

ADAM, EVE,
AND THE
SERPENT

ELAINE PAGELS



VINTAGE BOOKS

A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE, INC.

New York

III

GNOSTIC IMPROVISATIONS ON GENESIS

AS CHRISTIANITY SPREAD throughout the empire and took root, its leaders began to develop various strategies of community organization. They developed, too, ways of discriminating between those they accepted as orthodox ("straight-thinking") Christians and those they rejected as deviants, including, among the latter, many known as "gnostic" Christians.¹ Since to profess Christianity was still suspect and potentially dangerous throughout the Roman Empire, many Christian churches owed their coherence and their survival to the astuteness and courage of their leaders, the bishops. When Ignatius, bishop of Antioch in Syria, was arrested (c. 110 C.E.) and sent by ship to Rome for trial and execution, chained, as he said, to "ten leopards, I mean a band of soldiers,"² he spent his final journey writing letters to the churches surrounding his home church in Antioch and to the Christians in Rome, his final destination. Ignatius urged these and all other Christians to stand together under persecution and to maintain unanimous loyalty to the clergy, which he envisioned as a threefold hierarchy of bishop, priests, and deacons who ruled each church "in God's place,"³ and who maintained communication among Christians scattered throughout the world.⁴

Such crises as a bishop's arrest and execution emphasized how much the threatened Christian groups needed strong leaders; Ignatius knew that he was appealing to a still emerging and fragile institutional system. What concerned Ignatius especially was that this

system had not yet won the allegiance of all who counted themselves among the believers. Nor was there as yet, among Christian groups scattered throughout the Roman world, a single central organization. Christians in different provinces—and even in neighboring communities—demonstrated great diversity, from the wandering ascetics of Asia Minor⁵ to the settled "house churches" that were becoming established in Asian and Greek cities.⁶ Converts from Judaism, for example, whether they lived in Judea or Greece, Asia or Egypt, tended to borrow the structure of the synagogues, where a leader presided over a group of "elders," or in the Greek, *presbyteroi*, later translated as "priests." Other converts, originally Gentiles, developed a different administrative system adapted from large households, consisting of a group of servants, called in Greek *diakonoi*, which became the English term "deacons," headed by an "overseer," called in Greek *episcopos*, our word for "bishop." Within the next three centuries these bishops came to assume responsibility for specific areas, or dioceses, a pattern modeled on the organization of the Roman army.

But persecution, which, however intense, remained sporadic, was not the only reason that the majority of Christians came to accept an increasingly institutionalized structure to oversee each group internally and instruct and discipline its members. By the second century many Christians wanted to incorporate Jesus' moral fervor into everyday life by turning his Sermon on the Mount into a set of rules, an ethical system that set Christians apart from their pagan environment, and sometimes placed them in direct opposition to it; this ethical imperative became still another reason for the increasingly institutionalized church.

What distinguished Christians from everyone else, according to both pagan and Christian contemporaries, was their moral rigor, which impressed even pagans hostile to the movement. The famous Galen, for example, personal physician to the emperor Marcus Aurelius and the imperial family, admired Christian courage and "abstinence from the use of the sexual organs."⁷ When the Christian philosopher Justin wrote to the same emperors to defend his fellow Christians, he boasted that they were people who had completely changed their attitudes and behavior in matters of sex, money, and racial relations:

We, who used to take pleasure in immorality, now embrace chastity alone; we, who valued above everything else the acquisition

of wealth and possessions, now bring what we have into common ownership, and share with those in need; we, who hated and destroyed one another, refusing to live with those of a different race, now live intimately with them.⁸

The practices Justin praised—sexual self-restraint, sharing one's goods with the destitute, and living with people of all races—appealed especially, as we have seen, to those people most vulnerable to sexual abuse, financial exploitation; poverty, and racial hatred—that is, to freedmen, noncitizens, and slaves, to the despised and rejected within the Roman world. Despite the suspicion of certain Roman officials toward Christians, the movement, strengthened by its developing institutional structures, grew.

But as the churches became more institutionalized, some Christians resisted that process. For while certain bishops, including, for example, Irenaeus of Lyons, attempted to formulate community morals and to enforce discipline by teaching, penalizing, or expelling those who, for whatever reason, dissented, some, no doubt, resented these intrusions upon their behavior. Others, although they accepted the ethical basis of Christian teaching, regarded conformity, whether in doctrine or discipline, as something that only beginners needed to take seriously. Some ardent Christians wanted to recover the sense of spiritual transformation that they found in Jesus' message. For these Christians conversion meant more than accepting baptism and following a new set of moral rules derived from Jesus' teaching. Becoming a Christian meant discovering one's spiritual nature—discovering, as one teacher put it,

who we are, and what we have become; where we were . . . whither we are hastening; from what we are being released; what birth is, and what is rebirth.⁹

Many Christians striving for a higher level of spiritual consciousness had no quarrel with what the bishops taught; they agreed that moral guidance concerning good works and sexual restraint was not only welcome but essential, for most people. But some Christians objected to being told what to think and how to behave. Although they agreed that the first step toward becoming a Christian was to accept the faith and receive baptism from the bishop, these Christians wanted to go further. They yearned to become spiritually "mature,"¹⁰ to go beyond such elementary instruction toward higher levels of understanding. And this higher awareness they called *gnosis*,

which means "knowledge," or "insight."¹¹ To achieve gnosis, these Christians said, they no longer needed the bishop or the clergy.

