅπως ῥύσ(η)ται αὐτὴν τῶν δεσμῶν. ἦν λυτρωσάμενος ἅμα ἑαυτῷ περιῆγε, φάσκων τοῦτο εἶναι τὸ ἀπολωλὸς πρόβατον, ἑαυτὸν δὲ λέγων τὴν ὑπὲρ πάντα δυνάμιν εἶναι. ὁ δὲ ψυδρὸς ἐρασθεὶς τοῦ γυναιίου τούτου, Ἑλένης καλουμένης, ὠνησάμενος εἶχε, καὶ τοὺς μαθητὰς αἰδοῦμενος τοῦτον τὸν μῦθον πλασεν.

³⁵ A possible reason for this narrative gap will be proposed in the conclusion of this chapter, *infra* IV.1.2.

account is genuine or rather a reinterpretation of Simon's teachings in a Valentinian perspective. However, I have made clear that Irenaeus keeps all of the basic features of Justin's representation of Helena and Simon. Despite Justin's and Irenaeus' works being only a couple of decades apart, it was in those years that the Valentinian movements reached their acme, thus dominating the intellectual scene of second century Gnosticism. The success that this movement knew should lead modern interpreters at least to contemplate the possibility of a contamination between Irenaeus's understanding of the Simonian and the Valentinian heresies. Given the similarities, it is likely that Irenaeus enriched his account of Simonian gnosis with elements from other Gnostic traditions, especially the Valentinian one.³⁶ Although this potentially compromises the credibility of Irenaeus' account of Simonian gnosis, it cannot be ignored that his account finds confirmation in the news reported by Justin. Nonetheless, since all three heresiologists report the same information with only few variations, one cannot help wondering whether there is a dependence of one on the other. Such unusual concordance among sources should immediately raise suspicions rather than induce a false sense of reassurance. How is it possible to find so many similarities among texts written in different times and locations? There are two possible explanations: either they have a common source, or they are relying one on the other. Regarding the first possibility, we are not aware of any work which could have been used for this purpose. Consequently, the issue that needs to be addressed concerns the possibility that Irenaeus used Justin's lost *Syntagma* as a source for his *AdHaer*.³⁷ In this regard, I would agree with Thomassen in assuming that the author of the *El* used Irenaeus' *AdHaer* as a source.³⁸ Hence, the interpreter faces here what I would call a *methodological impasse*: if all heresiological sources about Simon Magus may be traced back to Justin's works, they can be deemed trustworthy only if one trusts Justin's account.

³⁶ In particular, the Valentinian account of Ptolemy in Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 1-8.

³⁷ Norelli investigated selected case-studies about this topic. He studied – among other issues – the relationship between Irenaeus' *AdHaer* and Justin's lost *Syntagma*, building his case on the example of *AdHaer* V, 26, 2 and concluding Irenaeus depends greatly on Justin's work. Norelli (2005) was aware of the partiality of his conclusions and hoped for further studies on this subject. Equally, Lettieri believed Irenaeus depends on Justin, see Lettieri (2008), 106.

³⁸ See Thomassen (2006), 77-81.

Fortunately, there are three other sources that one can use to verify the veracity of heresiological information about Helena: *Acts* 8:4-25; *Pseudo-Clementine* literature and *Acts of Peter*.

IV.1.2 Was Helena mentioned in *Acts*?

The portrayal of Simon presented in *Acts* 8:4-25 does not present elements of Gnostic teachings; rather it emphasises Simon's magical deeds and his fraudulent conversion to Christianity. Here, Simon is presented as a magician who initially practiced magical arts in the region of Samaria and then converted to Christianity. However, his conversion was fraudulent for he was convinced that the apostles were magicians, as Peter realised when Simon tried to pay him in exchange for the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Acts devoted only one sentence to introduce Simon, specifying that he 'amazed the people of Samaria [...] with his magic' and that he claimed to be 'the power of God that is called Great'.³⁹ Regarding Simon's magic, Haar's analysis of the use of the word *magos* in the ancient world is extremely useful. Haar, who mostly agrees with Segal,⁴⁰ believed that the meaning of this term varied significantly from text to text, assuming both positive and negative connotations. Haar claims that, since the use of the word was not consistent and the common practice indicated an ambiguous use of the term, there are no sufficient reasons to interpret in a pejorative sense the attribute *magus* that it is given to Simon by the author of *Acts*. Despite the veracity of his research, I am still persuaded of the defamatory intent of the author of *Acts*, who evidently used this term to discredit the activity of Simon.⁴¹ Furthermore, the defamatory intent of the author is confirmed by the fact the event is taking place in

³⁹ *Acts* 8:9-11: Ἀνὴρ δέ τις ὀνόματι Σίμων προὔπηρχεν ἐν τῇ πόλει μαγεύων καὶ ἐξιστάνων τὸ ἔθνος τῆς Σαμαρείας, λέγων εἶναί τινα ἑαυτὸν μέγαν, ὃ προσεῖχον πάντες ἀπὸ μικροῦ ἕως μεγάλου λέγοντες, Οὗτός ἐστιν ἡ δύναμις τοῦ θεοῦ ἡ καλουμένη Μεγάλη. προσεῖχον δὲ αὐτῷ διὰ τὸ ἰκανῶ χρόνῳ ταῖς μαγείαις ἐξεστακέναι αὐτούς.

⁴⁰ See Segal (1981), pp. 349–75.

⁴¹ Such a conclusion seems almost obvious when one takes into consideration the other two episodes of *Acts* in which the disciples encounter magicians or exorcists: *Acts* 13:4-12 and *Acts* 19:11-20. In the first case, the magician Bar-Jesus is described as a 'Jewish false prophet' and 'a son of the devil, enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villany'. In the second passage, the sons of the high priest Scaeva were leaped on by the evil spirit they tried unsuccessfully to exorcise and forced to '[flee] out of the house naked and wounded'.

Samaria, a land well-known for being religiously heterodox, even within Judaism. Simon's dwelling in Samaria may indeed be a genuine indication of his origin but, most likely, it is the author's indication of his unorthodox background.⁴² Indeed, in Samaria, a land where the apostles' missions were numerous,⁴³ the apocalyptic and messianic traditions were also very present.⁴⁴ Therefore, it is at least plausible to consider Simon's title of ἡ δύναμις τοῦ θεοῦ as another messianic claim, which means that Simon could have been interpreted by the author of *Acts* as one of the many "messiahs" who dwelled in Palestine during the first century.⁴⁵

In *Acts*' portrayal of Simon, Helena does not play any role. Her absence has not passed unnoticed by scholars, so much so that Lüdemann hypothesised that the ἐπίνοια of *Acts* 8:22 is a veiled reference to Helena.⁴⁶ Notwithstanding the fascination of Lüdemann's hypothesis, its argument presents a terminological issue. If it is remarkable that *Acts* 8:22 is the only occurrence of the term ἐπίνοια, which is indeed a key-term of Gnosticism, it is also true that ἐπίνοια is not the only term used by subsequent writers to refer to Helena: she is more often the ἔννοια rather than the ἐπίνοια of Simon.⁴⁷ It is clear that Lüdemann tried to enforce the equivalence of these two terms but, unfortunately, his theory is not entirely convincing. In conclusion, the information provided by *Acts* is not conclusive regarding Simon's identity and, most of all, is not sufficient to justify the complex portrayal of Simon that characterises later sources.

⁴² To this regard, I tend to agree with Haar (2003), 164-165 who claims Luke's reference to Samaria serves merely a literary purpose. Anyway, I admit that both instances could be true: Simon was a resident of Samaria and the author of *Acts* seized the opportunity to denigrate him.

⁴³ For a better understanding of the value of Samaria for early Christian missions, see Cullmann, (1956), 183-192.

⁴⁴ For the apocalyptic and messianic tradition in Samaria, see Lettieri (2008).

⁴⁵ For the messianic claims of Simon Magus, see Lettieri (2008) and Haar (2003).

⁴⁶ In *Acts* 8:22, Peter reprehends Simon with these words: 'Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart (ἐπίνοια τῆς καρδίας) may be forgiven you.' For Lüdemann's interpretation of this passage, see Lüdemann (1989), 96-98.

⁴⁷ As a matter of fact, the term ἐπίνοια is used exclusively in Hippolytus, *El* VI, 19, 2.

IV.1.3 The *Acts of Peter* and *Pseudo-Clementine Literature*

ActPt is a text that belongs to the so-called *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostle*, where numerous adventures of the apostles are narrated. The text was originally written in Greek, but it is known to us in the Latin translation of the Vercelli manuscript.⁴⁸ The place and date of composition of *ActPt*, as well as its author, are unfortunately obscure.⁴⁹

In spite of the importance of *ActPt* for the study of ancient Christian literature, this text cannot be used to add more information about Helena, since she is never mentioned in it.⁵⁰ The document is quite brief and the narrative is mainly focused on the fight between Peter and Simon, showing the former victorious and the latter losing. According to the portrayal of *ActPt*, Simon was therefore Peter's archenemy, the opposing rival who pulled people away from Christian faith by means of his false magic.⁵¹ The main focus of the text is on Peter's wonders, to which Simon's fraudulent magical practices are opposed. Interestingly, Ferreiro noted that the *ActPt* belonged to a different trend of tradition about Simon than the other texts analysed so far. He hypothesised the existence of two traditions concerning Simon's character: one, created by the heresiologists, according to which Simon was the first heretic; the other, to which both *ActPt* and *Acts* belonged, bequeathed the tradition of Simon as a magician. Moreover, he underlined how this latter tradition was victorious over the former since it almost completely disappeared around the sixth century

⁴⁸ To deepen this topic, see Hilhorst (1998).

⁴⁹ Bremmer (1998), 14-20 hypothesises that the text was written in Asia minor and that it was probably translated in Latin during the second half of the fourth century. See also Walker (2015), 227-272.

⁵⁰ For study on this work, see Elliot (1993), 390-426 and Thomas (2003).

⁵¹ Interestingly, the practice of magic is not here attributed exclusively to the "heretical" Simon, for also Peter performs 'marvellous wonders' which amazed the audience (*ActPt* IX). There are many texts that report the wonders of the apostles. Where then does the difference between them and Simon lie? First of all, it is worth underlining a terminological difference: when the author refers to Simon, he addresses him with the appellative 'sorcerer' (*ActPt* XXX), whereas when he refers to Peter he uses the term 'wonder-workers' (*ActPt* IX). Secondly, the difference between them lies in the powers from whom they received their magical powers. On the one hand, Simon performed magical deed because of his 'wickedness' (*ActPt* VI); on the other hand, Peter used these wonders to testify the power of Jesus, 'by whom all things impossible are made possible'. To deepen the argument of the rivalry between Peter and Simon in ancient literature see Côté (2001).

CE.⁵² Apart from this information, there is not much more that can be deduced from the text regarding Simon and Helena. The author does not report any of Simon's teachings or doctrines, nor does he mention any episode of his life, apart from his magical deeds. This scarcity of information leads me to think that the Simon portrayed in this work is merely a straw man, a fictitious character – inspired by the tradition according to which Simon is a magician – custom-fitted to the narrative exigencies of the *Acts*' author.⁵³ In addition, it is worth noting, once again, the fact that the author never mentions Helena. If one shares Ferreiro's hypothesis of two different traditions concerning Simon, the absence of Helena from both *Acts* and *ActPt* certainly stands out, for it means that she is absent from both texts which belonged to the tradition according to which Simon was primarily a magician.

Before drawing some conclusions regarding the character of Helena, there is another text that needs to be taken into consideration, namely, the *Pseudo-Clementine Literature*. This name is used to indicate two works, the *Recognitiones* and the *Homilies*, whose authorship was traditionally attributed to Clement of Rome. Just as the *ActPt*, their plot is centred on the literary *topos* of Simon's rivalry with Peter. The nature and the date of composition of these works have been discussed at length by recent scholarship without arriving at a definitive conclusion. Both works were originally written in Greek; however, whereas *Hom*'s text has been recovered in the original language, *Rec* survived only in the Latin translation of Rufinus.⁵⁴ Jones has recently published many articles on this subject, theorising that both *Rec* and *Hom* derived from a common Jewish-Christian source, the alleged *Periodoi Petrou*,⁵⁵ and that they were composed at the beginning of the fourth century. Despite Jones' mention of a possible influence of Marcionism, I think he has not underlined properly the highly Gnostic features of these texts, especially that of *Hom*. For instance, some of the speeches pronounced by Peter – especially his exegesis of the first

⁵² Ferreiro (2005a).

⁵³ To this regard I agree utterly with Luttikhuisen (1998).

⁵⁴ For a complete survey of manuscripts and versions of *Pseudo-Clementine Literature* see Jones (2012), 8-20.

⁵⁵ Also known as *Kerigma Petri*. For more details on this text, see Vinzent (1999); Jones (2012), 8-49; Reed (2018).

chapter of Genesis – have a strong Gnostic aftertaste.⁵⁶ In addition, the highly apocalyptic tone of the *Pseudo-Clementine* has not been underlined adequately; the latter is essential for understanding the representation of Helena.⁵⁷ As a matter of fact, the texts present many elements that come from the Jewish apocalyptic tradition,⁵⁸ as well as many others that belong to the Hellenistic one.⁵⁹ It is therefore likely that they were written in a widely syncretistic environment, where different religious traditions were strictly intertwined.

Despite their late redaction, *Pseudo-Clementine Literature* is a precious source for Simon Magus and Helena. In both *Rec* and *Hom*, Simon claimed to be a god⁶⁰ and he made his followers call him the ‘Standing One’,⁶¹ for he could not fall into corruption; as a god, he was not of this world but he had chosen to ‘appear as a man among men’ only to save Helena,⁶² who is once more associated with Helena of Troy.⁶³ Secondly, Simon openly professed his polytheism, affirming the existence of a multitude of gods, which were governed by a superior God of gods.⁶⁴ Thirdly, Simon expressed a very harsh evaluation of Jewish Law, which was typical of most Gnostic movements.⁶⁵ Lastly, he was convinced that Jesus was not the superior God, for the superior God revealed himself to ‘whom he wished’ from the beginning of times.⁶⁶

⁵⁶ It is important to underline that *Hom* present more Gnostic element than the *Rec*. For an example of Gnostic speeches see the one pronounced by Peter in *Hom* III, 22-28.

⁵⁷ In the apocalyptic tradition, the feminine is often represented in a highly negative form – that is, in a very similar manner to Peter’s speech in *Hom* III, 22-28. This passage will be discussed later more in details.

⁵⁸ For instance, both *Rec* and *Hom* inherited the myth of the fallen angels that finds its roots in the apocalyptic trends of Judaism, see *Rec* I, 29 and IV, 26; *Hom* VII, 13-20. This example shows the familiarity of the author with the *BWatch* and the *Enl*. For a more detailed account of these apocalyptic tradition see Stroumsa (1984).

⁵⁹ For instance, the astrological digressions of *Rec* IX-X.

⁶⁰ *Rec* II, 14 and III, 45-47.

⁶¹ *Rec* II, 6 and *Hom* II, 22.

⁶² *Rec* II, 14.

⁶³ *Hom* II, 25. It is worth remembering that such association had already been made in Hippolytus, *El* VI, 19, 1.

⁶⁴ *Rec* II, 40-45 and *Hom* III, 38. Interestingly, in *Rec* II, 47, Simon proposes an interpretation of *Mt* 11:27 according to which even Jesus acknowledged the existence of a superior God. In addition, in *Hom* XVI, 6, Simon wants to prove that the OT declares the existence of more than one God.

⁶⁵ For instance, in *Rec* II, 39.

⁶⁶ In *Hom* XVII, 4, Simon pronounced the following speech: ‘But Jesus, the teacher of Peter himself, came and said, “No one knew the Father except the Son, as no one knoweth even the Son except the Father, and those to whom the Son may wish to reveal Him.” If, then, it was the Son himself who was present, it was from the time of his appearance that he began to reveal to

Notwithstanding the many Gnostic features attributed to Simon, the portrayal of Helena is, once again, one of the most compelling arguments used to uncover his identity. In both *Rec* and *Hom*, the story of Simon and Helena is intertwined with the story of Simon and Dositheus, a rival magician.⁶⁷ At a first glance, the reader could be floored by the combination of the two stories; however, I believe that this responds to a precise narrative intent. In order to understand the author's reasons, it is necessary to analyse in more detail the narrative plot, for each element reveals additional information regarding Helena. John the Baptist, who was the founder of the movement to which Simon and Dositheus belonged, had thirty favourite disciples and Helena was close to this selected circle:⁶⁸ 'For after that John the Baptist was killed [...] when Dositheus had broached his heresy, with thirty other chief disciples, and one woman, who was called Luna [Moon].'⁶⁹ After John's death, Dositheus was designated leader of the sect. Being utterly dissatisfied with Dositheus' leadership and believing that he possessed a superior power, Simon decided to take over the leadership of the movement. In *Rec*, one of the reasons that pushed Simon to replace Dositheus was indeed the love for Helena:

But not long after he fell in love with that woman whom they call Luna;
and he confided all things to us as his friends: how he was a magician,
and how he loved Luna, and how, being desirous of glory, he was
unwilling to enjoy her ingloriously, but that he was waiting patiently till

those to whom he wished, Him who was unknown to all. And thus the Father was unknown to all who lived before him, and could not thus be He who was known to all.'

⁶⁷ For the story of Simon and Helena see *Rec* II, 8-9 and 12; *Hom* II, 23 and 25.

⁶⁸ The two texts disagree concerning Simon's affiliation to the sect: whilst in *Rec* II, 8 Simon was admitted in the group of thirty by Dositheus after John's death, in *Hom* II, 23 Simon was already among the thirty when John was alive; he was supposed to be the successor of John, but Dositheus was elected by his fellow disciples through a fraudulent stratagem. To deepen the role of John the Baptist within Gnosticism, see for instance what Heracleon said in his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, whose fragments can be found in Origen, *ComJn* VI, 20-21.

