

## Le Traité tripartite (NH I,5)

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With its eighty-eight pages, the *Tripartite Tractate* is the longest of the Nag Hammadi documents which have come down to us in a preserved state. It constitutes a veritable *summa* of Gnostic theology, and is the work of a Valentinian teacher who displays his understanding of the system on which the Valentinian Church based its teaching. In its form and content, the text corresponds to the tractates which the heresiologists Irenaeus and Hippolytus used to support their presentation of the Valentinian heresy. Therefore, it provides direct access to this type of literature, without which it would be necessary to accept the often tendentious interpretation the heresiologists have given us.

Although undoubtedly originally written in Greek, this text is only known through this single Coptic manuscript. No other witness has come down to us and no mention or citation is known in ancient literature.

Even though the work is part of a tradition involving the systematic exposition of Valentinism, the author is, nevertheless, an original thinker who is interested more in the logical structure of the system, which he sets out in its mythological detail. He considered himself as belonging to the Church of the Lord's flesh (125,4-5) and he is careful to explain his understanding of the Church and its place in this world. That the treatise itself is not directed explicitly to a Valentinian audience is not surprising, since the Valentinians considered themselves first and foremost as Christians and would rarely make reference to Valentinus himself.

A comparison of the tractate's content with the Valentinian systems described by the heresiologists reveals a large number of common expressions and motifs. Some of the most characteristic include: the division of the fallen aeon into two entities, with one returning to the Pleroma; the mission of the Son-Saviour as the common fruit of the Pleroma, and the tripartition of the material, the psychic, and the spiritual. The appeal to the intermediate psychic category, in order to give a positive evaluation to the Creator, the world itself, the Jewish Scriptures, and other non-Valentinian Christians, is typical of Valentinism. This category serves to distinguish the Valentinian Church, itself considered spiritual, from other Christians and Jews on the one hand, and those groups characterized by dualism and radical anti-Judaism, such as the Marcionite Church and other Gnostic groups, on the other.

The arrangement of the treatise follows a model well known from the heresiologists' presentation of Valentinism, and it contains the principal elements of certain non-Valentinian Gnostic tractates, such as the *Apocryphon of John*. Reduced to its fundamental elements, this model consists of 1) the description of the transcendent God and the Pleroma, 2) the passion of the youngest aeons, 3) the mission of the Saviour and the creation of the world, 4) the creation of humanity, 5) the coming of the Saviour, and 6) the eschatology. This model, however, allows for a great deal of individual variation.

The importance of the *Tripartite Tractate* is not only the fact that it permits a better understanding of some of the fundamental elements of the Valentinian system, but it also permits us to observe how much the teacher could give his own interpretation of the system from certain common themes. What the heresiologists treated with derision and presented as the endless disagreements between the heretics was, in fact, the expression of a continual play on these common themes and a mistrust of a fixed vocabulary which would have diverted attention from transcendent truths.

The Coptic text is established, introduced and commented on by Einar Thomassen and was translated in collaboration with Louis Painchaud.