THE SOURCES FOR VALENTINIAN GNOSTICISM: A QUESTION OF METHODOLOGY

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The Valentinian writings often served as grains of sand in the oyster bed of second and third century patristic literature, and in many instances it is still possible to recover those irritants with a reasonable degree of certainty. The patristic works which contain this primary Valentinian material have long been isolated and, using F.-M.-M. Sagnard's list,¹ include the following seven: Irenaeus' Adversus haereses; Clement of Alexandria's Stromata and Excerpta ex Theodoto; Hippolytus' Refutatio; Tertullian's Adversus Valentinianos; Origen's Commentary on John, which contains the fragments of Heracleon; and section 33 of Epiphanius' Panarion which reproduces Ptolemy's "Letter to Flora." To these, says Sagnard, "on pourrait ajouter: Pseudo-Tertullien (Adversus omnes haereses), Philastre (De haeresibus), Épiphane ([le reste du] Panarion), trois écrits dérivant d'une même source...; de même Théodoret."² To this group of later and derivative sources should be added K. Koschorke's recent collection of less familiar patristic material appearing to preserve some Valentinian sources. These range from Didymus' Commentary on the Psalms to comments recorded by the Second Tryllian Synod of 692.³

Another addition which now must be made to Sagnard's list is the evidence from the Nag Hammadi find of 1945. It would appear that these writings were treasured on their own merit by the monks of the neighbouring Pachomian monastery at Chenoboskion. Debate continues on which of these 46 independent works are Valentinian, but the following seven make a defensible working group: The Prayer of the Apostle Paul (I,1); The Gospel of Truth (I,3/XII,2); The Treatise on the Resurrection (I,4); The Tripartite Tractate (I,5); The Gospel of Philip (II,3); The Interpretation of Knowledge (XI,1); and A Valentinian Exposition (XI,2). Three others may be considered as candidates as well: The First and Second Apocalypses of James (V,3-4); and The Letter of Peter to Philip (VIII,2).⁴
Having roughly delimited the primary sources for a study of Valentinianism one must assess their value. This is not an easy task. The scholarly tendency is to separate the Nag Hammadi material from that found in the Fathers, and to view the two bodies of information in roughly the same manner as Pauline scholars now view Acts and the letters of Paul. In other words, the Nag Hammadi works, which come to us directly "from the source’s mouth," must be seen as primary and given pride of place in any reconstruction of Valentinianism. The sources found in the Fathers, on the other hand, suffer the same fate as do the Acts accounts in any reconstruction of the life and teachings of Paul: they are to be consulted only after one exhausts the "primary sources," and their testimony must be accepted with caution and due regard for their redactional Tendenzen. K. Rudolph in some respects is a good representative of this position. In his recent and important study, Gnosis, he claims to "have deliberately given precedence to the original works today abundantly available, above all in Coptic, and less to the heresiological reports." Were the analogy with Pauline scholarship more exact, Rudolph’s position would be unquestionable. As it stands, however, the situation facing the student of Valentinianism is even more complicated.

The primacy of the Nag Hammadi sources is questionable on internal and external grounds. Internally, it must be said that not one of these works claims to represent the views of Valentinus or to be Valentinian. The difficulty scholars have in agreeing upon which of these works is Valentinian reinforces this observation. There is something of the chicken and egg mentality at play here: some of the Nag Hammadi works are designated Valentinian on the strength of the patristic accounts, so in effect the "primary sources" are only primary insofar as one accepts the claims made in the "secondary sources." This is a methodological problem which has not received the attention it deserves. Externally there is the dual problem of dating and provenance. The receipts and fragments of correspondence which were used to pad the bindings of the codices help us to date the compilation of these writings to ca. 350 C.E. As well, the proximity of the find to the Pachomian monastery, coupled with the mention of "monks" and "Father Pachom" in the bindings, makes it likely that "the writings derive from the library of a monastery"—and may even have been buried as a result of Athanasius’ proscription of heretical books, which reached Egypt in 367. As van den Broek has stated, "there is a growing consensus that