⁶⁹ *Rec* II, 8: *Iterfecto etenim, [...], baptista Iohanne, cum Dositheum et haereseos suae inisset exordium cum aliis triginta principalibus discipulis et una muliere quae Luna vocitata est*. The texts give two different versions regarding Helena's affiliation to John's sect: whereas *Hom* II, 23 listed Helena among John's thirty favourite disciples (albeit it is specified that she counted as 'half a man'); in *Rec* she was listed in addition to John's thirty disciples. Anyhow, it is noteworthy that both texts insisted on the importance of the number thirty, which is the same number of aeons of the Valentinian Pleroma. In the *Recognitiones*, Helena is called with the name of Luna, and I will propose an explanation of this unusual name in the following paragraphs.

he could enjoy her honourably; yet so if we also would conspire with him towards the accomplishment of his desires.⁷⁰

In order to accomplish his desire to possess Helena, he had to discredit Dositheus, so much so that the story continues with the narration of Simon's magical fight against Dositheus. Why was Dositheus an obstacle towards the Simon's honourable union with Helena? Although it is not explicitly stated in the text, it seems logical to conclude that Simon could not enjoy the company of Helena 'honourably' because she was Dositheus' lover. As a matter of fact, a few paragraphs later the author specified:

Therefore, after the death of Dositheus, Simon took Luna to himself; and with her he still goes about, as you see, deceiving multitudes, and asserting that he himself is a certain power which is above God the Creator, while Luna, who is with him, has been brought down from the higher heavens, and that she is Sophia, the Mother of All Things, for whom, says he, the Greeks and barbarians contending, were able in some measure to see an image of her; but of herself, as she is, as the dweller with the first and only God, they were wholly ignorant.⁷¹

But Simon is going about in company with Helena, and even till now, as you see, is stirring up the people. And he says that he has brought down this Helena from the highest heavens to the world; being queen, as the all-bearing being, and Sophia, for whose sake, says he, the Greeks and barbarians fought, having before their eyes but an image of truth; for she, who really is the truth, was then with the chiefest god. Moreover, by cunningly explaining certain things of this sort, made up from Grecian myths, he deceives many; especially as he performs many signal marvels,

⁷⁰ Rec II, 9: *Sed hic non multo post incidit in amorem mulieris illius quam Lunam vocant, nobisque utpote familiaribus suis omnia concredebat, quod magus esset et quod amaret Lunam quodque gloriae cupidus nollet ea inglorious frui, sed exspectaret patienter donec honeste ea uti liceret, sit amen etiam nos conspiremus ei ad omnia quae velit.*

⁷¹ Rec II, 12: *Igitur post obitum Dosithei Simon accepit Lunam, cum qua usque ad praesens circuit, ut videtis, decipiens turbas et adserens semetipsum quidem virtutem esse quamdam, quae sit super conditorem deum, Lunam vero quae secum est, esse de superioris caelis deductam, eandemque cuctorum genetricem adserit esse sapientiam, pro qua, inquit, Graeci et barbari confligentes imaginem quidem eius aliqua ex parte videre potuerunt, ipsam vero, ut est, penitus ognorarunt, quipped quae appud illum primum omnium et solum habitaret deum.*

so that if we did not know that he does these things by magic, we ourselves should also have been deceived.⁷²

At first glance this account might appear quite bare; however a closer look discovers many ‘hidden’ elements. For instance, the number thirty is worthy of deeper analysis since even the text explicitly suggests that ‘this might be without a dispensational significance’.⁷³ The number thirty is indeed a key number for Gnostic cosmology for it is the number that constitutes the fullness of the divine Pleroma in Irenaeus’ account of the Valentinian gnosis.⁷⁴ According to Gnostic cosmologies, this is also the number of archons who dwelled in the inferior world and were commanded by the chief archon, Yaldabaoth.⁷⁵ It is then plausible to hypothesise that the number thirty was symbolically referred to the archon, which is allegorically represented by the false ‘Standing One’, Dositheus, to whom Helena was bound before Simon’s liberation. Moreover, I believe that the appellative Luna, given to Helena, is a “clue” to uncover the real cosmological meaning of this passage.⁷⁶ Indeed, Helena’s appellative is related to her imperfection, for ancient tradition believed that the lunar cycle of twenty-eight days was not as perfect as the solar one.⁷⁷ Furthermore, Helena’s sexual promiscuity – thus her status of prostitute – equates her to the ‘prophetess’, which is one of the appellatives

⁷² *Hom* II, 25: ἐκείνου στάντος, αὐτὸς πεσὼν ἐτελεύτησεν. ὁ δὲ Σίμων τὴν Ἑλένην παραλαβὼν ἐκπεριέρχεται, καὶ μέχρι τοῦ δεῦρο, ὡς ὀρᾷς, ἀναστατεῖ τοὺς ὄχλους. αὐτὴν δὲ τὴν Ἑλένην ἀπὸ τῶν ἀνωτάτων οὐρανῶν κατενηνοχέει λέγει τῷ κόσμῳ, κυρίαν οὖσαν, ὡς παμμήτορα οὐσίαν καὶ σοφίαν, ἧς ἕνεκεν (φησὶν) Ἕλληνες τε καὶ βάρβαροι ἐμαχέσαντο, εἰκόνα φαντασθέντες ἀληθείας· ἡ γὰρ ὄντως οὖσα τότε παρὰ τῷ πρωτίστῳ ὑπῆρχεν θεῶ. πλὴν τοιαῦτά τινα Ἑλληνικοῖς μύθοις συνπεπλασμένα πιθανῶς ἀλληγορῶν ἀπατᾷ πολλοὺς, ἐξαιρέτως πολλὰ τερατώδη θαυμάσια ποιῶν, ὡς, εἰ μὴ ᾔδειμεν ὅτι μαγεία ταῦτα ποιεῖ, ἡπατήθημεν ἂν καὶ αὐτοί.

⁷³ *Hom* II, 23: ‘As the Lord had twelve apostles, bearing the number of the twelve months of the sun, so also he, John, had thirty chief men, fulfilling the monthly reckoning of the moon, in which number was a certain woman called Helena, that not even this might be without a dispensational significance. For a woman, being half a man, made up the imperfect number of the triacontad; as also in the case of the moon, whose revolution does not make the complete course of the month.’

⁷⁴ See Irenaeus, *AdHaer.* I, 3, 2; Hippolytus, *El* VI, 31; see also Epiphanius, *Pan* I, 31, 5-6.

⁷⁵ The Demiurge made the world as faded copy of the world above, see Irenaeus, *AdHaer.* I, 5, 1.

⁷⁶ Interestingly, Lettieri (2008), 107 notes the wordplay in Greek (Σελήνη/Ελήνη) and, more importantly, the connection between the name Luna and the pagan goddess of Samaritan apocalyptic tradition.

⁷⁷ I have already mentioned *Hom* II, 23 where it is said that Helena is the imperfect as the lunar cycle, which means she is only ‘half a man’.

given to Eve⁷⁸ in the *Pseudo-Clementine*. The prophetess is an extremely negative character who acts as follows:

Wherefore, stealing the seeds of the male and sowing them with her own seeds of the flesh, she brings forth the fruits—that is, words—as wholly her own. And she promises that she will give the present earthly riches as a dowry, wishing to change the slow for the swift, the small for the greater. However, she, not only presuming to say and to hear that there are many gods, but also believing herself to be one, and in hope of being that which she had not a nature to be, and throwing away what she had, and as a female being in her courses at the offering of sacrifices, is stained with blood; and then she pollutes those who touch her.⁷⁹

As long as Helena is not united with the male element, she can only dwell in the temporary world, in the material and fleeting world.⁸⁰ Only abandoning this shameful condition and uniting with Simon, she regains the rightful in the

⁷⁸ *Hom* III, 22-23: ‘But a companion was created along with him [Adam], a female nature, much differing from him, as quality from substance, as the moon from the sun, as fire from light. She, as a female ruling the present world as her like, was entrusted to be the first prophetess, announcing prophecy with all amongst those born of woman. But the other, as the son of man, being a male, prophesies better things to the world to come as a male. Let us then understand that there are two kinds of prophecy: the one male; and let it be defined that the first, being the male, has been ranked after the other in the order of advent; but the second, being female, has been appointed to come first in the advent of the pairs. This second, therefore, being amongst those born of woman, as the female superintendent of this present world, wishes to be thought masculine.’

⁷⁹ *Hom* III, 23-24: διὸ κλέπτουσα τὰ τοῦ ἄρσενος σπέρματα καὶ τοῖς ἰδίοις τῆς σαρκὸς σπέρμασιν ἐπισκέπουσα ὥς ὅλα ἴδια συνεκφέρει τὰ γεννήματα, τουτέστιν τὰ ῥήματα. καὶ τὸν παρόντα ἐπίγειον πλοῦτον ὥς προῖκα δώσειν ἐπαγγέλλεται, τῷ ταχεῖ <τὸ βραδύ>, τὸ βραχὺ τῷ μείζονι ὑπαλλάξαι θέλουσα. πολλοὺς μέντοι θεοὺς λέγειν καὶ ἀκούειν οὐμόνον τολμῶσα, ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτὴ γενέσθαι πιστεύουσα, καὶ ἐλπίδι τοῦ γενέσθαι ὃ μὴ ἔχει φύσιν καὶ ὃ ἔχει προσπολλύουσα, καὶ ὥς θήλεια <ἐν> ἐνμηνίοις γινομένη προφάσει θυσιῶν αἰμάσσεται καὶ οὕτως τοὺς ψαύοντας αὐτῆς μολύνει.

⁸⁰ The text continues in *Hom* III, 24-27: ‘But when she conceives and brings forth temporary kings, she stirs up wars, shedding much blood; and those who desire to learn truth from her, by telling them all things contrary, and presenting many and various services, she keeps them always seeking and finding nothing, even until death. For from the beginning a cause of death lies upon blind men; for she, prophesying deceit, and ambiguities, and obliquities, deceives those who believe her. [...] The male is wholly truth, the female wholly falsehood. But he who is born of the male and the female, in some things speaks truth, in some falsehood. For the female, surrounding the white seed of the male with her own blood, as with red fire, sustains her own weakness with the extraneous supports of bones, and, pleased with the temporary flower of flesh, and spoiling the strength of the judgment by short pleasures, leads the greater part into fornication, and thus deprives them of the coming excellent bridegroom. For every person is a bride, whenever, being sown with the true Prophet’s whole word of truth, he is enlightened in his understanding.’ It would be utmost interesting to investigate the representation of the feminine in the *Pseudo-Clementine* literature. Unfortunately, for the sake of brevity, the present work is exclusively focus on the representation of Helena.

‘higher heaven’ with Simon. Her condition is not ‘inglorious’ only for Simon, but also for her, who is prostituting herself with someone unworthy of her higher status, thus indulging her inferior female nature. In other words, before being reunited with Simon, Helena is merely an ‘image of truth’ – where ‘image’ platonically means ‘faded copy’ – whereas she is ‘really the truth’ only once she is ‘with the chiefest God’.⁸¹ Only after Simon defeats the false god, they can be proclaimed and acknowledged as a divine couple: ‘God the Creator’ and ‘Sophia’.⁸² It is worth noting that the various appellatives attributed to Helena – ‘Mother of All things’, ‘All-bearing being’, ‘Truth’, etc. – corresponds to the ones attributed to her by previous accounts. I believe the elements presented in *Rec* and *Hom* make a good case regarding the Gnostic nature of Simon and Helena.

IV.1.4 Concluding Remarks on Helena

The sources about Helena raise many questions: why is she absent from the accounts of *Acts* and *ActPt*?⁸³ How is it possible to explain such a multi-faceted Gnostic feminine imagery at the middle of the first century? Was Helena a historical character or was she a heresiological construct fashioned to discredit Simon? Helena’s absence from two accounts of *Acts* and *ActPt* is indeed puzzling. From a chronological perspective, *Acts* is the closest source to the half of the first century and it is also the one that does not mention Helena at all. In addition, both *Acts* and the *ActPt* are openly hostile to Simon, thus mentioning his illicit love relationship would have certainly strengthened their case. Moreover, another question arises: since the *ActPt* were composed approximately at the same time as Justin’s *ApPr*, why do they not mention Simon’s lover? I believe the only solution to this conundrum is to acknowledge the fact that Helena is a heresiological construct, a custom-fitted character fashioned by Justin and then embraced by the following heresiological

⁸¹ *Hom* II, 25.

⁸² *Rec* II, 12.

⁸³ For more information on women in *Acts*, see Arlandson (1997). It is also worth noting that feminist scholars have noted a tendency to downplay women’s importance in Luke’s works, see Richter Reimer (1995).

writers.⁸⁴ A few decades later, the author of the *Pseudo-Clementine* literature, whether he was building on the *Periodoi Petrou* or not, inserted the story of Helena in his work, for it fitted perfectly both its narrative and its literary purposes.

In addition, this hypothesis explains the narrative gap in the heresiological accounts and in the *Pseudo-Clementine*. According to their descriptions, originally Helena was the first aeon produced by the First God, Simon ‘power of God’.⁸⁵ As such, she was dwelling in the Pleroma, but she fell out of it into the lower regions, where the archons were dwelling.⁸⁶ Once she had fallen, she was trapped by these evil powers and reduced into slavery. Moreover, when dwelling in the material world, she was forced to assume material bodies, the last of which was that of a prostitute from Tyre. At last, Simon ‘First God’, who also assumed a material appearance, found her and restored her to her original divine status. Notwithstanding the fact that the story is quite detailed, it never mentions the reason why Helena fell out of the Pleroma. I believe that the only explanation for such an omission is that the heresiologists, and consequently the author of *Rec* and *Hom*, were implicitly overlapping the story of Helena with the story of Sophia’s fall. From an heresiological perspective, it was not necessary to explain the cause of her fall because the comparison with Sophia was evident. As a matter of fact, the heresiological narrative projected so many features of Sophia on Helena that it is almost possible to establish a systematic comparison between the two characters. Interestingly, since Helena groups together all aspects of feminine imagery – for she is the feminine in the Godhead, the fallen divine being and the carnal woman – her portrayal also borrowed features from other Gnostic female characters, such as Barbelo or

⁸⁴ On the contrary, Scopello (2000) does believe that the stories about Helena are true; whereas Lettieri (2008), 106 believes that ‘ad Elena non può essere riconosciuta alcuna reale consistenza storica, interpretandola come l’incarnazione polemica della demonizzazione apocalittica del messia rivale proiettata dalla missione giudeo-cristiana in Samaria sul Simone attestatoci da *Acts* 8 e, a mio avviso, da *Gv* 4, oltre che da un importante testo di Giuseppe Flavio.’

⁸⁵ As his Ennoia, she would be involved in the creation of other aeons that dwell in the high regions, see Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 23, 2.

⁸⁶ The sources disagree on whether she is involved in the creation of the evil powers that dwell in the lower regions, see Epiphanius, *Pan* I, 21, 2, 4.

Eve.⁸⁷ Anyway, this only strengthens the case that she was custom-fitted to respond to a precise design. Furthermore, this hypothesis solves the problem of admitting the existence of such complex feminine imagery in the second half of the first century. Indeed, there is no evidence of any Gnostic mythology around the middle of the first century. It is far more likely that several elements were borrowed from other female Gnostic characters and projected onto Helena by the heresiologists. The more complex the Gnostic mythology became (as in the case of Hippolytus or Epiphanius), the more complex the portrayal of Helena was. It is not a coincidence that, following the chronological order of the heresiological accounts, the character of Helena became more and more complex, adding always further details to her description. Be that as it may – that is, whether she was or was not a real woman – it does not change the fact that heresiologists superimposed Gnostic features onto her in order to build their case against Simon. As a matter of fact, I believe that the syzygy Simon-Helena is a heresiological construct fashioned in order to make Simon a more credible Gnostic teacher. In this sense, the character of Helena assumes an important value for this research, since it represents an example of how significant and inescapable the feminine is for Gnostic mythology. In order to present a valuable and credible Gnostic teacher, the opponents of Gnosticism felt the need to match him with a female character without whom their story would not have been entirely credible.

⁸⁷ This convergence of many characters in one has been unconsciously noticed by Epiphanius, *Pan* I, 21, 2, 2-4: ‘He [Simon] had the nerve to call the whore who was his partner the Holy Spirit, and said that he had come down on her account. He said, “I was transformed in each heaven in accordance with the appearance of the inhabitants of each, so as to pass my angelic powers by unnoticed and descend to Ennoia to this woman, likewise called Prunicus and Holy Spirit, through whom I created the angels. But the angels created the world and men. But this woman is the ancient Helen on whose account the Trojans and Greeks went to war.”’

IV.2 The *Book of Baruch* of the Gnostic Teacher Justin

The *Book of Baruch* of the Gnostic teacher Justin represents a peculiar case in early Christian literature.⁸⁸ Studying this Gnostic text means facing a double mystery: on the one hand, Justin, the author of the book, is no more than a name among many Gnostic teachers; on the other hand, the authorship of the *El*, the book in which this text is bequeathed to us, is still contested. Hence, *Bar* represents a fascinating tangle of historical problems that are still waiting for a solution.

Besides being an intriguingly obscure text, this Gnostic book represents also a valuable source for the study of Gnostic feminine imagery, since it portrays a female character – namely, Edem – whose characteristics do not fit into a specific Gnostic movement but rather constitute a unique case. The author of *El* classified *Bar* among Sethian or Ophite works.⁸⁹ This classification has been widely accepted by scholars since the myth presents some elements proper to the Ophite and Sethian movements, the most striking of which is the presence of the angel Naas.⁹⁰ However, by contrast with previous studies on this topic, my analysis will show that Edem, as well as *Bar*'s nuptial imagery, presents strong Valentinian elements.

For the sake of clarity, I will here summarise briefly the plot. Elohim and Edem are two unbegotten divine principles that, together with the Good One, form the Gnostic Pleroma of Justin's system. The Good One is a transcendent deity who possesses foreknowledge and unknowability. Elohim is the inferior pneumatic male divinity, who is unknowable and invisible, but does not possess foreknowledge and is unaware of the existence of a higher pneumatic divinity. Edem is instead a psychic and hylic female principle, described as half woman and half viper. After having introduced all the deities, the myth focuses on the vicissitudes that happened when Elohim and Edem become enamoured

⁸⁸ *Bar* occupies part of the fifth book of Hippolytus' *El* V, 26, 1 – V, 27, 5.

⁸⁹ Regarding the distinction between Sethian and Ophite myths, see Hippolytus, *El* V, 1-27; Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 29-30.

⁹⁰ Simonetti (1999), 87-101.

of each other and begot the world out of their mutual pleasure. The intra-divine crisis which is common to Gnostic myths is here represented by Elohim's decision to abandon Edem in the world they created to return to the pneumatic regions of heaven, to which he truly belongs because of his nature. Having failed to bring Elohim back to her side, Edem unleashes her fury over the creation, particularly against the spirit of Elohim which is trapped in human beings. Moved by the suffering of his offspring, Elohim sends Baruch, his third angel, to save those spiritual parts of him that are trapped in the world. After a series of unsuccessful attempts, Baruch entrusts his message to Jesus, thus achieving the salvation for spiritual humankind.

The Gnostic myth described in *Bar* is unique within Gnosticism for it is centred on two divine characters, Elohim and Edem, who do not appear in any other Gnostic system. Indeed, neither the vicissitudes of Elohim and Edem are mentioned elsewhere, nor is the story of the redeemer Baruch told in other Gnostic books. Moreover, none of the other Gnostic teachers ever attributed such importance to the pact (συνθήκη) of the syzygy (συζυγία),⁹¹ showing that the nuptial imagery is not a mere rhetorical expedient, but rather the core of Justin's speculation.

In this chapter, I will explore in depth the feminine imagery of *Bar*. This analysis aims at shedding some light on this text by using the feminine imagery as a major indicator of its affiliation to Gnosticism.⁹² Being a highly syncretistic work, *Bar* should be understood as drawing elements not only from ancient religious and philosophical traditions, but also from different trends within Gnosticism. Against the predominant scholarly trend, which

⁹¹ In truth, the word συζυγία is not explicitly used by Hippolytus to indicate the union of Edem and Elohim. Nevertheless, the term σύζυγος is used several times to indicate both of them individually, hence making a συζυγία of the couple.

⁹² It is worth underlining that, given the polemical nature of the *El*, a certain caution is necessary in analysing the text of *Bar* in the form bequeathed by the author. Unfortunately, in the present case, Hippolytus' account is the only version available of the text. Regarding Hippolytus' trustworthiness as a source for Gnosticism, see Vallée (1981), 51-62. In addition, Buckley (1985a), 329 cleverly highlights that Hippolytus uses some key words when he wants to quote directly from a source, as he does in the case of *Bar*.

understands *Bar* as an Ophite/Sethian work,⁹³ this chapter will argue that this book might be better understood if it were read also in light of Valentinian doctrines, using the feminine and bridal imagery as primary focus. Therefore, I will systematically reference Valentinian sources to underline similar theologoumena and mythologoumena between Valentinianism and *Bar*. In order to prove my point, I will firstly discuss the identity of the author of *El*, thus suggesting that the text was circulating in Rome, where there was a prominent Valentinian circle. Secondly, I will investigate the role and functions of the female character Edem and of the syzygy. Lastly, I will explore the theological and eschatological consequences of the intra-divine fracture caused by the separation of the syzygy.

IV.2.1 The Identities of Hippolytus and Justin

It is not the purpose of this chapter to debate the *Hippolytusfrage*, but it is important to clarify those issues that have direct impact on my research, namely the *El*'s date of composition and its place of circulation.

Although many researches have dealt with this topic, the most exhaustive and conclusive work on the figure of Hippolytus is that by Simonetti.⁹⁴ He successfully used the cultural background and the ecclesiology of *El* to cast some light on the author's identity. First of all, he proposed to distinguish between Hippolytus, the oriental author of the *Against Noetus*, and Hippolytus, active in Rome at the beginning of the third century, who seems to be the

⁹³ I will mention here only the most significant contributors: Haenchen (1953); Grant (1954); Simonetti (1954) and (1999), 87-101; Van den Broek (1973) and (2003); Olander (1978); Buckley (1985a); Marcovich (1988a).

⁹⁴ See Simonetti (2011) and Loi – Simonetti (1977). Simonetti is hardly the first scholar to question the authorship of *El*, but he is certainly one of the most authoritative. The traditional attribution of the *El* to Hippolytus of Rome depends on a list of works found on a statue of Hippolytus discovered in the catacomb of Via Tiburtina in Rome in 1551; among the texts mentioned, the most famous was his *Against Noetus*. The first scholar to formulate the hypothesis of two Hippolytus living in Rome was Nautin (1953), thus rejecting Harnack's suggestion about the existence of only one Hippolytus, see Harnack (1855). A significant contribution to the *Hippolytusfrage* was also given by Brent, especially Brent (2011), who also explores archaeological evidence to support his hypothesis about the identity of the author. For an outline of the scholarship about the author of the *El*, see Cerrato (2002) and Aragione – Norelli (2011).

author of *El*.⁹⁵ Secondly, he concluded that the author of *El*, who might indeed have been named Hippolytus, corresponded to the one of the *Περὶ παντός* and *Συναγωγή χρόνων καὶ ἐτῶν*. These three works show indeed a similar interest in pagan philosophy, which constituted a peculiarity of Hippolytus' work.⁹⁶ Moreover, Simonetti's analysis highlighted how much the unknown author was close to the intellectual positions of the Alexandrian theologians, particularly Origen and Clement.⁹⁷ From his investigation, Simonetti deduced three main elements that could cast light on the author's identity: a) The author of *El* had a broad knowledge of pagan philosophies, whereas his education in the Scriptures was not equally advanced; b) it is likely that he was active in Rome, since he gave a detailed account of the ecclesiological discussions that inflamed the Roman elites; and c) his work was probably marginalised in the Roman community because of its ecclesiological perspective, as well as for the choice of the language, since using Greek was considered a proof of elitism and conservatism.⁹⁸

The identity of the Gnostic teacher Justin is no less of a mystery. One of the few attempts to reconstruct the identity of this author has been carried out by Van de Broek, who placed Justin in Alexandria, emphasising his syncretism and his Jewish Christian background.⁹⁹ His hypothesis is grounded on two main assumptions: a) the dependence of Justin's representation of Edem as a *μιξοπάρθενος* on Isis-Thermouthis, a half woman and half viper Egyptian goddess; b) the fact that Justin's strong syncretistic attitude and his knowledge

⁹⁵ See Simonetti (2000), 88-139 where he summarised his remarks on the *Hippolytusfrage*. He hypothesised the existence of three different figures: 1. The writer Hippolytus, author of *Against Noetus* (mentioned by Jerome and Eusebius), who was active in the oriental regions between the end of the second and the beginning of the third century; 2. The Roman Hippolytus, author of *El*, who was active during the first years of the third century and probably opposed both popes (Zephyrinus and Callistus); 3. The presbyter and martyr Hippolytus, who was worshipped in Rome and Porto.

⁹⁶ In this regard, see also Mansfeld (1992).

⁹⁷ Simonetti makes explicitly reference to the Logos theology, see Simonetti (2011), 262-267.

⁹⁸ See Simonetti (2011), 273, where he concluded: 'se coglie nel segno la nostra ipotesi circa il tentativo esperito dall'autore di *Elenchos* di prolungare o risuscitare, a fronte dell'ormai prevalente struttura gerarchica episcopale, quella presbiteriale di prima, potenziandone l'inevitabile tendenza centrifuga, questa caratteristica completa il quadro di una personalità di rilievo, la cui formazione culturale fuori dell'ordinario ebbe a tradursi in un'attività di pensiero e di azione non al passo con i rapidi mutamenti che allora modificavano a fondo quasi ogni aspetto della vita della comunità, e perciò destinata a esiti largamente fallimentari'.

⁹⁹ See Van Den Broek (1973), 42-44 and (2003), 282-287. The syncretistic nature of Justin's book has also been highlighted by Marchovich (1988).

of Greek mythology suited well the cultural elites of Alexandria. Notwithstanding that the cultural milieu of Alexandria might indeed be the ideal origin for the unusual mythology of *Bar*, Van den Broek's hypothesis cannot find additional corroboration due to the scarcity of information about Justin. Indeed, the book's mythology is the only source of information available and it does not provide definitive clues to help the historical investigation. Therefore, the social context in which *Bar* was circulating is equally indefinite. The author of *El* informs us that this book was held 'in high esteem' (ἐνδόξου)¹⁰⁰ by Justin's followers, who were described by him as an organised and structured group. Moreover, the author of *El* mentions some ritual practices; for instance, they were obliged to swear an oath in order to be introduced to the mysteries of the Good One, reproducing typologically the oath sworn by their Father Elohim when he entered the superior world. In addition, it is likely that this initiatory ritual included a baptismal moment in which the participants drank the 'pneumatic waters' in order to be purified.¹⁰¹ Concerning this ritual practice, it is worth noting that the ritual of baptism is a key element of Valentinianism, thus providing a first element of proximity between Justin's followers and this Gnostic school.¹⁰² In my attempt to provide a new interpretation of *Bar*, I will build on Simonetti's findings regarding the author of *El*, thus assuming that the works of the Gnostic teacher Justin were known in Rome at the beginning of the third century.

IV.2.2 Edem: the Double-Minded μιζοπάρενος

The unbegotten principles of everything are presented as follows:

This is what he says: there were three unborn principles in the universe; two male, and one female. One of the male principles is called "Good One". He alone is called this, and he foreknows all things. The other is called "Father" of generated beings. He does not foreknow, nor is he

¹⁰⁰ Hippolytus, *El* V, 24, 2.

¹⁰¹ Hippolytus, *El* V, 27, 1-4. Buckley (1985a), 337-338 conducts an interesting analysis of these ritual practices, identifying two ritual stages: firstly, the believer took the oath, then, they perform an 'inner baptism', drinking the pneumatic waters.

¹⁰² For the importance of baptism in Valentinianism, see Thomassen (2006), 333-414.

known or seen. The female principle does not foreknow, is irascible, double-minded, and double-bodied – in all respects like the girl in Herodotos’ story. She is like a young woman as far as the groin, but a viper below, as Justin says. She is called “Eden” and “Israel.” These, he says, are the principles of the universe, the roots and sources from which all existing reality came to be. There was nothing else at all.¹⁰³

The beginning of *Bar* presents an unusual “Trinity” quite different from any other Gnostic system. At a first glance, this pleromatic structure might be assimilated to the one of Irenaeus’ account of the Ophite system, which presents a First Man, a Second Man and a First Woman.¹⁰⁴ However, the comparison would be inaccurate for the roles and functions of *Bar*’s divine entities differ greatly from those of the pleromatic beings of Ophite accounts.¹⁰⁵ On the contrary, it is much more useful to compare it with Valentinian accounts. Firstly, while the First Man contributes to the generation of the Pleroma by emanating the Second Man, the Good One transcends utterly the creation and does not play any part in the generation of the world or of other pleromatic beings. Besides revealing a certain platonic concern for the transcendence of the highest divine entity, Justin’s reticence to involve the transcendent deity in the generation of the divine world might indicate the author’s awareness of the on-going Valentinian debate concerning the monadic or syzygial nature of the Pre-Father.¹⁰⁶ In this regard, Justin attempted to preserve the monadic and transcendent nature of the Father. Secondly, while the First Woman of the Ophite’s account, as presented by Irenaeus, was identified with the Holy Spirit and deemed consubstantial with the pneumatic First and Second Men, this is not the case of Edem. As a matter of fact, the female divine being of *Bar* does not belong to the same ontological nature of

¹⁰³ Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 1-2: Οὗτός φησιν· ἦσαν τρεῖς ἀρχαὶ τῶν ὅλων ἀγέννητοι, ἀρρενικαὶ δύο, θηλυκὴ μία. τῶν δὲ ἀρρενικῶν ἡ μὲν τις <ἀρχή> καλεῖται ἀγαθός, αὐτὸ μόνον οὕτως λεγόμενος, προγνωστικὸς τῶν ὅλων, ἡ δὲ ἑτέρα πατὴρ πάντων τῶν γεννητῶν, ἀπρόγνωστος <καὶ ἄγνωστος> καὶ ἀόρατος. ἡ δὲ θήλ(εια) ἀπρόγνωστος, ὀργίλη, διγνώμων, δισώμ<ατ>ος, κατὰ πάντα τῇ κατὰ τὸν Ἡροδότου μῦθον <κόρη> ἐμφορής, μέχρι βουβῶνος παρθένος, ἔχιδνα δὲ τὰ κάτω, ὥς φησιν Ἰουστίνος· καλεῖται δὲ Ἐδὲμ αὕτη ἡ κόρη καὶ Ἰσραήλ. αὗται, φησὶν, <εἰσὶν> αἱ ἀρχαὶ τῶν ὅλων, ρίζαι καὶ πηγαὶ ἀφ’ ὧν τὰ ὄντα ἐγένετο· ἄλλο δὲ ἦν οὐδέν.

¹⁰⁴ In particular, Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 30, 1-2.

¹⁰⁵ See Simonetti (1954), 80-82.

¹⁰⁶ For the disagreements between Valentinian theologians, see Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 2, 4 and I, 11, 1; Hippolytus, *El* VI, 29, 2-3. This topic has already been addressed in *supra* III.2.

the male divinities, rather to an inferior one. Her inferiority is primarily deducible from her appearance, for her physical characteristics suggest an ambiguous nature: she is double-minded (διγνώμος) and, consequently, double-bodied (δισώματος) – that is, half a virgin and half a viper.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, the only feature that Edem and Elohim have in common is the deprivation of foreknowledge (ἀπρόγνωστος). Secondly, a further confirmation of her lowliness can be found in the Greek terminology used in reference to her throughout the book: while Elohim is endowed with πνεῦμα and therefore belongs to the lofty regions of heaven (τὰ ὑψηλὰ μέρη τοῦ οὐρανοῦ), Edem possesses only ψυχή, thus being classified as a soul-endowed being of psychic nature.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, having her some animal parts (θηριώδης μέρος), it seems reasonable to assume that she also partakes in the hylic nature. Thirdly, Edem possesses a proclivity towards passions – specifically ὀργίλη, ἐπιθυμία and λύπη¹⁰⁹ – which makes the contrast between her and the male beings even more noticeable.¹¹⁰ In this regard, it is worth noting some similarities between Edem and Sophia Achamot of the Valentinian myth, for the passions described by Justin are the same as the ones suffered by Sophia, the fallen female aeon, in other Valentinian accounts.¹¹¹ Just as Achamot, Edem is unable to restrain her passions and she is confined in the lower region of the cosmos. Nonetheless, it must be noted that the overlap between Edem and Achamot is not complete for they differ in two respects. On the one hand, Edem and Achamot have different natures since the former is a psychic being whilst the latter is a fallen pneumatic being. On the other hand, Edem is one of the unbegotten ‘roots and

¹⁰⁷ The unusual bodily composition of Edem has been discussed extensively within scholarship; see especially Haenchen, (1953), 125 and Van Den Broek (1973), 35-41. The former hypothesized that Edem’s body is derived from the depiction of the zodiacal sign of Virgo, whereas the latter highlighted the similarities between Edem and the Egyptian goddess Isis-Thermouthis. A third hypothesis was suggested by Marcovich (1988), 95-97 who claimed the most likely source for Edem’s representation is Herodotus’ μιζοπάρενος.

¹⁰⁸ Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 14.

¹⁰⁹ For the latter two passions, see Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 2-3 and V, 26, 19-20.

¹¹⁰ In this regard, it should be noted that Elohim is not entirely immune from passions since he experienced desire (ἐπιθυμία) towards Edem, see Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 2. Nonetheless, neither the intensity nor the variety of passions can be equated to those suffered by Edem.

¹¹¹ See *ApJohn* II, 13, 13-17; Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 4, 1. This proclivity towards passion suits perfectly the Valentinian myth, in which even the divine pneumatic nature is tainted by passions, albeit only in its lowest emanations. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that once the pneumatic nature has been tainted by passions, it cannot remain inside the Pleroma, but it must be expelled. This is indeed the reason for Sophia’s fall outside the Pleroma (Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 3-4). On the value of passions within Gnostic mythology, see Lettieri (1996).

sources from which all existing reality came to be' (ἀρχαὶ τῶν ὅλων, ῥίζαι καὶ πηγαὶ ἀφ' ὧν τὰ ὄντα ἐγένετο), whereas Ahamot resulted from Sophia Echmot being restricted in the Pleroma by the aeon named Limit. Lastly, I believe it is worth spending few words on the unbegotten nature of Edem. In most Gnostic accounts, female characters are born by generation or emission from a male being, usually the abyssal Father. On the contrary, Edem is here conceived as ἀγέννητος, thus becoming more similar to a pre-existent χώρα, a 'receptacle of all becoming' as in Plato's *Timaeus*.¹¹² Hence, every detail of this initial presentation of Edem suggests that she is a liminal being, dwelling with divine beings albeit she does not display any divine properties. In this respect, the name Ἰσραήλ is illuminating since it serves a double purpose: on the one hand, it identifies Edem with the bride of God; on the other hand, it implies she is the bride of God of the Old Testament that Gnostics considered inferior.

Nevertheless, Edem's ambiguous and liminal disposition does not prevent her from being the object of Elohim's desire (ἐπιθυμία); so much so that she is united with Elohim by mutual love (εἰς μίαν φιλίας εὐνοίαν), reciprocal desire and fertile love,¹¹³ and they constitute an eternal and unbreakable bond, a συζυγία.¹¹⁴ Before listing those elements that characterise this union as a syzygy, it is worth mentioning two important features which distinguish it from the usual Valentinian syzygy. On the one hand, Edem and Elohim constitute an impure syzygy since they belong to different natures, namely, the pneumatic and psychic ones. On the other hand, their union originated from a passion (ἐπιθυμία) and, as such, is tainted by irrationality. Despite these two elements, the syzygy maintains a strong normative value in *Bar*. Once again, the Greek text is revealing, for the choice of the word συνθήκη to describe the relation of the σύζυγοι clarifies the legal status of the union. Similarly, the comparison with the dowry suggests the legal pact constituted by the syzygy: as the law requires that women bring a dowry to their husbands, so Edem conferred all

¹¹² Plato, *Timaeus* 49 a5–6 or 52 a8–d3.

¹¹³ Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 2–3.

¹¹⁴ For the connection with the idea of ἱερὸς γάμος, see Marcovich (1988), 97–98.

her powers to Elohim when she married him.¹¹⁵ Indeed, the marriage between Edem and Elohim is τύπος of all human marriages, which imperfectly try to reproduce the rules established by the original marriage of these two divine entities.¹¹⁶ Hence, the syzygy constitutes an eternal and supreme law that regulates the generation of the entire cosmos and, insofar as Edem is united with Elohim in syzygy, her passions are restrained and she contributes actively to the creation, providing ψυχή to the creation.¹¹⁷ The celestial offspring of Elohim and Edem are twenty-four angels – twelve maternal angels and twelve paternal ones – and together they form the Garden of Heaven. Each of them is a tree: Baruch, third of the paternal angels, is the Tree of Life; whilst Naas, third of the maternal angels, is the Tree of Good and Evil. Both of them are extensions of their parents' powers, therefore they act in accordance with their will.¹¹⁸ After breaking of the syzygy, Baruch will be identified with the Redeemer, sent to free the trapped parts of Elohim's spirit; whereas Naas will be his antagonist, the evil angel who puts all his efforts in concealing the salvific message of Baruch. Edem's other angels are archontic figures that rule over the creation, being also responsible for evil times and diseases.¹¹⁹ However, before the intra-divine fracture caused by Elohim's decision to ascent, their dominion is harmoniously described as a circular dance (ἐν χορῶ κυκλικῶ).¹²⁰ The human offspring of the syzygy are Adam and Eve. Humankind occupies a special place in the world for it symbolises the unity and love between Edem and Elohim (σύμβολον τῆς ἐνότητος αὐτῶν καὶ εὐνοίας);¹²¹ they are seal (σφραγίς) and reminder (ὑπόμνημα) of the eternal

¹¹⁵ Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 10. The Greek text underlines the relation between divine event and human tradition by means of the words: θεῖον καὶ πατρικὸν νόμον.

¹¹⁶ I believe the use of a typological way of thinking is the main reason to classify this text as undoubtedly Gnostic. For the importance of typology within Gnosticism see Lettieri (2005) and (2011).

¹¹⁷ Moreover, she creates the beasts and the inferior beings that come from Edem's bestial part, see Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 7.

¹¹⁸ Simonetti even considers the actions of these angels as actions of Edem or Elohim themselves, Simonetti (1954).

¹¹⁹ See *Gen.* 2:9. For the angels as evil rulers of the world, see Daniélou (1970).

¹²⁰ Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 11-13. In the Greek philosophical tradition, the circular movement was generally used as symbol of the perfection and order of the κόσμος. In truth, the disposition of these angels is described as φειδωλός, but the passage is ambiguous since it could be interpreted that they act niggardly consequently to Elohim's betrayal.

¹²¹ Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 8. I would like to point out the multiple meanings of the word εὐνοία. It does not only give the idea of affection, but it has also a component of ontological goodness

union (αἰώνιος γάμος) between the spouses. Adam is εἰκὼν of Elohim, while Eve typologically represents Edem.¹²² As their “children”, they inherit something from each of their parents: from Elohim they receive the πνεῦμα, whereas from Edem they obtain the ψυχή. Once more, it is possible to observe that Edem’s contribution to humankind concerns her ἡμερος and ἀνθρωπέος parts; therefore, Adam and Eve inherited her nobler and better parts. Regarding the nature of humankind, Justin remarks twice that both Adam and Eve inherited ψυχή and πνεῦμα. As a consequence, Eve is paradoxically superior to her own mother, since she possesses the pneumatic nature of which Edem is devoid. Stating this, Justin explicitly equates the ontological status of the male and female sexes, recognising both as being potentially worthy of salvation.¹²³ The redeemable nature of the cosmos is confirmed by the Good One’s refusal to grant to Elohim the permission to destroy the world. After having experienced ‘what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived’ in the lofty regions of heaven,¹²⁴ Elohim wanted to destroy his creation for it was imperfect and his spirit, in the guise of men and women, was still trapped in it. However, when he asked the consent of the Good One, he denied him his permission, saying to Elohim: ‘You can do nothing harmful now that you are beside me, for from mutual pleasure you and Eden made the world. So let Eden have the creation as long as she wants. But you, remain by me’.¹²⁵ Since the world originated from the syzygial union, it has the potentiality to be redeemed and it cannot be destroyed.

Hence, the description of Edem up to the point of the creation of Adam and Eve seems to emphasise her mingled disposition, making her an ambivalent and paradoxical character. On the one hand, she is an unbegotten divine

in it. This word was especially used to refer to marriage and therefore it acquired a deeper meaning which is impossible to convey through the English word ‘love’.

¹²² Hippolytus, *El V*, 26, 9.

¹²³ See Hippolytus, *El V*, 26, 9 and *V*, 26, 25. It would certainly be interesting to investigate why Justin felt it necessary to reaffirm this idea twice, but I fear it would be more a mental exercise rather than a historical speculation. It is indeed probable such an elucidation was due to a common belief in the inferiority of the female sex. I fear it is an impossible task to determine whether it was used to contrast a peculiar of Gnostic tendency or common cultural belief.

¹²⁴ Hippolytus, *El V*, 26, 16.

¹²⁵ Hippolytus, *El V*, 26, 18: οὐδὲν δύνασαι κακοποιῆσαι παρ’ ἐμοὶ γενόμενος· ἐκ κοινῆς γὰρ εὐαρεστήσεως ἐποιήσατε τὸν κόσμον σύ τε καὶ ἡ Ἐδέμ· ἔασον οὖν τὴν Ἐδέμ ἔχειν τὴν κτίσιν μέχρι βούλεται.

principle who plays an essential role in the generation of the cosmos. On the other hand, she is a psychic being inclined to passions. In this regard, the identification of her angel Naas with both the Snake and the Tree of Good and Evil is revelatory, for it underlines the ambiguity of Edem. Therefore, Edem's role ought to be understood within the boundaries of the syzygy. Insofar as she is restrained by a male element, she actively contributes to the creation of the world by providing the psychic and material substratum of the cosmos and humans within it.

IV.2.3 Breaking the Syzygy: Celestial Disruption and Origin of Chaos

The role of Edem changes abruptly when an 'evil necessity' (ἀνάγκη τῆς κακίας) occurs:

The necessity of evil emerged from this type of cause. After he outfitted and fashioned the world from their mutual pleasure, Elohim decided to ascend to the heights of heaven and observe their contents, so that there might not be anything deficient among the beings of his creation. So, taking with him his own angels (he was naturally borne upward), he abandoned Eden below (for as earth, she did not want to accompany her spouse to the upper regions).¹²⁶

By deciding to move upwards, Elohim breaks the eternal law of the syzygy. In other Valentinian texts, this is formulated as: 'For this is the will of the Father: not to allow anything to happen in the Pleroma (πληρωμα) apart from a syzygy (συζυγος). Again, the will of the Father is: always produce and bear fruit (καρπος)' ¹²⁷ Being a mixed syzygy, Elohim and Edem cannot be part of the Pleroma and the syzygy has to break for the pneumatic nature to be reunited with the superior world, thus showing the paradoxical nature of an 'evil necessity'. Although the text does not explicitly mention this syzygial "law",

¹²⁶ Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 15: Γέγονε δὲ ἡ τῆς κακίας ἀνάγκη ἐκ τοιαύτης τινὸς αἰτίας· κατασκευάσας καὶ δημιουργήσας <ὁ> Ἐλωειμ ἐκ κοινῆς εὐαρεστήσεως τὸν κόσμον, ἀναβῆναι ἠθέλησεν εἰς τὰ ὑψηλὰ μέρη τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ θεάσασθαι μή τι γέγονε τῶν κατὰ τὴν κτίσιν ἐνδεές, συμπαραλαβὼν τοὺς ἰδίους ἀγγέλους μεθ' αὐτοῦ - ἦν γὰρ ἀνωφερής - <καὶ> καταλιπὼν τὴν Ἐδὲμ κάτω - γῆ γὰρ οὕσα ἐπακολουθεῖν ἄνω τῷ συζύγῳ ἐθέλουσα οὐκ <ἠδυνήθη>.

¹²⁷ *ExVal* XI, 36, 28-34.

Justin seems to be aware of the fact that breaking the syzygy constitutes an evil.¹²⁸ As in the previous case of the dowry, the commandment given to humankind to proliferate should be type of the events that happen in the superior world.¹²⁹ Nonetheless, such rupture is necessary for Elohim has to reunite with the superior world to which he belongs. Hence, this episode is indeed an ‘evil necessity’ that constitutes the beginning of evils in the world.¹³⁰

As in all Gnostic mythologies, the world is abandoned to an evil ruler; however, Justin seems to attribute Valentinian demiurgical features to both Elohim and Edem. The Gnostic teacher seems to suggest a correspondence between Elohim and the inferior God, the Demiurge, especially since Elohim discovered the existence of a higher divinity of whom he had previously ignored the existence as the Demiurge does in other Gnostic accounts. Furthermore, the monotheistic statement of Elohim resembles visibly the monotheistic claim of the Demiurge in other Gnostic accounts.¹³¹ Given these similarities, most scholars have identified Elohim with the Demiurge/Yaldabaoth.¹³² Nonetheless, I believe it is necessary to underline that, in *Bar*, the role usually attributed to the Demiurge is split between Elohim and Edem, who possesses the archontic dominion over the world. As Elohim, she is affected by ignorance and lack of foreknowledge: while Elohim did not recognise the existence of a superior God, Edem cannot know the pneumatic Elohim.¹³³ In addition, Edem and the Demiurge both belong to the psychic nature, which is indeed what prevents her from ascending towards the highest regions. In interpreting Edem’s inability to ascend, I am following Marcovich’s critical edition of the Greek text, thus amending both the English and Italian

¹²⁸ The idea that breaking the syzygy constitutes an evil is also expressed by Ptolemy’s rejection of the divorce in Ptolemy, *EpFl* in Epiphanius, *Pan* I, 33, 3, 5.

¹²⁹ Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 9.

¹³⁰ For the antinomian attitude of Gnostic texts, see Jonas (1963).

¹³¹ Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 15. For other accounts, see *ExTheod* 33; Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 5, 4; *ApJohn* II, 11, 20-22.

¹³² Simonetti is counted in this group, although he strongly stressed the differences with other representations of the Demiurge, see Simonetti (1954), 77-78.

¹³³ Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 37: “Israel has not known me,” he (Father) says, “for if she had known that I am with the Good, she would not have punished my spirit,” which is bound in humans on account of their Father’s ignorance.’

translations, where the verb δύναιμι is missing from the text.¹³⁴ This amendment adds in fact a very important element for the general understanding of Gnostic natures, which are here presented as consistent ontological categories, as some Valentinians did.¹³⁵

Consequently, I think that, in spite of her desire to be reunited with her spouse, Edem could not ascend to the lofty regions of heaven because of her psychic nature. Unable to reach her spouse upward and desperate because of his betrayal, Edem exercised her power over the earth as an evil demiurgic being. Having been left behind by Elohim and not being restrained by his presence, her mingled nature did not know any restraints and her actions were now driven by passions. She condemned Elohim's spirit that is in humans so that they would experience the same loss and betrayal that she felt when abandoned by Elohim; therefore, her angels unleashed evils over the earth, causing divorces, adulteries and pederasty. It is worth noting that the actions of her angel are a systematic subversion of the laws that regulate the union between men and women that had been established in the syzygial creation. Indeed, tainting (or attempting to taint) the purity of the creation by means of sexual crimes, as in the case of the illicit intercourse of Naas, is a typical feature of demiurgical will in Valentinian texts. Furthermore, the sexual nature of Edem's crimes resembles the archontic crimes described in *ApJohn* or *HypArch*,¹³⁶ where the archons try – more or less successfully – to defile many female characters, such as Eve or Norea. Moreover, the description of Edem's passionate and even lustful behaviour presents many similarities with female characters of Jewish and Gnostic apocalyptic literature.¹³⁷ The text associates her with a prostitute who distances herself from her spouse and wanders alone.¹³⁸ However, despite the fact that the prostitute-imagery is extremely common in Gnostic texts, this very image assumes here a unique meaning. One of the Nag Hammadi treatises, namely *ExSoul*, tells the story of a fallen pneumatic soul who has

¹³⁴ For the Italian translation, see Simonetti (1999), 93. For the English translation see Litwa (2016), 342-343.

¹³⁵ Concerning the three ontological natures in Valentinianism, see Simonetti (1966).

¹³⁶ See *ApJohn* I, 29, 16 – 30, 11; *HypArch* II, 89, 17-30 and 92, 19-32.

¹³⁷ To deepen the topic of apocalyptic literature in Valentinian and Sethian works, see Stroumsa (1984), 17-70; Attridge (2000); Lettieri (2017).

¹³⁸ Hippolytus, *El V*, 27, 4.

many lovers before she can finally be reunited with her rightful Spouse.¹³⁹ Contrariwise, in *Bar*, the imagery of prostitution is not used to describe the condition of the fallen pneumatic nature, rather the condition of a psychic primordial aeon. The psychic Edem, originally united in syzygy with her pneumatic match, is now abandoned to prostitute herself to her hylic side, thus further showing the crucial importance of the syzygy in this text. Hence, it would appear that Justin is attributing features and episodes usually referred to the Demiurge or Yaldabaoth in other Gnostic mythologies to Edem, and partly to Elohim.

Concerning the similarities with other Gnostic characters involved in the intra-divine rupture proper to Gnostic mythologies, Justin seems to draw an unusual comparison between Elohim and the Valentinian superior Sophia, namely the one who has been restored after the fall. In particular, Elohim could be associated with those accounts that identify Sophia's better self with Christ, such as the *ExVal* and *ExTheod* 32.¹⁴⁰ The peculiarity of these accounts consists in the fact that Christ is both Sophia's son and her better self. On the one hand, Elohim decided to ascend to the superior regions of heaven, abandoning Edem downward, just as Christ left his mother in the midst of shadows after she had brought him forth. On the other hand, Elohim has a lot in common also with the Sophia Echmot of the *GosPhil* and the *GN*.¹⁴¹ First, both Elohim and the Valentinian superior Sophia got involved in the generation of the inferior world because of their ignorance. As Elohim united with Edem because he was unaware of the Good One, some Valentinian accounts report that Sophia caused the rupture because she was ignorant of the Father.¹⁴² Secondly, they both contaminated their pneumatic nature with the inferior psychic nature: Elohim through his union with Edem and Sophia Echmot by generating the Demiurge. Thirdly, they both repented their actions and tried to amend their error; indeed, Sophia begged the Pleroma to rescue her whilst Elohim asked the

¹³⁹ This text will be analyzed in the following chapter, *infra* IV.3.

¹⁴⁰ *ExVal* XI, 33, 28 – 35, 37 and *ExTheod* 32, 1-3. This separation myth is also present in the *TriTrac*, where the character of Sophia is identified with the Logos, see *TriTrac* II, 77, 11 – 78, 20. For further information on the myth of separation in Valentinism, *supra* III.3.

¹⁴¹ *GosPhil* II, 60, 10-15 and Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 2, 2-5.

¹⁴² Some Valentinian accounts report that Sophia wanted to know the Abyssal Father, whilst other accounts claim that she was looking for a partner, see Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 3-4.

Good One to destroy the fruit of his union with Edem. Lastly, just as Sophia, Elohim was found culpable for the evils which occurred after his ascent. Although Elohim did not perform any evil deeds by ascending upwards where he belonged, his actions contributed – even though only indirectly – to generate evils that afflict humans. After he had broken the unbreakable law of the syzygy, Edem became *superbullientes*, to borrow Irenaeus' word.¹⁴³ Nonetheless, the reason for the intra-divine fracture is not found exclusively in Edem's disposition, for the text explains:

From this time on,¹⁴⁴ vices and virtues took hold of human beings. Both have a single source— the Father. For when he ascended to the Good One, the Father showed the way for those willing to rise, but when he separated from Eden, he initiated troubles for the spirit in human beings.¹⁴⁵

Edem's irascible behaviour is intrinsic to her psychic nature, but the responsibility of evil is found in Elohim's lack of foreknowledge and in his violation of the Father's will.¹⁴⁶ The Greek is once more extremely enlightening, since the verb that designates Elohim's decision is ἐθέλω, a verb that undoubtedly indicates his decision to ascend; such ascension was, however, a necessary decision which reunited him with him with the Good One with whom he shared the pneumatic nature.¹⁴⁷ When he indulged in his desire towards Edem, he was unaware of the results of his gesture and his actions originated greater evils for men and women. In this respect, *Bar* represents an *unicum* among Gnostic texts: while the fault of the intra-divine fracture is always attributed to a female aeon, usually named Sophia, this text describes it as an evil necessity that is originated from Elohim. Consequently, this passage

¹⁴³ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 30, 2. I am not equating the status of Edem and the First Woman, I am only alluding to a natural incontinence proper to certain Gnostic representation of the feminine.

¹⁴⁴ That is, the seduction of Adam and Eve by Naas.

¹⁴⁵ Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 23-24: ἀπὸ τότε <τε> ἐπεκράτησε τὰ κακὰ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις καὶ <κεχώρηκε> τὰ ἀγαθὰ, ἐκ μιᾶς ἀρχῆς γενόμενα, τῆς τοῦ πατρὸς· ἀναβὰς γὰρ πρὸς τὸν ἀγαθὸν ὁ πατὴρ ὁδὸν ἔδειξε τοῖς ἀναβαίνειν θέλουσιν, ἀποστὰς δὲ τῆς Ἑδέμ ἀρχὴν κακῶν ἐποίησε τῷ πνεύματι [τοῦ πατρὸς] τῷ ἐν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις.

¹⁴⁶ To a certain extent, he is the Gnostic Sophia whose ignorance is the cause of the rift within the Pleroma.

¹⁴⁷ Hippolytus, *El* V, 26,14: κατασκευάσας καὶ δημιουργήσας <ὁ> Ἐλωεῖμ ἐκ κοινῆς εὐαρεστήσεως τὸν κόσμον, ἀναβῆναι ἠθέλησεν εἰς τὰ ὑψηλὰ μέρη τοῦ οὐρανοῦ.

has puzzled scholarship, which is divided on whether Elohim or Edem must be found culpable of evil.¹⁴⁸ Despite being an unusual version of the Gnostic myth, the text is extremely clear regarding the fact that, had Elohim not broken the syzygial unity, no moral evil would have affected the spirit within humankind. Therefore, just as Edem is depicted as the perpetrator of evils, unleashing her unjust angel, so also Elohim is here called ἀρχή κακῶν. Both of them acted according to their natures – one pneumatic and one psychic – and both were unaware of the consequences of their actions. Nonetheless, Elohim seems culpable of contravening to the divine pact of the συζυγία, while Edem is guilty of being unable to restrain herself. In both cases, the events are classified as κακία ἀνάγκη, a necessary and inevitable evil, since both were compelled by their natures. Hence, the importance of sexual and nuptial imagery for *Bar*'s structure is made clear: while the sexual relationship that was regulated by the norms (συνθήκη) of the syzygy originated the entire creation, its opposite – namely, adultery and pederasty – determined the cosmic fall into chaos. Furthermore, this divorce represents the necessary and unavoidable fracture between the psychic and the pneumatic, since the break of the syzygy symbolises also the separation of two eschatological destinies. Just as Edem, once the psychic nature is separated from its consortium with the pneumatic spirit, it converts to its lower instincts and becomes similar to the hylic beasts. This fracture is incurable: as Elohim is unable to dwell again in the inferior region, equally the evil turn of Edem is irreversible. Hence, the separation of the two natures results in the abandonment of the psychic nature to its doom.

In this regard, the Good One's denial to destroy the creation needs further exploration since such a refusal might appear puzzling: why should not Elohim destroy what was generated in error?¹⁴⁹ The answer lies in the mingled disposition of creation. Since the world originated from the concoction of both pneumatic and psychic natures, it possesses a radical ambiguity that makes it potentially worthy of salvation. Furthermore, the Good One's denial reveals

¹⁴⁸ Buckley (1985a), 342-343 does not express a definitive opinion to this regard. On the contrary, Van den Broek, (1973), 41 denies that Edem is the origin of evils.

¹⁴⁹ Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 18.

that Justin's attitude towards the creation is less negative than most Gnostic movements. Gnostics tend to have an extremely negative conception of the created world, including humankind, which they believe to be *created* and ruled by the inferior Demiurge. By attributing the creation of the world to the mutual love of Elohim and Edem, Justin denied an evil foundation of the world that was rather originated by the pact of two divine entities. The συζυγία, which is the encounter of two natures, brought forth entities that resemble its assorted nature. Consequently, where most Gnostic myths envisage hidden pneumatic spirits trapped in a psychic and hylic creation,¹⁵⁰ Justin acknowledges the persistence of both pneumatic and psychic nature in all humans, thus making all humankind be endowed with the salvific πνεῦμα. Given that the creation possesses the salvific spirit, the fruit of the union between Edem and Elohim cannot be destroyed. Notwithstanding Justin's evaluation of the creation and his attribution of both pneumatic and psychic element to humankind, the psychic nature does not seem destined to be saved:

There was made a division, he explains, between water and water so that there is a water of the evil creation below the firmament, in which the psychic and hylic beings are washed, and a water of the Good above the firmament. This water is living, and in it are washed the living spiritual humans.¹⁵¹

Hence, the pneumatic waters will not be drunk by the psychics or hylics, who will not be saved. Indeed, the Redeemer Baruch was sent by his Father Elohim to show the way only to his pneumatic children,¹⁵² who will ascend to his presence in the lofty regions of heaven. Eventually, all humankind – both men and women endowed with πνεῦμα – will know the way upward and will be

¹⁵⁰ According to most Gnostic doctrines, not all humans will be eschatologically saved, but only Seth's offspring or the pneumatic nature will enter the nuptial chamber, see *ApJohn* II, 25, 16 – 27, 30; Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 7, 5.

¹⁵¹ Hippolytus, *El* V, 27, 3: διακεχώρισται γάρ, φησίν, ἀνὰ μέσον ὕδατος καὶ ὕδατος, καὶ ἔστιν ὕδωρ τὸ ὑποκάτω τοῦ στερεώματος τῆς πονηρᾶς κτίσεως, ἐν ᾧ λούονται οἱ χοῖκοι καὶ ψυχικοὶ ἄνθρωποι, καὶ ὕδωρ ἔστιν <τὸ> ὑπεράνω τοῦ στερεώματος τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, ἄνθρωποι, καὶ ὕδωρ ἔστιν <τὸ> ὑπεράνω τοῦ στερεώματος τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, ζῶν <ὄν>, ἐν ᾧ λούονται οἱ πνευματικοὶ ζῶντες ἄνθρωποι, <καὶ> ἐν ᾧ ἐλούσατο <ὁ> Ἐλωεὶμ καὶ λουσάμενος οὐ μετεμελήθη.

¹⁵² The name Baruch comes from the Hebrew tradition: בָּרַךְ is the past participle of the verb “to bless”. It is clear that the author is revoking the narrative of the Old Testament. However, the reasons behind this choice still need to be explored in depth.

received at the presence of the Good One, as their Father Elohim was before them. Baruch's message will spread throughout the earth thanks to a man, Jesus, who will be the first to render his body to Edem and his spirit to the Good One. Here, the Christology displayed by Justin works as additional confirmation of the different eschatological destinies reserved to psychic and pneumatic natures: since the body belongs to the lower psychic nature, it must be left behind to Edem, the psychic root of everything.¹⁵³ Although the destiny of Edem is not discussed openly by Justin, the text seems to suggest that she is excluded from redemption, insofar as she is not united in syzygy with Elohim. Therefore, while many Gnostic texts envisage a final return of the fallen female being to the Pleroma by means of union with the male pneumatic element, *Bar* poses a protological unity that is not restored at the eschatological time.

IV.2.4 Conclusion

Bar certainly stands out amongst Gnostic works for its peculiar structure and mythology, the originality of which is entirely conveyed by feminine and bridal imagery. This brief work presents an unusual and radically ambiguous female character, as well as a unique Gnostic syzygy.

The female character Edem is presented as one of the divine 'three principles of the universe', but she is also portrayed as double-minded and double-bodied virgin, inclined to passions and in need of being restrained by a pneumatic element. Although none of the other Gnostic myths presents such a paradoxical female character, Edem – to a certain extent – resembles all intra-pleromatic and fallen female characters. Insofar as her main function is generative, she resembles the highest female principles of Gnostic mythologies, namely Barbelo, Ennoia or Silence. However, whereas these latter characters are involved in the generation of pleromatic beings, Edem generates humankind with Elohim and provides psychic and hylic substratum for the world. Contrariwise, insofar as she is inclined to passions and subject to them when she is not united in syzygy, she resembles Sophia Achamot, the fallen female

¹⁵³ Hippolytus, *El* V, 26, 32. Here, Justin's Christology seems to confirm his rigid separation between pneumatic and psychic element. See Orbe (1976), 377.

aeon who originated the intra-divine fracture. However, if in most Gnostic texts Sophia's yearning for knowledge is the cause of evil,¹⁵⁴ in *Bar Edem* is merely the executor of evils, but not their cause. The responsibility of the evil in the world seems to lie with Elohim, who broke the bond of the syzygy by abandoning Edem and ascending to the upper regions. Nonetheless, since Elohim possessed a pneumatic nature, he could neither remain confined within the limit of the creation nor be separated from his own Father, the Good One. Consequently, the fracture originated by the break of the syzygy is both an incurable and necessary evil. Although *Bar* has mostly been interpreted within the Ophite and Sethian tradition, its overall interpretation of the pleromatic and fallen feminine and the syzygy does not fit within these groups' theologoumena and mythologoumena. Notwithstanding that also most Ophite texts envisage a male redeemer, they present female characters playing a significant revealing or soteriological role, thus making them essential to the historical economy of salvation.¹⁵⁵ This is not the case of Edem. As the textual analysis has highlighted, Edem does not perform either salvific or revealing actions. Furthermore, the syzygy plays a fundamental role within Justin's system. Although the notion of the importance of the syzygy is present in many Gnostic movements, Justin's description of the functions and roles of the syzygy shares many similarities with the Valentinian tradition. In *ValEx*, *GosPhil* and in the Ptolemy's *EpFl*, the indissolubility of the syzygial union stands as the core of the Valentinian myth.¹⁵⁶ Similarly the role played by the female character of Edem must be understood within the boundaries of the syzygy as in Valentinianism, where a male element intervenes in restraining the female aeon who dwells in the material world. There is, however, one possible similarity with Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite texts, that is, the attribution of a pneumatic nature to Eve. In the previous sections,¹⁵⁷ I have shown that Eve has a pneumatic self only in *ApJohn*, *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*; on the contrary, she is valued mainly for being the female counterpart of the

¹⁵⁴ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 3-4.

¹⁵⁵ This is visible in the Nag Hammadi treatise *OrigWorld* and the final hymn is particularly indicative of this, see *OrigWorld* II, 114, 4-15. For more detail on this topic, *supra* II.3.4 and II.4.3.

¹⁵⁶ See *ExVal*. XI, 36, 28-34 and XI, 39, 13; *ExTheod* 32, 1; *GosPhil* II, 76, 6-17; Ptolemy, *EpFl* in Epiphanius, *Pan* I, 4, 4, 7.

¹⁵⁷ *Supra* II.4 and III. 4.

syzygy in Valentinian texts. In *Bar*, we find an unusual combination of the two traditions: on the one hand, Eve is superior to his mother Edem, because she possesses the pneumatic nature; on the other hand, Eve is valued mainly as syzygial counterpart of Adam. To sum up, the feminine imagery of *Bar* corresponds mainly to Valentinian texts in the case of the intra-pleromatic and fallen feminine, whereas it is an unusual mix of Ophite, Barbeloite and Valentinian mythologoumena and theologoumena when it comes to the case of the incarnated feminine.

Concerning the affiliation of *Bar* to the Ophite tradition, it is also interesting to note that the character of the Serpent, called Naas in *Bar*, differs substantially from its portrayal in Ophite texts. Frequently, in texts categorized as Sethian or Ophite, the Serpent is interpreted as a positive character – even a Redeemer – for he frees humans from the oppression of the ignorant Demiurge. Contrarily, in *Bar*, Naas causes evils among humans by hiding the pneumatic doctrines of Baruch. Hence, far from being an instrument of redemption, he is rather an instrument of oppression. To sum up, *Bar* displays two essential Valentinian theologoumena and mythologoumena: the indestructible nature of the syzygy and the rigidity of the three natures (pneumatic, psychic and hylic). Indeed, the evils Elohim caused to fall upon human beings are the result of the evil necessity that occurred when he broke the nuptial pact of the syzygy and ascended to the Good One to be reunited with the transcendent deity with whom he is consubstantial.

The textual analysis briefly presented in this chapter suggests that *Bar* must have been composed after the rise of Valentinianism, from which the text borrows many theologoumena, even if it would be a stretch to include this text among the Valentinian works. This conclusion is also supported by the researches on the author of *El* and the life of Justin. If one concedes that the author of the *El* was indeed that Hyppolitus who was part of the Roman elites at the beginning of the third century, it seems even more likely that Justin was himself familiar with the Valentinian school, which was very active in Rome in the second half of the second century. Moreover, if one envisions Justin as a Gnostic teacher who was famous only locally, collocating Justin in Rome

would also explain why his work did not survive in any other account. Nonetheless, I would like to underline that these remarks on Justin's identity and geographical and chronological collocations remain a speculative hypothesis, for no concrete evidence can be brought in this regard.

In conclusion, the syncretistic nature of Justin's work led to an unusual combination of Ophite and Valentinian mythologoumena and theologoumena, which represents an *unicum* in the Gnostic tradition. There is, however, one element that does not appear in any other Gnostic account and it is worth mentioning as proper to Justin: a fairly positive evaluation of humankind. Since both men and women were created from Elohim's and Edem's mutual pleasure, all humankind possesses pneumatic parts waiting to be reunited with their consubstantial Father. Therefore, Justin is displaying the idea of a potential universal salvation for humankind. Although Edem is, in the end, abandoned to its own destiny of destruction, this cannot be said of her offspring. As proven by the case of Jesus, they will render their psychic and hylic part to Edem, but their spiritual self will 'wash' in the 'waters above'. Contrarily to most Gnostic texts, the possession of a spiritual nature is naturally and ontologically granted to all humankind because of the original pneumatic and psychic union of Elohim and Edem. This notion represents probably the most original feature of Justin's mythology.

IV.3 A Feminine Tale in *The Exegesis on the Soul* (NHC II, 6)

The Coptic treatise entitled *The Exegesis on the Soul* is one of the most striking examples of the use of feminine imagery in early Christianity. The text narrates the journey of a soul towards redemption in terms of feminine imagery. Although the Gnostic affiliation of this treatise has been contested by some scholars, I believe that a thorough investigation of feminine imagery will clarify this unsettled question, providing new evidence regarding the Gnostic nature of the text. In particular, I will argue that this treatise presents all of the mythologoumena and theologoumena that are proper to Valentinian feminine imagery. Hence, the purpose of this chapter is twofold: on the one hand, it aims at offering a detailed analysis of the use of feminine imagery in *ExSoul*, contextualizing it within Gnosticism; on the other hand, it aims at proving the theological and mythological affinities between *ExSoul* and the Valentinian movement.

ExSoul is a short treatise, written in Greek probably between third and fourth century and then translated in Coptic.¹⁵⁸ Unlike other Nag Hammadi treatises, *ExSoul* presents a fairly good state of conservation, with only occasional *lacunae*.¹⁵⁹ Nevertheless, scholars working on this text agree on very little. One of the first causes of scholarly disagreements can be identified in the translation of the title ΤΕΞΗΓΗΤΙΚΟΝ ΕΠΙ ΤΗΣ ΨΥΧΗΣ and the literary genre of *ExSoul*.¹⁶⁰ Concerning the title, Kasser has dedicated an entire article to try to settle this scholarly dispute.¹⁶¹ In his opinion, none of the three English translations – that is, ‘The Exegesis on the Soul’,¹⁶² ‘The Expository Treatise concerning the Soul’¹⁶³ and ‘The Exegetical Treatise concerning the Soul’¹⁶⁴ – is accurate, for

¹⁵⁸ The date of composition can only be indicative, for it is impossible to narrow it down to a specific decade. Robinson (1989), 136 considered it written as early as the beginning of the third century CE, whereas Scopello (1985), 13 suggested a composition between third-fourth century.

¹⁵⁹ Brown (1975) and Layton (1977).

¹⁶⁰ For the Coptic texts and translation, I am using Robinson (1989).

¹⁶¹ Kasser (1997).

¹⁶² This title has been chosen by Wisse (1975). For the French equivalent see Scopello (1985), whilst for the German equivalent see Krause and Labib (1971).

¹⁶³ See Robinson (1989) and Layton (1977).

¹⁶⁴ Layton (1978).

the Hellenistic meaning of the term **ΤΕΞΗΓΗΤΙΚ** is closer to ‘history’ than our modern ‘exegesis’. Consequently, he has proposed to use the title ‘L’Histoire de l’Âme’.¹⁶⁵ Although I have chosen to use the English translation ‘The Exegesis of the Soul’, thus preferring a literal translation of the title, Kasser’s observations regarding the use of **ΤΕΞΗΓΗΤΙΚ** in the Hellenistic period are convincing and the word ‘exegesis’ should not be intended in a narrow sense. It seems indeed likely that use of the word **ΤΕΞΗΓΗΤΙΚ** was due to the author’s intent to make this treatise a narrative discourse about the journey of a soul towards redemption.

This brings the topic to the second cause of disagreement among scholars: the literary genre of *ExSoul*. Scopello has noted some similarities between *ExSoul* and the ancient Greek novels.¹⁶⁶ *ExSoul* follows the same narrative plot of Greco-Roman novels, usually centered on the tragic separation of two lovers and the obstacles to their love until their happy reunion.¹⁶⁷ Robinson has also highlighted how this treatise bears some similarities with philosophical treatises on the soul, although he concluded that it would be inaccurate to describe *ExSoul* as a purely philosophical work.¹⁶⁸ Another possibility has been more recently discussed by Dritsas Bizier, who has classified *ExSoul* as a hortative baptismal homily; nevertheless, his analysis has failed to account for the need of such a storyline in a baptismal homily.¹⁶⁹ An example of a similar literary structure might be found in the *Authentikos Logos*, another treatise of the Nag Hammadi library. Nevertheless, this treatise does not present the love story element as neatly as *ExSoul*, thus resulting in a text that is less similar to a novel than *ExSoul*.¹⁷⁰ The doubts surrounding the literary genre of *ExSoul* are further complicated by the possibility that the text underwent several redactions. This hypothesis was first formulated by Robinson, who believed that *ExSoul* had two different redactions: firstly, the text was written to narrate the story of the soul; at a later time, biblical and classical quotations were

¹⁶⁵ Kasser (1997), 80.

¹⁶⁶ Scopello (1985), 46-47; 50-51.

¹⁶⁷ In this regard, the book of Cueva (2004) is particularly interesting for it analyses the importance of mythological literary structure for Greek novels.

¹⁶⁸ Robinson (1996), 136.

¹⁶⁹ Dritsas Bizier (2010), 295-301.

¹⁷⁰ For a complete analysis of the *Authentikos Logos* see Tervahauta (2015).

inserted as a sort of ‘catchwords’.¹⁷¹ Robinson’s theory was contested a few years later by Wilson, who proved successfully that there are several biblical quotations embedded in the main body of the treatise which cannot be considered later additions.¹⁷² In this regard, my analysis will show that *ExSoul* is a unitary work, which was probably conceived in the author’s mind in a form very similar to the one bequeathed to us. Moreover, I do not think it is possible to classify *ExSoul* under any specific literary genre, since *ExSoul* eludes all rigid literary classifications, thus constituting a case in its own right.

The third and most important cause of disagreement among scholars lies in the affiliation of this treatise to Gnosticism. When this treatise was first published in German by Krause and Labib in the 1970s,¹⁷³ most scholars tended to admit its Gnostic background. Besides Krause, the most compelling cases were argued by Scopello, Ménard and Sevrin.¹⁷⁴ However, scholars disagreed on whether *ExSoul* presented Naassene or Valentinian mythologoumena and theologoumena.¹⁷⁵ While Robinson was a supporter of the Naassene’s dependence of *ExSoul*,¹⁷⁶ Scopello and Ménard claimed the Valentinian affiliation of this treatise.¹⁷⁷ By contrast with these views, Wisse first warned against what he called a kind of “guilt by association” – that is, the prejudice according to which all Nag Hammadi texts had to be Gnostic.¹⁷⁸ Wisse’s warnings have been embraced by other scholars – such as Kulawik, Lanzillotta, Dritsas Bizier and Fowler – for most works published in the last twenty years are inclined to deny the Gnostic affiliation of *ExSoul*.¹⁷⁹ Against these scholars, I will argue for a Valentinian affiliation of this text; nevertheless, I acknowledge that the greatest merit of these works consists in highlighting the extent to which this text can be defined as a syncretistic work. As a matter of

¹⁷¹ Robinson (1970).

¹⁷² Wilson (1975).

¹⁷³ Krause and Labib (1971).

¹⁷⁴ Sevrin (1983), Scopello (1977), Krause (1975a), Ménard (1975a).

¹⁷⁵ In this case, the Ophite are narrowed down to the ones described as Naassens in Hippolytus, *El V*, 7-9. I will discuss this argument shortly.

¹⁷⁶ It must be noted that he intended it not as Gnostic, but rather as a Neopythagorean philosophy. Robinson (1970), 116-117.

¹⁷⁷ Sevrin (1983), Scopello (1985).

¹⁷⁸ Wisse (1975), 68.

¹⁷⁹ Fowler (2017), Dritsas Bizier (2010), Lanzillotta (2010) and (2010a), Kulawik (2006).

fact, when considered individually, most elements proper to this text could be related to a specific Hellenistic tradition. For instance, Lanzillotta has argued that *ExSoul*'s dualism may be seen as a re-interpretation of Plato's dualism in the *Symposium*.¹⁸⁰ In addition, he has claimed that the opposition between an earthly and heavenly Father is typical also of Origen's and Dydimus' works.¹⁸¹ Moreover, Dritsas Bizier has discussed at length the similarities between *ExSoul* and the orthodox homilies for catechumens preparing for baptism.¹⁸² Among her many arguments, Kulawik has decided against the Gnostic affiliation of *ExSoul* because of its positive use of the Septuagint.¹⁸³ Recently, Fowler has associated *ExSoul*'s asceticism with the Pachomian monastic community.¹⁸⁴ Similarly, Lundhaug has also discussed the affiliation of this text to the nearby Pachomian monastery by claiming that Pachominan texts and this treatise use the Scripture in a like-minded way.¹⁸⁵

Notwithstanding the value of these analyses, I will argue that only a Valentinian affiliation of *ExSoul* can account for the coexistence of such diverse elements in a single text, for the affiliation of this treatise to Gnosticism is not a matter of a *single* striking and decisive element, rather it derives from the sum of many circumstantial evidences.

Given the highly syncretistic nature of *ExSoul*, it is not surprising that this treatise presents elements from different Gnostic traditions, such as Simonian, Ophite and Valentinian Gnosticism. Nevertheless, my analysis will show that the Valentinian mythologoumena and theologoumena are predominant in the text. Among the arguments which I will present to support this point, the majority are related to feminine imagery and can be summarized in six points:

- a) The feminine nature of the soul;
- b) The metaphorical opposition between virginity and prostitution;

¹⁸⁰ Particularly, Plato, *Symposium* 201d-212b. See Lanzillotta (2010), 405 and (2010a) .

¹⁸¹ Lanzillotta (2010), 416.

¹⁸² Dritsas Bizier (2010), 313-315.

¹⁸³ Kulawik (2006).

¹⁸⁴ Fowler (2017), 87-89.

¹⁸⁵ Lundhaug (2017).

- c) The deformity of children born out of an illicit relationship;
- d) The insistence on the theme of repentance;
- e) The use of nuptial imagery and the explicit mention of the bridal chamber as the eschatological reunion with God.
- f) The overlapping between the story of the soul and that of Sophia;

Consequently, my research will expand on studies – such as those of Scopello and Ménard – who already supported a Gnostic, particularly Valentinian, affiliation of *ExSoul*, but it will also contextualize it in the broader Gnostic tendency of employing feminine imagery to convey crucial theological doctrines. I believe that the analysis conducted thus far on feminine Gnostic imagery will allow the reader to acknowledge the many similarities between Valentinian imagery and *ExSoul*.

This chapter will be divided into three sections. In the first section, I will discuss the nature of the soul, explaining how each element of the feminine imagery conveys a specific anthropological doctrine (points a-b-c-d). In the second and third section, I will discuss respectively the last two of the abovementioned points (e-f), relating them to soteriological and eschatological doctrines found in the *ExSoul*.

VI.3.1 The Nature of the Soul

The first lines of *ExSoul* are striking in their blunt feminine imagery:

Wise men of old gave the soul a feminine name (ΑΝΘΡΩΠΟΣ ΕΤΨΟΟΠΙ ΖΗΤΗΝΕΖΗ ΑΥΤΗ ΟΝΟΜΑΣΙΑ ΕΤΨΥΧΗ ΝΗΝΟΥΡΑΝ ΝΕΖΙΜΕ). Indeed, she is female in her nature as well (ΟΝΤΩΣ ΟΝ ΖΗ ΤΕΣΦΥΣΙΣ ΟΥΖΙΜΕ). She even has her womb (ΟΥΝΤΑΣ ΝΗΜΑΥ ΖΩΩΣ ΝΗΤΕΣΜΗΤΡΑ). As long as she was alone with the Father, she was a virgin (ΟΥΠΑΡΘΕΝΟΣ) and in form androgynous (ΟΥΖΟΥΤΕΖΙΜΕ). But when she fell down into a body

(ἐκὼμα) and came to this life, then she fell into the hands of many robbers (ἄλαστοι).¹⁸⁶

The incipit of *ExSoul* presents four pivotal theologoumena and mythologoumena about the nature of the soul: 1) its female gender; 2) its virginity; 3) its androgyny; 4) its fall into a material world. These four elements are among the most controversial when it comes to the Gnostic affiliation of this text, for they can be traced back also to non-Gnostic traditions. However, the following analysis will show that, although each one of these elements finds antecedents in different Hellenistic, philosophical, literary or theological traditions, they can be found combined together only in the Gnostic feminine imagery, which I believe is employed in the incipit of *ExSoul*.

First, I believe it is necessary to devote a few more words to the initial reference to unnamed *auctoritates*, generally named ἄνκοφος, to whom the author of the *ExSoul* attributes the idea that the soul has a feminine nature. In spite of the author's intention, the tradition to which he is referring is not immediately evident. The female gender of the noun ψυχή makes the identification with a woman almost immediate, without pointing towards any specific theological or philosophical tradition. On the contrary, the subsequent reference to the soul's having a 'womb' is very specific. One of the few instances in which these elements are found together is Philo's *De Migratione Abrahami*, which employed the term τὰς μήτρας τῆς ψυχῆς allegorically.¹⁸⁷ This element confirms the influence of the Alexandrian cultural milieu on *ExSoul*, observed also by Scopello. In her analysis of the sources of *ExSoul*, Scopello successfully proved the influence of Alexandrian philosophers and theologians, particularly Clement and Origen, thus building a valid case for the

¹⁸⁶ *ExSoul* II, 127, 19-22.

¹⁸⁷ Philo, *De Migratione Abrahami* 33-34: 'For the offspring of the soul's own travail are for the most part poor abortions, things untimely born; but those which God waters with the snows of heaven come to the birth perfect, complete and peerless. I feel no shame in recording my own experience, a thing I know from its having happened to me a thousand times. On some occasions, after making up my mind to follow the usual course of writing on philosophical tenets, and knowing definitely the substance of what I was to set down, I have found my understanding incapable of giving birth to a single idea, and have given it up without accomplishing anything, reviling my understanding for its self-conceit, and filled with amazement at the might of Him that is to Whom is due the opening and closing of the soul-wombs (παρ' ὃν τὰς τῆς ψυχῆς ἀνοίγνυσθαι τε καὶ συγκλείεσθαι μήτρας συμβέβηκεν).'

Alexandrian placement of this treatise.¹⁸⁸ Nevertheless, I would like to underline that the use of such blunt sexual imagery is also a typical feature of Gnostic mythologies. In particular, my previous findings indicate that the use of the metaphor of the ‘womb’ is particularly common in Gnostic texts. This is indeed the case of Barbelo in *ApJohn* II, 4, 26 – 5, 11, as well as the one of Silence in Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 1, 1, but also Sophia in *AdHaer* I, 3, 4.¹⁸⁹ Although this parallel is not conclusive, it is important to underline the presence of a shared metaphorical language between *ExSoul* and other Gnostic texts. Hence, rather than identifying these ‘wise men’ only with Alexandrian intellectuals or with Homer and the Prophets, as Scopello did,¹⁹⁰ I would tend to interpret *ANCOΦOC* as a general reference to the previous philosophical and theological tradition of the late Hellenistic Egypt, thus opening to the possibility that this text might also be referring to Gnostic works.

Secondly, the imagery of a virginal soul is largely employed by second and third century theologians to symbolize spiritual purity. In particular, around the same time in which *ExSoul* was composed, the association between the soul and young virgins had been consolidated by Origen of Alexandria’s *Commentary* and *Homilies on the Song of Songs*. Following an exegetical Jewish tradition, Origen interpreted *Sos* allegorically as the love story between the soul and God, thus portraying the soul as the virgin bride waiting for her true and only bridegroom.¹⁹¹ From that moment onward, many other commentaries adopted a similar imagery. Although these traditions might have influenced *ExSoul*, it ought to be noted that virginity is one of the typical attributes of pleromatic female characters in Gnosticism, especially referred to as the spiritual Eve and the superior Sophia.¹⁹² In particular, the motif of virginity is found in Valentinian texts in reference to Sophia Echamot,

¹⁸⁸ Scopello (1985), 17-44 and Scopello (1977).

¹⁸⁹ Respectively, *supra* II.3.1; III.3.1.3; III.3.2.2.

¹⁹⁰ Scopello (1985), 120.

¹⁹¹ In both his *Commentarium in Cantica Canticorum* and his *Homiles in Cantica Canticorum*, Origen interpreted *Sos* as a love story between the soul and God. In his metaphorical interpretation, the wandering of the maid outside of her bedchamber was equated to prostitution. For the English translation see Lawson (1957).

¹⁹² *ApJohn* II, 23, 37 – 24, 15; *HypArch* II, 91, 34 – 92, 4; *OrigWorld* II, 114, 4-6.

especially in *GosPhil*.¹⁹³ Moreover, my previous research has highlighted how the opposition between virginity and prostitution is pivotal in Gnostic feminine imagery. The same opposition constitutes the narrative focus of *ExSoul*, thus marking a significant similarity between female characters in Gnostic mythologies and the soul in *ExSoul*'s narrative.¹⁹⁴

Thirdly, the author of *ExSoul* defines the soul **ΟΥΖΟΥΤΕΖΙΜΕ** (androgynous), thus considering this androgyny as the original status of humankind that has been lost in the fall into a material body. This way of interpreting androgyny finds its closest parallel in Gnostic texts. Besides being a very common notion among all Gnostic movements,¹⁹⁵ the notion of androgyny displayed by *ExSoul* resembles the one displayed by Valentinian texts closely, particularly *GosPhil* and *ExTheod*, where androgyny is strictly intertwined with the notion of the syzygy.¹⁹⁶ Interpreting the creation of humankind of *Gen.* 1:26-27 as an androgynous creation, Valentinian Gnostics believed sexual differentiation followed the original creation of humankind, so much so that it was often associated with the beginning of death for human beings. The Valentinian notion of an original androgynous creation was dictated by the idea of cosmological typology, according to which the human creation mirrored the syzygial structure of the Pleroma. Thus, the separation between Adam and Eve mirrored the one between Sophia and her partner.¹⁹⁷ Just as in these Valentinian texts, *ExSoul* interprets the fall of the soul downward as the cause of separation between the sexes and as the origin of the nuptial union. In this regard, it is not a coincidence that *ExSoul* uses Adam and Eve as an example of this original androgyny: 'For they were originally joined to one another when they were with the Father (**ΝΕΥΖΟΤΡ̅ ΓΑΡ ΕΝΟΥΕΡΗΥΣ ΝΨΟΡΠ ΖΑΖΤ̅ ΠΕΙΩΤ**) before the woman led astray the man, who is her brother'.¹⁹⁸ Moreover, the assimilation of the soul's androgyny with a spousal union between a male and a female element is made clear by affirming that the soul's mistake was that of leaving

¹⁹³ *GosPhil* II, 71, 3-21; *GosPhil* II, 55, 23-32;

¹⁹⁴ The prostitution of the soul will be discussed shortly, *infra* IV.3.2.

¹⁹⁵ For instance: *GosTh*, *Logion* 22 (II, 37, 25-35); *ApJohn* II, 20, 9-28; *OrigWorld* II, 113, 21-34.

¹⁹⁶ *GosPhil* II, 70, 10-22; *ExTheod* 21, 1-3.

¹⁹⁷ *GosPhil* II, 70, 10-22. For a detailed discussion see *supra* III.4.

¹⁹⁸ *ExSoul* II, 133, 4-6.

‘her perfect husband’ (ἄνθρωπος ἄνθρωπος ἄνθρωπος).¹⁹⁹ Therefore, regarding the androgyny of the soul in *ExSoul*, I disagree with both Robinson and Lanzillotta, who considered this passage dependent instead on Plato’s *Symposium*.²⁰⁰ Even if the platonic myth had a certain influence on *ExSoul*, this had to be mediated by an allegorical interpretation of *Gen.* 1:26-27 since the lost androgyny was not only considered as the original status of humankind, but also as the cause of the fall from a heavenly condition. Besides Valentinian Gnostics, there were other theologians, such as Origen, who considered the creation of *Gen.* 1:26-27 as an asexual creation.²⁰¹ Nevertheless, Valentinian interpreters were the only ones to consider the sexual separation of human beings as the separation between a female-male couple, as *ExSoul* does. Consequently, the myth of the sexual separation as presented by Valentinian Gnostic is by far the most likely source for *ExSoul*’s interpretation of androgyny.

Fourthly, it is worth highlighting that *ExSoul* does not provide any information regarding the cause or the circumstances of the fall from the status of proximity to the Father. This virgin soul is said to have been with the Father in the beginning and to have had a status of androgyny – which may or may not be interpreted as a syzygial status – enjoying a state of perfection which has now been lost because of her fall into a material world, which is instead envisioned in very pejorative terms. At this stage in the analysis of *ExSoul*. I will draw the attention to two elements. On the one hand, *ExSoul* seems to display the feature of a cosmic dualism, marked by a manifest anti-cosmism, which is one of the most renowned features of Gnostic mythologies. On the other hand, it ought to be noticed that the fall of a virginal, androgynous, female being from a divine status to a lower and material one resembles – at least in its narrative outline – the myth of Sophia’s fall.²⁰²

¹⁹⁹ *ExSoul* II, 137, 6-7.

²⁰⁰ The notion of the creation of an androgynous human being are also present in Plato, *Symposium* 190B – 191C. Robinson (1970), 114-117 and Lanzillotta (2010a), 348-349.

²⁰¹ In particular, Origen, *De Principiis* I, 2, 2. For a detailed analysis, see Simonetti (2004a).

²⁰² This pattern recalls also Plotinus, *Enn* IV, 3, 15, in which he explains the differences among those souls who descended from the divine realm into the material world and are now unable to ascend to the superior world.

Hence, the similarities that I have listed between *ExSoul* and Gnostic texts of various traditions represent enough evidence to make a further investigation worth, especially considering that the affinity between Valentinian feminine imagery and that of the *ExSoul* becomes evident when one considers the events which took place after the fall from the heavenly condition. Therefore, this will be the focus of the next section.

IV.3.2 The Repentance of a Prostitute Soul

The loss of the pristine condition enjoyed by the soul while she was with the Father is metaphorically represented by means of a very explicit sexual imagery:

And in her body she prostituted herself (ΑΥΩ ΑΣΠΟΡΝΕΥΕ Ζἄ̅ ΠΕCCΩΜΑ) and gave herself to one and all, considering each one she was about to embrace to be her husband (ΠΕCΖΑΕΙ). [...] Some made use of her [by force] (Ζ[ἄ̅ΝΟΥΒΙ]Α), while others did so by seducing her with a gift (ἄ̅ΔΩΡΟΝ). [...] For from them she gained nothing except the defilements (ΑΝΧΩΖἄ̅) they gave her while they had sexual intercourse with her. And her offspring by the adulterers are dumb, blind, and sickly. They are feebleminded (ΑΥΩ ΝΕΝΤΑCΧΠΟΟΥ ΕΒΟΛ Ζἄ̅ ἄ̅ΜΟΙΧΟC ἄ̅ΚΩΦΟC ΝΕ ΑΥΩ Ζἄ̅Βἄ̅Λἄ̅ΑΥ ΝΕ ΑΥΩ CΕΟ ἄ̅Ρἄ̅Μἄ̅Λἄ̅Χἄ̅Ε' ΠΟΥΖΗΕΤ' ΠΟΨC).²⁰³

This passage illustrates very vividly the wretched conditions into which the soul has fallen. However, scholars have elaborated very different interpretations of the metaphor of the soul's prostitution. Assuming that *ExSoul* is a homily destined for newly converted Christians, Dritsas Bizier has identified the soul's lovers with the pagan gods, thus interpreting the soul's prostitution imagery as an anti-pagan exhortation.²⁰⁴ Although it is true that some theologians of the time employed the metaphor of prostitution to illustrate the risks of paganism, I disagree with Dritsas Bizier's interpretation

²⁰³ *ExSoul* II, 128, 1-26.

²⁰⁴ Dritsas Bizier (2010), 296-297. He brings the examples of Origen and John Chrysostom to prove the validity of his theory.

insofar as he has failed to provide any textual reference to idolatry or pagan gods in *ExSoul*. On the contrary, Lanzillotta has claimed that the soul's prostitution is a metaphor for the interaction of the soul with the sensible world, interpreting the soul's lovers who impose themselves on her by force or gifts as the material impressions which comes from senses and reason respectively.²⁰⁵ While I agree with him concerning the anti-materialistic implications of this prostitution metaphor,²⁰⁶ his hypothesis does not provide any explanation for the role of the soul's dumb offspring, which instead I believe is a key element of *ExSoul*'s description of the soul's prostitution. In *ExSoul*, just as in all the above-mentioned Gnostic occurrences of this kind, illicit sexual intercourse pollutes the women involved in it and makes them conceive defective offspring.²⁰⁷ Having dumb, blind and sickly offspring was indeed the case in *ApJohn*, *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*. In addition, the topic of the children's defectiveness as a result of the unilateral decision of Sophia is also proper to Valentinianism, since Sophia was unable to produce a well-formed offspring once she had fallen from her Father's plenitude. As a matter of fact, the parallel might be even more specific than what one can imagine since *ExSoul*'s passage mirrors closely *ExTheod* 68, when it is said that: 'as long we were children of the Woman, as if of a shameful union, we were incomplete, dumb, sickly and formless infants, brought forth like abortions.'²⁰⁸ The similitude with Valentinian texts is even more striking since *ExSoul* opposes this illicit and defective generation with the 'good children' that result from the union between the soul with her true bridegroom,²⁰⁹ stressing that 'since she is female, she is powerless to beget a child' by herself.²¹⁰ In both cases, the parallel with *GosPhil* is remarkable.²¹¹ In my opinion, all of these parallels seem to suggest that the author of *ExSoul* was aware of these

²⁰⁵ Lanzillotta (2010), 349-348.

²⁰⁶ Discussing the prostitution of the soul, the author of *ExSoul* stresses the role that the body plays in this defilement. As a matter of fact, *ExSoul* rejects form of fleshly pleasures very explicitly, thus assuming a very ascetic tone, which was proper to certain Gnostic movements.

²⁰⁷ *OrigWorld* II, 117, 15-29; *HypArch* II, 91, 12-30; *ApJohn* II, 30, 6-11.

²⁰⁸ *ExTheod* 68: Ἀχρι μὲν γὰρ ἡμεν τῆς Θελείας μόνης τέκνα, ὡς ἂν αἰσχροῦς συζυγίας, ἀτελῆ καὶ νήπια καὶ ἄφρονα καὶ ἀσθενῆ καὶ ἄμορφα, οἷον ἐκτρώματα προ[σ] ενεχθέντα, τῆς Γυναικὸς ἡμεν τέκνα· ὑπὸ δὲ τοῦ Σωτῆρος μορφωθέντες Ἄνδρὸς καὶ Νυμφῶνος γεγόναμεν τέκνα. It is worth reminding that this passage resembles also *GosPhil* II, 76, 6-9.

²⁰⁹ *ExSoul* II, 133, 31-134, 6.

²¹⁰ *ExSoul* II, 132, 6-7.

²¹¹ *GosPhil* II, 76, 6-9 and *ExTheod* 68.

mythologoumena and reproduced these structures in his work. It would therefore appear that the metaphor of the prostitution of the soul indicates the mingling of the soul with the sensible world,²¹² as Lanzillotta has highlighted; however, this platonic *topos* of the soul's descent into a body is mediated by Gnostic mythologoumena, such as the Sethian, Barbeloite and Ophite element of the archon's seduction and the Valentinian element of the generation of unformed offspring. In other words, against Lanzillotta's interpretation, I argue that *ExSoul* appears platonic only insofar as all Gnostic texts that describe the descent of the soul into a material world can be interpreted as platonic, since the specific features of the soul's descent displayed by *ExSoul* belong to the Gnostic tradition.

Another interesting element is the correspondence between the archons' seduction of Eve and the lovers' seduction of the soul.²¹³ When one examines more closely the mythologoumena displayed by this passage, the correspondence between the strategies of the seductions described in *ExSoul* and the ones employed by the archons in *ApJohn*, *HypArch* and *OrigWorld* becomes evident. According to *ExSoul*, the adulterers tried to seduce the soul either by force or by means of gifts. The former instance recalls the episode of the archons' attack on the carnal Eve in *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*, when they defile by force the inferior image of the spiritual Eve.²¹⁴ By contrast, the latter strategy resembles the myth of the daughters of men and the evil archons of *ApJohn*, where the evil archons bring gifts to humankind to seduce the daughters of men.²¹⁵ It is also worth noting – as Scopello does – that the author of *ExSoul* does not seem to “blame” the soul for her prostitution, since there is nothing she can do against the plots of the evil archons.²¹⁶ Such a conclusion would be in line with what this thesis has shown regarding the role of carnal women in Sethian, Ophite and Barbeloite texts, thus posing an interesting proximity between *ExSoul* and these mythologoumena and theologoumena.

²¹² This is further confirmed by *ExSoul*. 130, 20-28, where the author of *ExSoul* lists all material goods that the soul thinks she needs, but she truly does not.

²¹³ In this regard, I partly agree with Scopello (1985), 121-126, who also identified the adulterers with the archons.

²¹⁴ *HypArch* II, 90, 17-28 and *OrigWorld*. II, 116, 33 – 117, 15.

²¹⁵ *ApJohn* II, 29, 16 – 30, 11, particularly II, 29, 30-33.

²¹⁶ Scopello (1985), 64-65.

Further similarities with Gnostic texts can be noticed in the following passage about the soul's repentance:

But when the Father who is above (ΠΕΙΩΤ' ΕΤΗΠCΑ ΝΤΠΕ) visits her and looks down upon her and sees her sighing (ΕCΕΩ ΕΖΟΜ) – with suffering and in disgrace (ΝΕCΠΑΘΟC ἦΝ ΝΕCΧΗΜΟCΥΝΕ) – and repenting of the prostitution (ΕCΜΕΤΑΝΟΕΙ ΕΧἸΝ ΤΕCΠΟΡ'ΝΕΙΑ) in which she engaged, and she begins to call upon [his name] so that he might help her (ἸCΑΠΧΕΙἸΝ ΝῚΕΠΙΚΑΛΕΙ ΕΖΡΑΙ ΕΠ[ΕCΡ]ΑΝ ΑΤΡΕCῚΒΟΗΤΕΙ ΝΑC), [lacuna] all her heart, saying, “Save me, my Father, (ἸΜΟ[C ΧΕ ΜΑ]ΤΟΥΧΟΕΙ ΠΑΕΙΩΤ) for behold I will render an account [to thee, for I abandoned] my house and fled from my maiden's quarters ([ΧΕ ΑΖΙΚΩ] ἸCΩΕΙ ἸΠΑΗΕΙ ΑΥΩ' ΑΖΙΠΩΤ ΕΒΟΛ ἸΠΑΡΘΕΝΩΝ). Restore me to thyself again (ΠΑΛΙΝ ΤΚΤΟΕΙ ΨΑΡΟΚ'”) – when he sees her in such a state, then he will count her worthy of his mercy upon her, for many are the afflictions that have come upon her because she abandoned her house.²¹⁷

This quotation presents many elements which can be traced back to other Gnostic sources. First of all, there is the ambiguity of the expression ΠΕΙΩΤ' ΕΤΗΠCΑ ΝΤΠΕ. Although Scopello is right in identifying this periphrasis as a translation of the New Testament's expression πατήρ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς,²¹⁸ I believe that this expression ought to be put in connection with a passage which occurs later on in the text opposing the ‘earthly father’ (ἸΠΕΙΩΤ ἸΠΚΑΖ) to ‘the father who is in heaven’ (ἸΠΕCΕΙΩΤ ΕΤΖἸΝ ἸΠΗΥΕ).²¹⁹ The opposition between an earthly father and a heavenly Father suggests that the author of *ExSoul* is working within a dualistic paradigm which opposes two main divinities, each one ruling over a different realm.²²⁰ In this regard, I disagree with both

²¹⁷ *ExSoul* II, 128, 26 – 129, 5.

²¹⁸ For instance, *Mt* 5:16: οὕτως λαμψάτω τὸ φῶς ὑμῶν ἔμπροσθεν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, ὥπως ἴδωσιν ὑμῶν τὰ καλὰ ἔργα καὶ δοξάσωσιν τὸν πατέρα ὑμῶν τὸν ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς. See Scopello (1985), 127, who nonetheless believe these passages refer to Sophia's story.

²¹⁹ *ExSoul* II, 133, 20-28: ‘For he requires her to turn her face from her people and the multitude of her adulterers, in whose midst she once was, to devote herself only to her king, her real lord and to forget the house of the earthly father, with whom things went badly for her, but to remember her Father who is in heaven’.

²²⁰ Both Scopello (1985), 144 and Sevrin (1983), 106 seem to identify the ἸΠΕΙΩΤ ἸΠΚΑΖ with the Demiurge.

Lanzillotta and Kulawik. While Kulawik believes that a single mention of the ‘earthly father’ does not justify the assumption of the existence of a Demiurge, Lanzillotta expresses the opinion that a Demiurge is ‘hardly necessary’ since other theologians, such as Origen of Alexandria, interpreted the ‘earthly father’ as the devil.²²¹ Although their hypotheses appear plausible if the passage is considered out of context, their claims hardly fit within the overall framework of this passage – or of *ExSoul* in general – for they do not explain the presence of the virginity-prostitution imagery together with the theme of repentance (μετάνοια). This is indeed the main pivotal concern of *ExSoul*: the narration of a story of fall, repentance and restoration of a soul to her original pristine condition. When observed in this light, it is hard to miss the similarities with the Gnostic myth of Sophia’s fall, prostitution, repentance and restoration to the Father’s house.

To further confirm the association between the soul and Sophia, especially as presented in the Valentinian accounts, it is necessary to explore two further issues: first, the nature of the soul’s repentance and, secondly, the meaning of her restoration to her original condition. Regarding the soul’s μετάνοια, *ExSoul* specifies that ‘the beginning of salvation is repentance’ for ‘repentance takes place in distress and grief’ (ΤΜΕΤΑΝΟΙΑ ΔΕ ΨΑCΨΩΠΕ ΖΝ ΟΥ ΛΥΠΗ ΜΝ ΟΥ ΜΚΑΖ ΝΖΗΤ).²²² Moreover,

It is fitting to pray to the Father and to call on him with our soul (ΨΩΕ ΘΕ ΕΨΗΛ ΕΠΕΙΩΤ ΝΤΗΜΟΥ ΤΕ ΕΖΡΑΙ ΕΡΟΨ ΖΝ ΤΗΨΥΧΗ ΤΗΡC) [...] repenting for the life we lived (ΕΝΡΜΕΤΑΝΟΕΙ ΕΧΜ ΠΒΙΟC ΝΤΑΖΝΝΑΑΨ); confessing our sins; perceiving the empty deception we were in, and the empty zeal; weeping over how we were in darkness and in the wave (ΕΝΡΙΜΕ ΝΘΕ ΝΕΝΨΟΟΠ ΖΜ ΠΚΑΚΕ ΜΝ ΦΟΕΙΜ); mourning for ourselves, that he might have pity on us (ΟΥΑΑΝ ΧΕΚΑΑC ΕΨΝΑΝΑ ΝΑΝ ΕΗΜΟCΤΕ)²²³

²²¹ See Lanzillotta (2010a), 411 and 416; Kulawik (2006), 204.

²²² *ExSoul* II, 135, 21-22 and 25-26.

²²³ *ExSoul* II, 135, 4-14. These emotions recur also at the end of the treatise in reference to Helena, stressing their importance for the access to the ‘Father’s house’, see *ExSoul* II, 137, 5-11.

It is possible to detect many parallels between this passage and the Gnostic descriptions of Sophia's repentance.²²⁴ First of all, both *ExSoul* and Valentinian texts stress the role of emotions, namely grief and distress, as these are those emotions which appear after Sophia's repentance in both *GN* and *ExTheod*.²²⁵ Moreover, Sophia's appeal to her Father for help is almost a *topos* of Gnostic literature, for it is widely present in Gnostic works.²²⁶ Secondly, the soul's weeping over the darkness of *ExSoul* seems to correspond almost literally to *ApJohn*'s passage when the mother weeps because of the 'garment of darkness' (ΑΤΖΒCΩ ΜΠΚΑΚΕ) which clothed her because her consort had not agreed with her.²²⁷ Furthermore, it is also interesting to note that Sophia's sufferings are assimilated to a proper Passion, for they become the true existence of the soul for 'she exists suffering' (CΩOON` ΖΑ ΠΑCΧΑ). Overall, this representation of the soul's μετάνοια resembles the idea of Sophia's ἐπιστροφή as described by Gnostic myths,²²⁸ for it exhorts the soul to escape from a condition of materiality resulting from her poor judgment by converting and returning to the Father, which is indeed the final goal of the soul.

Besides being associated with Sophia, the soul is also identified with Helena:

Again Helena <...> saying "[My hearth] turned itself from me. It is to my house that I want to return. (ΠΑΖΗΤ` ΛΟΚΤΟC ΝΤΟΟΤ` ΠΑΛΙ(Ν) ΕΕΙΟΥΩΩ ΒΩΚ` ΕΠΑΗΕΙ)" For she sighed (ΝΕCΑΩ ΕΖΟΗ) saying "It is Aphrodite who deceived me and brought me out of my village. My only daughter I left behind me, and my good, understanding and faithful husband."”²²⁹

²²⁴ *ApJohn* II, 13, 32 – 14, 1; *AdHaer* I, 4, 2; *Val. Ex.* 34, 23-38.

²²⁵ Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 4, 2 and *ExTheod* 48, 2-4. Interestingly, it is also a passion proper to Error in *GosTruth* II, 26, 19-23.

²²⁶ See the abovementioned textual *loci* in *ApJohn*, *GN* and *ExVal*.

²²⁷ *ApJohn* II, 13, 33.

²²⁸ Sophia's conversion is specifically described as an ἐπιστροφή in *AdHaer* I, 2, 3 and I, 4, 1-2.

²²⁹ *ExSoul* II, 136, 35 – 137, 5.

In the chapter on the Simonian gnosis, the centrality of the character of Helena has been extensively proved.²³⁰ According to the available sources, Helena was a prostitute whom Simon Magus had taken as a wife. Regardless of whether the character of Helena has been fabricated by the heresiologist or not, it is certain that it became as a primary marker of Simonian gnosis in the third and fourth centuries. Moreover, the character of Helena was perceived as alternative to that of Sophia, for they both underwent the same journey from divine beings to fallen entity and, finally, to redeemed beings. In this regard, both Helena and Sophia would be a perfect match for the character of the soul in *ExSoul*, since they were associated with the element of prostitution. Therefore, it would be odd – to say the least – that the author of *ExSoul* chose a similar example to exemplify his theory about the soul's journey towards the Father's house without having in mind such a clear and renown Gnostic antecedent. Since, in all probability, this is a reference to the so-called Simonian tradition, it must also be considered as an additional proof of the Gnostic background of *ExSoul*.

I would like to underline that a reference to Sophia does not diminish the parenetic purpose of these passages. On the contrary, it would appear that *ExSoul* is bringing the Valentinian ecclesiological role of Sophia to its extreme consequences: if Sophia is not only an aeon, but the totality of the spiritual seed that will be redeemed, then it is only logical that each spiritual soul will undergo what Sophia underwent.²³¹ In *ExSoul*, the story of Sophia has been universalised to the extent that all those who are born out of the 'seed that is the life-giving spirit' have the same destiny as Sophia, thus eventually stressing the hortatory function of this treatise.

VI.3.3 The Redemption of the Soul

According to *ExSoul*, the reunion with the Father happens in two subsequent steps. At first, the soul needs to regain her feminine nature, which she has apparently lost because of her prostitution. Secondly, by regaining the lost

²³⁰ *Supra* IV.1.

²³¹ A similar association was also developed by Origen in his *Commentary and Homilies on the Song of Songs*, where the bride represents both the Church – that is, the totality of the λογικοί – and the individual soul (λογικός). See Origen, *CCc* IV, 1, 1-27.

feminine nature, the soul becomes a bride and she can marry her true bridegroom. The first step is described in the following manner:

But when she perceives the straits she is in and weeps (Ἰσπιδε) before the father and repents (Ἰσμετανοει), then the father will have mercy on her and he will make her womb turn from the external domain and will turn it again inward (Ἰκτο Ἰτεσμητρα εβολ 2Ἰ να πσα νβολ παλι(ν) Ἰκτος εζουν), so that the soul will regain her proper character. For it is not so with a woman. For the womb of the body is inside the body like the other internal organs (Ἰμητρα γαρ Ἰπσωμα ευψοοῖ Ἰφοῦν Ἰπσωμα Ἰθε νγκεμαζτ), but the womb of the soul is around the outside like the male genitalia, which are external (Ἰμητρα Ἰτοῦ Ἰτφυχη εκωτε Ἰπσα νβολ Ἰθε ἸἸφυσιγον Ἰφοοῦτ ευψοοῖ Ἰπβολ). So when the womb of the soul (Ἰμητρα θε Ἰτφυχη), by the will of the father, turns itself inward, it is baptized (ψαρεσβαπτιζε) and is immediately cleansed of the external pollution.²³²

Once again, *ExSoul* uses blunt sexual imagery to describe the vicissitudes of the soul. The text is here probably describing the sacrament of baptism as the restoration of her womb from the outside to the inside, through which the soul will reach the status of purification required to enjoy the Father's proximity.²³³ Metaphorically, the turn of the womb to the inside and, consequently, the soul's re-gaining of a feminine nature represent the restoration of her lost virginity, the one she had protologically while she was with her Father. The implications of this metaphor are pivotal for understanding this treatise and they imply both liturgical and mythological aspects. From a liturgical perspective, *ExSoul* is clear regarding the priority and necessity of baptism over the mystery of the bridal chamber.²³⁴ From a mythological and allegorical perspective, *ExSoul* stresses that the soul needs to be feminine in order to be restored to the Father's house. In this regard, the first passage appears as an exception concerning the Gnostic use of gender categories, for it implies that

²³² *ExSoul* II, 131, 16-30.

²³³ For *ExSoul*'s sacramental theology, see Krause (1975a).

²³⁴ The discussion of the sacramental theology of *ExSoul* falls beyond the scope of my dissertation. For more information on Valentinian sacramental theology see Thomassen (2006), 333-416.

the female gender is superior to the male one.²³⁵ In this instance, the male gender is associated with prostitution, since it is equated to the soul's womb being exposed to the world like an indecent proposal, thus contradicting the statements of *GosTh* and *ExTheod*, where the soul has to become "male" to access the bridal chamber.²³⁶ By contrast, in *ExSoul* the soul needs to turn from male to female to re-gain the access to the Father's house. Notwithstanding the apparent contradiction, I am convinced that the solution to this conundrum can be found in the Valentinian myth of the angels and the spiritual seed. According to this Valentinian mythologoumenon, the soul of the elect has a female gender, for it is countered by Sophia's male emission – that is, the angels – to whom these female souls will be eschatologically married. In this perspective, it makes sense that the true and original nature of the soul is feminine, since she had originally been assigned a female gender and is eschatologically destined to be reunited with her counterpart, that is, a male angel. Moreover, such interpretation of the soul's femaleness would also explain better the overlapping between the soul and Sophia, for the fallen female aeon and her female emission – that is, those who are born out of the 'seed that is the life-giving spirit' (ΠΕΣΠΕΡΜΑ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΗΤΟΟΤῚ ΕΤΕ ΠΠΝᾶ)²³⁷ – have the same eschatological destiny of Sophia. Hence, as in Valentinianism the eschatological syzygies are composed by a female spiritual element and male angelic elements, in *ExSoul* the soul needs to regain her female nature to marry her true male bridegroom. Nevertheless, it is worth stressing that the use of the masculine imagery in a pejorative sense represents a *unicum* among Gnostic texts, thus diverging from the use of gender categories noted in the majority of Gnostic texts.

²³⁵ This oddity had already been underlined by Scopello, (1985), 134, who, however, does not pose it in relation to the Valentinian mythologoumenon and theologoumenon of the female spiritual seed and the male angelic seed, as I will explain shortly.

²³⁶ See *GosTh*, Logion 114 (51:18 – 51:26) and *ExTheod* 21. A similar concept can be also observed in Heracleon's fragment in Origen, *ComJn* VI, 20, 1.

²³⁷ *ExSoul* II, 133, 31-134, 6: 'And when she had intercourse with him, she got from him the seed that is the life- giving spirit, so that by him she bears good children and rears them. For this is the great, perfect marvel of birth. And so this marriage is made perfect by the will of the Father'. In this regard, I strongly disagree with Lanzillotta (2010), 418 who dismisses the presence of *pneuma* as the 'Aristotelian conception of the extrinsic intellect'. Lanzillotta's argument is indeed build on the affirmation of the dualistic anthropology (body/soul) of *ExSoul*, rejecting the *pneuma* as the third element of the human being.

Following the sacrament of baptism – which is antecedent to the union between the bridegroom and the bride in the bridal chamber – *ExSoul* resorts to the nuptial imagery which we have observed in many Gnostic texts, especially Valentinian ones:

From heaven the father sent her her man, who is her brother, the firstborn (ΑΠΕΙΩΤ' ΤΗΝΑΥ ΝΑΣ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΗ ΤΠΕ ΗΠΕCΖΟΟΥΤ' ΕΤΕ ΠΕCCON ΠΕ ΠΩΟΡΠ' ΗΜΙCΕ). Then the bridegroom came down to the bride (ΤΟΤΕ ΑΠΡΗΨΕΛΕΕΤ' ΕΙ ΑΠΙΤΗ ΨΑΧΕΛΕΕΤ'). She gave up her former prostitution (ΗΤΕCΠΟΡΝΙΑ) and cleansed herself of the pollutions of the adulterers, and she was renewed so as to be a bride (ΑCΡ ΒΡΡΕ ΔΕ ΑΥΗΝΗΨΕΛΕΕΤ). She cleansed herself in the bridal chamber (ΑCΤΟΥΒΟC ΖΗ <Π>ΜΑ ΗΨΕΛΕΕΤ); she filled it with perfume (ΗCΤΗΝΟΥCΕ); she sat in it waiting for the true bridegroom.²³⁸

This passage has a very strong Valentinian connotation, for it displays those features that are proper to the Valentinian theologoumenon of the bridal chamber.²³⁹ First of all, both *ExSoul* and *GosPhil* believe that the soul's prostitution will end only when she will be reunited with her true bridegroom. Just as in *ExSoul*, *GosPhil* claimed that: 'If a marriage is open to the public, it has become prostitution (ΟΥΓΑΜΟC ΕCΨΑΚΩΚΑΖΗΥ ΑCΨΩΠΕ ΗΠΟΡΝΕΙΑ), and the bride becomes the harlot [...] when she is impregnated by another man'.²⁴⁰ Therefore, the condition of the prostitute-bride of *GosPhil* resembles closely that of the prostitute soul and bride in *ExSoul*, since both brides prostitute themselves and have children with the adulterers while waiting for their true husbands. Secondly, both *ExSoul* and *GosPhil* employ the same terminology to describe the bridegroom. The idea that the bridegroom is the soul's brother mirrors the idea that he is Sophia's brother in other Gnostic texts;²⁴¹ in addition, many Valentinian texts, especially *ExTheod*, named Sophia's bridegroom the

²³⁸ *ExSoul* II, 132, 9-15.

²³⁹ For my analysis of the bridal chamber in Valentinian texts, see *supra* III.4.2. For the value of the bridal chamber in *ExSoul* and *GosPhil*, see also Ménard (1975a).

²⁴⁰ *GosPhil* II, 82, 10-12.

²⁴¹ For instance, Irenaeus, *AdHaer* I, 30, 12. For a detailed study of this metaphor, see Orbe (1974).

πρωτοτόκος.²⁴² Thirdly, *ExSoul*'s description of the descent of the bridegroom to make the soul 'renewed as to become a bride' resembles closely the theologoumena of the second coming of Christ that gives Sophia the formation κατὰ γνῶσιν, since such action is necessary to make respectively Sophia and the soul lawful brides, worthy of being united with the bridegroom.²⁴³ Lastly, just as in *GosPhil*, *ExSoul* resorts to the metaphor of the perfume to describe the waiting for the bridegroom and the spiritual love.²⁴⁴ Hence, both *ExSoul* and *GosPhil* employ nuptial imagery to discuss the coming of the bridegroom and the eschatological destiny of the souls.

In the case of *GosPhil*, I have underlined how the nuptial imagery has been borrowed from the *Sos*.²⁴⁵ Could it not be the same for *ExSoul*? Could these similarities be traced back to *Sos* independently, thus eliminating the need of assuming a shared Valentinian affiliation? I do not think this is the case for the following reasons. First of all, it is worth mentioning that *ExSoul* does not quote *Sos* explicitly, but it recalls it only implicitly. For instance, the soul's prostitution in the market resembles closely the description of the bride's wandering in the city searching for the bridegroom and being attacked by the city's guards in *Sos* 5:6-8.²⁴⁶ Moreover, a further example can be identified in the perfume that fills the bridal chamber, as in the case of *Sos* 4:10-11. Nevertheless, if this was a direct quotation from the *Sos*, it would be difficult to understand why the author of *ExSoul*, who quotes both Old and New Testaments numerous times, did not acknowledge this quotation from *Sos*. However, not only does *ExSoul* resort to nuptial imagery, but it also assumes that the bridal chamber represents the eschatological destiny of the soul. In this regard, the similarity with Valentinian theologoumena is complete, especially considering that both *GosPhil* and *ExSoul* portray the bridal chamber's union between the bride and the bridegroom in a similar manner:

²⁴² *ExTheod* 7,3-4. See also, *AdHaer* I, 2, 6, he is described as the τέλειον καρπὸν of the Pleroma.

²⁴³ *AdHaer* I, 4, 1.

²⁴⁴ *GosPhil* II, 77, 35- 78, 7 and II, 82, 19-23.

²⁴⁵ *Supra* III.3.2.1.

²⁴⁶ *ExSoul* II, 132, 15-19.

For since that marriage (ΕΠΓΑΜΟΣ) is not like the carnal marriage (ΜΠΓΑΜΟΣ ΝΣΑΡΚΙΚΟΣ), those who are to have intercourse with one another will be satisfied with that intercourse. And as if it were a burden they leave behind them the annoyance of physical desire and they [turn their faces from] each other. But this marriage [*lacuna*] But [once] they unite [with one another], they become a single life (ΑΛΛΑ ΕΥΨΑΝ[Π]ΖΝΖΩΤΡ̄ ΑΝ[Ο]Υ[ΕΡΗ]Υ ΨΑΥΨΩΠΕ ΑΥΩΝΖ ΟΥΩΤ).²⁴⁷

This passage from *ExSoul* suggests that the author interpretes the nuptial imagery according to the Valentinian theologoumenon of the syzygy, for this passage matches *GosPhil* where it is written: ‘If there is a hidden quality in the marriage of defilement (ΠΓΑΜΟΣ ΜΠΧΩΖΜ̄), how much more is the undefiled marriage (ΠΓΑΜΟΣ ΝΑΤΧΩΖΜ̄) a true mystery! It is not fleshly but pure. It belongs not to desire but to the will (ΕΦΗΠ ΑΝ ΑΤΕΠΘΥΜΙΑ ΑΛΛΑ ΕΠΟΥΩΨ).’²⁴⁸ As a matter of fact, both Nag Hammadi treatises contrast the earthly marriage with the heavenly one: while the former is driven by physical desire, the other is pure and spiritual. Furthermore, both understand the bridal chamber as the eschatological place where the original unity between male and female will be finally restored. This is indeed the primary theologoumenon displayed by *ExSoul*: the restoration in the bridal chamber of the original unity between a female and a male element, for this will grant the soul access to the Father’s house. According to the terms in which it is expressed and the imagery which is employed, it is reasonable to conclude that, in this instance, *ExSoul* has borrowed various Valentinian mythologoumena and theologoumena.

IV.3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has shown how the study of feminine imagery can cast light on some understudied texts, such as *ExSoul*. By comparing feminine imagery in this treatise with that in other Gnostic texts, it has been possible to isolate some shared mythologoumena and theologoumena, which strongly support the hypothesis of a Valentinian affiliation of *ExSoul*.

²⁴⁷ *ExSoul* II, 132, 27-35

²⁴⁸ *GosPhil* II, 82, 4-6.

The analysis of the condition of the female soul while she was with the Father has shown that the author of *ExSoul* identifies the souls with an androgynous virgin that fell away from her Father, thus abandoning her true husband.²⁴⁹ In the description of these events, *ExSoul* displays mainly features proper to Alexandrian Platonism and Valentinianism. In particular, I have underlined the similarities with Origen, *ExTheod* and *GosPhil*. Moreover, I have stressed that the soul's androgyny resembles closely the Valentinian syzygy, for *ExSoul* assumes that the male/female couple represents both the protological and the eschatological condition of the soul. Nevertheless, the similarities between *ExSoul* and other Gnostic texts have become more evident in my investigation of the fallen condition of the soul. First of all, *ExSoul*'s assimilation of the soul with a prostitute finds many parallels in all Gnostic traditions. In particular, I have highlighted how the seduction strategies of the soul's lovers correspond to the seduction strategies of the evil archons in the Sethian, Barbeloite and Ophite texts. In addition, I have underlined how the classical reference to Helena of Troy may suggest a bridge between *ExSoul* and the so-called Simonian gnosis. Secondly, I have listed and analysed numerous examples concerning the similarities between the soul's μετάνοια and Sophia's repentance, stressing particularly the similarities between the emotions manifested by the soul and Sophia. Lastly, I have also proved the correspondence between the nuptial imagery in *ExSoul* and in Valentinian texts. By comparing the bridal chamber in *ExSoul* and *GosPhil*, I have shown that both texts attribute the same functions to the bridal chamber, since they believe that it represents the eschatological marriage between the soul and her true bridegroom, the "First-born". This union will be possible after the soul has undergone a journey of purification, which *ExSoul* depicts as the soul regaining her female nature. Unlike the majority of Gnostic texts, *ExSoul* employs the metaphor of male sex (the outward womb) to describe the status of prostitution, whilst it assimilates the female sex (the inward womb) to a condition of purity. Nevertheless, I believe that this unusual gender imagery can be explained by means of the Valentinian myth of *ExTheod*, according to which human souls

²⁴⁹ Although this information is not explicitly stated in the text, it is deducible from *ExSoul* II, 133, 4-10.

need to be female to marry male angels. After having regained her femaleness, the soul is ready to marry the bridegroom, thus re-establishing the syzygial union that she had broken in the beginning.

In conclusion, this analysis has highlighted many similarities and correspondences between *ExSoul* and the Gnostic mythologoumena and theologoumena, especially the Valentinian ones. Hence, it would appear that the syncretism proper to this text not only implies that the author resorted to various non-Christian traditions, such as classical or Jewish literature, but also to various Gnostic texts. However, the Gnostic elements shape *ExSoul*'s narrative and theology to such an extent that they indicate far more than a mere Gnostic influence or a possible Gnostic reading, as Lanzillotta and Dritsas Bizier have implied.²⁵⁰ Gnostic mythologoumena and theologoumena, conveyed through feminine imagery, are pivotal in *ExSoul*, thus constituting the main message of the treatise. It is reasonable to conclude that *ExSoul* seems closer to Valentinianism than to any other Gnostic movement, for *ExSoul*'s feminine imagery encompasses all three aspects which are proper to Valentinian feminine imagery.

²⁵⁰ Lanzillotta (2010) and (2010a), XXX; Dritsas Bizier (2010), 313.

Conclusion

It is now time to get back to the question that drives my research: what does Gnostic feminine imagery say about God? First, I have shown that all three aspects of Gnostic feminine imagery, which are strictly related to each other through the mechanism of *typological resemblance*, are an essential part of the Gnostic representation of the divine. Therefore, I have proved that the interest for the feminine should not be taken as a cultural super-imposition of modern concerns over Gnostic texts, but as a genuine concern for Gnostic theologians. Secondly, I have presented some compelling arguments to claim that feminine imagery conveys the most original doctrines of Gnostic theologies, which resorted to mythological feminine imagery to discuss those aspects of the Godhead that they considered ambiguous and paradoxical. Overall, this work has achieved results in two respects. On the one hand, I have improved the understanding of how feminine imagery is employed and what it says about the divine through a detailed hermeneutical work on Gnostic texts that present Ophite, Sethian, Barbeloite and Valentinian mythologoumena and theologoumena. On the other hand, I have proved the worth of these findings by using them to analyse three Gnostic female characters which do not fit within the usual Gnostic paradigms – namely, Helena of Tyre, Edem and the feminine soul of *ExSoul*.

My research is grounded on the *working definition* of Gnosticism that I have illustrated in Part I. Expanding on the definition agreed during the Gnostic Colloquium in Messina, I have proposed to identify Gnosticism as a Christian dualistic movement, which started around the second century CE, and presented a mythological and cosmological structure organised according to the principle of *typological resemblance*. I have reached this conclusion after having observed that each level of reality in Gnostic cosmology is but an imperfect reproduction of the superior level. Typological resemblance is especially visible among female characters, since both the incarnated feminine and the fallen feminine are often imperfect copies of the intra-pleromatic feminine. In addition, I have explained that heresiological classifications of

Gnostic movements – such as those of Ophitism, Sethianism, Barbeloism and Valentinianism – are useful for the purpose of historical and theological investigations of Gnosticism, but that they do not reveal the historical reality of these groups. On the contrary, I have warned that these categories are employed as mere historiographical categories, for they have proven helpful in organising the variegated Gnostic material.

In Part II, I have analysed how the feminine is employed in the description of God in *ApJohn*, *HypArch*, *OrigWorld* and *AdHaer* I, 29 and I, 30. These texts, which present a majority of Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite mythologoumena and theologoumena, stand out because they attribute Trinitarian, soteriological and revealing functions to female characters. The Trinitarian functions of the feminine are particularly visible in *ApJohn*, where Barbelo is identified as the female third element of the Gnostic Trinity (Father-Mother-Son). In this treatise, which presents mainly Barbeloite features, Barbelo put into action the Father's will to generate the entire Pleroma, thus stressing how the generative function of God is exemplified by introducing a female person into the Trinity. Therefore, the analysis of *ApJohn*'s intra-pleromatic feminine has shown that this treatise conceives the Trinitarian Holy Spirit as a Mother, whose primary function is that of actualising the Father's will to generate the Pleroma. This Barbeloite feature is also present in Irenaeus' account (*AdHaer* I, 29), thus showing that this Gnostic innovation was well known among non-Gnostic Christian theologians and perceived as a threat. Besides the Trinitarian functions of the feminine, the authors of these texts attribute also key soteriological and revealing functions to the feminine. In this regard, it is worth remembering that revealing and soteriological functions often coincide within Gnosticism, since this movement is based on the belief that knowledge (*gnosis*) is the way to salvation. This overlapping of roles is confirmed in all three aspects of the Gnostic feminine. In *HypArch*, the intra-pleromatic character of Incorruptibility is the divine luminous being which reveals herself in the waters below during the theophany above the waters, thus functioning both as the revealing agent and as the revealed divine being. The author of *HypArch* goes even further, making her the 'likeness' according to which all human beings have been created, thus reinterpreting the human creation in *Gen* 1:26-27 as the

creation into the likeness of a female divine being. Similar soteriological functions are even held by fallen female beings, thus showing to what extent feminine imagery is ambiguous and paradoxical.

In the case of the fallen feminine, the ambiguity and paradox of Gnostic feminine imagery in Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite movements become evident. Sophia, the fallen aeon of most gnostic mythologies, personifies both the defectiveness of God – that is, the will of an inferior divine being to act like the supreme God – and a soteriological and revealing agent. In *OrigWorld*, Sophia is both the fallen aeon, who generates the evil ruler Yaldabaoth, and the virgin who reveals her image in the waters and purifies the earth through her blood. Likewise, the paradoxical nature of the feminine is visible in the case of the incarnated feminine, since Eve performs both the role of the instructor and that of the perpetrator of Yaldabaoth's plan in *ApJohn*, *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*. While the spiritual Eve awakens Adam from his condition of ignorant sleep, the carnal Eve is subjugated by evil archons and generates sons to Yaldabaoth. In this case, I have shown that these Gnostic theologians separate the two Eves because of the difficulties of conceiving the existence of a divine nature within human beings. The impossibility of making human and divine coexist in the same character is such that they separate the two characters. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that the vast majority of Gnostic texts present a docetic Christology, thus leaving one wondering if the theological reasons behind the separation of the two Eves could not be traced back to a docetistic issue, especially considering that the spiritual Eve is one of the major soteriological agents of Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite mythology.

In Part III, where I have investigated Valentinian feminine imagery, I have encountered equally ambiguous and paradoxical female characters, but I have also observed a significant shift in the theological doctrines conveyed through feminine imagery. First, the significance of the pleromatic feminine is reduced compared to *ApJohn*, *HypArch* and *OrigWorld*. Both *ExVal* and *GN* conceive Silence – that is, the female syzygial counterpart of the Abyss – as a passive recipient for the male power. In Valentinian theology, the generative role that other Gnostic theologians envision as belonging to the Trinitarian Mother is

reduced to that of mere provider of divine substratum to which the male element of the syzygy gives form. Nevertheless, Valentinian theology attributes great significance to the fallen feminine for the character of Sophia conveys the great originality of this Gnostic movement. First of all, the myth of the fallen feminine is represented by means of the so-called ‘myth of separation’, that is, the hypostatisation of Sophia in two characters: one representing her better self and one her worst self. While in *ExVal* and *ExTheod* 1-42 Sophia’s separation is envisioned by means of filiation since her better self is identified with Christ, in *GosPhil*, *GN* and *ExTheod* 43-65 she separates into two female characters named pleromatic-Sophia/Sophia-Echamot and Sophia-Echmot/Achamot. If in the case of Eve, her separation into two characters is due to the paradox of conceiving divinity and humanity together, Sophia’s separation is instead the result of the impossibility of conceiving a suffering God. In *ExTheod* and *GN*, Sophia – more precisely, Sophia Achamot in *GN* – is conceived as the visible and suffering part of God. However, while in *ExTheod*, Sophia is explicitly acknowledged as the Logos’ σαρκίον,¹ in *GN* Sophia’s passion is envisioned as the pleromatic archetype of Christ’s Passion. Hence, the fallen feminine is acknowledged as the defective part of God that is able to suffer passions. Nevertheless, Sophia is also conceived as the totality of the spiritual seed, the elected Church, thus assuming a prominently ecclesiological feature. As such, she is also the bride that awaits the coming of the bridegroom who will save her and reunite with her in the bridal chamber. In particular, *GosPhil* highlights that the mystery of the bridal chamber coincides with the creation of Adam and Eve in syzygy, whereas the separation between sexes is identified with the coming of death. Just as Sophia’s actions outside of the boundaries of the syzygy disrupt the divine order, so Eve’s separation from Adam is the beginning of death among humans. Therefore, just as Sophia’s reunion with the Saviour will result in the redemption of the entire spiritual Church, so the union between Adam and Eve will be achieved once again through the sacrament of the bridal chamber. Unlike the texts analyzed in Part II, Valentinian theologians conceive female characters as subordinated to male characters, especially considering that all

¹ *ExTheod* 1, 1-2.

female characters necessitate the intervention of a male being to redeem them. However, feminine imagery still says a great deal about the way in which Valentinian theologians understand God and the divine nature, for it is used to indicate the Christian mystery of a suffering God that redeems human beings by reuniting them with him.

My findings concerning feminine imagery in these Gnostic traditions have also been useful in identifying similar patterns in three other Gnostic works: the Simonian portrayal of Helena of Tyre, the character of Edem in *Bar* and the fallen soul in *ExSoul*. These three works present a significant feminine imagery, but their importance for the study of Gnosticism has been often underestimated, since they present unique mythologies. In the study of Helena of Tyre, the companion of Simon Magus, I have noticed that the three different aspects of the Gnostic feminine have been grouped in a single character. Although the sources about Simon Magus are hardly conclusive regarding the affiliation of Simon Magus to Gnosticism, the portrayal of Helena as a Gnostic divine being is difficult to be denied. Helena is at once the Ennoia of Simon First-God, the fallen divine being trapped into a material world and the prostitute rescued by Simon Magus. The correspondence between the portrayal of Helena and the female characters of Gnostic mythologies is striking to such an extent that it seems likely that her character – if she ever really existed – was refashioned by the heresiologists to match Gnostic feminine imagery. Whether Helena existed or not and whether Simon was indeed a Gnostic teacher, the portrayal offered by the polemical sources makes Helena a symbol of the inescapability and importance of feminine imagery, since her character was fashioned to make Simon a credible gnostic teacher. The second female character that I have analyzed is Edem, the psychic divine entity of *Bar*. This text has not been studied much since it is known only through the mediation of Hippolytus and, in addition, it presents a unique gnostic mythology. Nevertheless, I have identified several similarities between Edem and Ophite, Barbeloite and Valentinian feminine imagery. First of all, just as Barbelo, Edem is inserted in a sort of Trinity composed by her, Elohim and the Good One. Within this Trinity, she performs a generative role. Moreover, just as in the case of Valentinian intra-pleromatic characters, her power needs to be

limited by a male figure; however, unlike other pleromatic female beings in all other Gnostic mythologies, she is a psychic rather than a pneumatic being. When she is abandoned by her companion Elohim and her power is no longer restrained by him, she turns into a fallen evil being that originates evil for human beings. In this case, the description of her depravity is quite similar to the description of Sophia's defectiveness in Ophite mythologies, since both borrow several elements from Jewish apocalyptic texts. Another peculiarity of *Bar* is the superiority of Eve to Edem, since the former possesses the spiritual nature that the latter lacks. Therefore, the character of Eve in *Bar* is fairly similar to the spiritual Eve in Ophite, Sethian and Barbeloite texts concerning the superiority of Eve on Sophia. Nevertheless, as in Valentinian texts, Eve does not have any soteriological role and the goal of humanity is identified with the restoration of the syzygial condition of unity between the female and male element. It would therefore appear that, although the mythological plot of *Bar* is unique, the feminine imagery proposed by this unknown Gnostic teacher is a combination of various Barbeloite, Ophite and Valentinian mythologoumena and theologoumena. In *ExSoul*, the last case study I have presented, the story is entirely centered on the female personification of the soul. This feminine soul is portrayed as a virgin who abandoned her Father's house and gave herself to prostitution. In the course of my work, I have underlined several times the importance of the metaphor of the prostitute and the bride in a Gnostic framework, especially with regard to the fallen and incarnated feminine. Therefore, the presence of such opposition in *ExSoul* is already a good indicator of the possible Gnostic affiliation of this text. Moreover, given the proximity between the myth of Sophia in Valentinianism with the myth of the fallen soul in *ExSoul*, I have hypothesized that this is indeed a Gnostic work, one with significant Valentinian influences. First of all, the reason for the fall of the soul from her pristine condition of androgynous virginity is identified by the author of *ExSoul* with her violation of the Father's will, just as it happens in the majority of Valentinian myths. Moreover, the fact that her original condition was androgynous seems to suggest that she was united in syzygy, which she abandoned for her other lovers. Secondly, her condition of prostitution is accompanied by violent passions – especially that of regret – like it was in the case of Sophia. Lastly, the goal of the prostitute

soul is to be restored to her original condition and to marry her true husband in the bridal chamber. Overall, I believe that *ExSoul's* feminine imagery corresponds to a large extent to Valentinian feminine imagery, thus confirming a Valentinian affiliation of the texts.

In conclusion, the study of Gnostic feminine imagery has proven to be particularly fruitful for the identification of the key elements of the Gnostic description of God. In Gnosticism, feminine imagery was not only a powerful rhetorical and mythological tool, but it was also an effective way to convey theological doctrines and teachings. I can only hope that these preliminary findings will stimulate further research into Gnostic feminine imagery for much needs yet to be done in this field.

Abbreviations

ACW	<i>Ancient Christian Writers</i>
ActPt	<i>Acts of Peter</i>
AdHaer	<i>Adversus Haereses</i>
AdVal	<i>Adversus Valentinianos</i>
All	<i>Allogenes</i>
ApAd	<i>The Apocalypse of Adam</i>
ApJohn	<i>Apocryphon of John</i>
ApPr	<i>Apologia Prima</i>
Bar	<i>Book of Baruch</i>
BASP	<i>The Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists</i>
BCNH	<i>Bibliothèque Copte de Nag Hammadi</i>
BETHL	<i>Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium</i>
BWatch	<i>Book of Watchers</i>
CCc	<i>Commentary on the Song of Songs</i>
CC	<i>Corpus Christianorum Serie Graeca</i>
CCSL	<i>Corpus Christianorum Serie Latina</i>
ClHom	<i>Clementine Homilies</i>
ClRec	<i>Clementine Recognitiones</i>
ComJn	<i>Commentary on the Gospel of John</i>
DialTryph	<i>Dialogue with Trypho</i>
El	<i>Elenchos</i>
EnI	<i>Enoch I</i>
Enn	<i>Enneads</i>
EpFl	<i>Letter to Flora</i>
Eug	<i>Eugnostos</i>
EV	<i>Estudios Valentinianos</i>
ExSoul	<i>Exegesis of the Soul</i>
ExTheod	<i>Excerpta ex Theodoto</i>
ExVal	<i>Valentinian Exposition</i>
GCS	<i>Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller</i>
GosEg	<i>Gospel of the Egyptians</i>

<i>GosMary</i>	<i>Gospel of Mary</i>
<i>GosPhil</i>	<i>Gospel of Philip</i>
<i>GosTruth</i>	<i>Gospel of Truth</i>
<i>HypArch</i>	<i>Hypostasis of Archons</i>
HTR	<i>The Harvard Theological Review</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JECS	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
LCL	<i>Loeb Classical Library</i>
LM	<i>Le Muséon</i>
<i>Mar</i>	<i>Marsanes</i>
<i>Mel</i>	<i>Melchizedek</i>
NHMS	<i>Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies</i>
NHS	<i>Nag Hammadi Studies</i>
NT	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
NU	<i>Numen</i>
<i>OrigWord</i>	<i>On the Origin of the World</i>
<i>Pan</i>	<i>Panarion</i>
<i>Ref</i>	<i>Refutatio Omnium Haeresiarum</i>
SBL	<i>Society of Biblical Literature</i>
SC	<i>Sources Chrétiennes</i>

SHR	<i>Studies in the History of Religions</i>
<i>SophJesChr</i>	<i>Sophia of Jesus Christ</i>
Sos	<i>Song of Songs</i>
SP	<i>Studia Pastristica</i>
<i>Strom</i>	<i>Stromata</i>
<i>StSeth</i>	<i>Three Steles of Seth</i>
<i>TestTruth</i>	<i>Testimony of Truth</i>
<i>ThNor</i>	<i>The Thought of Norea</i>
<i>TriProt</i>	<i>Trimorphic Protennoia</i>
<i>TReub</i>	<i>Testament of Reuben</i>
<i>TriTrac</i>	<i>Tripartite Tractate</i>
VC	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
VCh	<i>Vetera Christianorum</i>
WUZT	<i>Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament</i>
ZAC	<i>Zeitschrift Für Antikes Christentum</i>
Zos	<i>Zostrianos</i>

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Declaration

This work has been submitted to the University of Nottingham in accordance with the regulations for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. It is my own work, and none of it has been previously submitted to the University of Nottingham or any other university for a degree.