When Irenaeus, bishop at Lyons (c. 180 C.E.), discovered among his own congregation a large group of such Christians who sought to exempt themselves from his authority and set out to know God directly through gnosis, or immediate experience, he recognized—and even grudgingly respected—their spiritual purpose.¹² As bishop, however, he soon came into conflict with their determination to follow Christ in their own way. He decided that they were divisive and arrogant upstarts who threatened to undermine church unity and discipline, for they "disturb the faith of many by alluring them under a pretense of superior knowledge."¹³ Above all, as we shall see, Irenaeus was concerned that gnostic teaching threatened the message of freedom that he and many others considered central to the gospel. Irenaeus read some of the writings of these gnostic Christians and engaged in conversation with several of them. He then composed a five-volume polemic against them, which he called "The Refutation and Overthrow of Falsely So-Called Knowledge (*Gnosis*)."¹⁴ The term "gnostics," now often used descriptively for such dissident spiritual seekers, may have been their own term, or it may have originated as a derisive name for those Christians whom Irenaeus regarded as self-appointed "know-it-alls."¹⁴

These so-called gnostics, then, did not share a single ideology or belong to a specific group; not all, in fact, were Christians. Those who did identify themselves as Christians included a wide variety of people who chose to follow their faith in their own way. Many gnostic Christians were members of Christian congregations, including both lay people and members of the clergy, who wanted no more than to supplement the teaching and worship common to all Christians with deeper insights derived from their own spiritual experience. Many gnostics also followed certain spiritual teachers who promised to initiate them into deeper mysteries of the faith.

Irenaeus directed his polemic primarily at the group of gnostic Christians whom members of his own congregation found most attractive and powerful—a group the bishop considered especially dangerous and divisive. These were followers of a spiritual master called Valentinus, who some forty years before Irenaeus wrote, and while Justin was still teaching in Rome, had joined the Christian group there as a newcomer (c. 140–160 C.E.). Before coming to Rome, Valentinus had already established himself among Christians of the Egyptian city of Alexandria as a poet, visionary, and spiritual

teacher; and in Rome, where his abilities were widely recognized, he was considered a likely candidate for bishop. Even Tertullian, who would bitterly denounce Valentinus's followers a generation later, admitted that their teacher had been "a capable man, both in intelligence and eloquence."¹⁵

Valentinus urged Christians to go beyond the elementary steps of faith, baptism, and moral reform to spiritual illumination. His followers claimed, moreover, to have received from him access to secret teachings of Paul, the "deeper mysteries" that Paul reserved from his public teaching and taught only to a few chosen disciples in secret.¹⁶ Other gnostics claimed to know the secret teaching of Jesus himself—teaching only hinted at, they said, in the New Testament gospels but revealed more fully in such secret writings as the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, and the *Dialogue of the Savior*.¹⁷

Such writings, suppressed and lost for nearly sixteen hundred years, remained, until recently, virtually unknown. But in December of 1945, two years before the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in desert caves in Israel, copies of these very writings and many others were discovered unexpectedly in the Egyptian desert near the town of Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt. This extraordinary find disclosed, in fact, more than fifty texts that date back to the first centuries of the Christian Era, including a collection of early Christian "gospels" and other writings attributed to Jesus and his disciples. While the original language of these texts was Greek (the language of the New Testament), the copies discovered in Egypt had been translated from Greek into Coptic, the common language of Egypt in the third and fourth centuries. Whether these writings—or which of them—contain authentic teaching of Jesus and his disciples we do not know, any more than we know with certainty which sayings or teachings in the New Testament are authentic. What the discovery certainly *does* offer, however, is extraordinary insights into the early Christian movement. For the first time, we can read firsthand works later condemned and destroyed by the bishops as heretical. Now for the first time the "heretics" can speak to us in their own words. For church leaders of the second century, including Ignatius, Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Clement, had attacked the gnostic Christians, condemned their teachings, and attempted to drive them out of the churches.

A century and a half later, when the emperor Constantine abruptly changed Roman policy from one of persecuting Christians

to protecting and favoring them with massive gifts of money, tax exemptions, and enormous prestige, the bishops, now in political favor, sometimes used these new resources to promote unanimity; thus in 381, the Christian emperor Theodosius made "heresy" a crime against the state.

The texts discovered in a jar near Nag Hammadi show us more clearly than we had ever known that some of these so-called gnostic Christians sought divine illumination through a process of spiritual self-discovery.¹⁸ The Christian bishops who called themselves orthodox might no doubt claim that they, too, sought spiritual illumination; but their methods differed considerably. Justin the philosopher followed a common Christian tradition when he called the ritual of baptism itself "illumination" and explained that "since at our birth we were born without our knowledge or choice, by our parents' union, and were raised with bad habits and false education," so converts had been born first as "children of necessity and ignorance." But Christians, through baptism, were born again as "children of choice and knowledge."¹⁹ Justin sought to increase his own understanding of the faith—and that of his students—through moral action and philosophic discourse. Followers of Valentinus, on the other hand, tended to regard baptism as only the elementary initiation ritual, and one that, for many people, lacked real spiritual content.²⁰ Instead of following a philosophic path, like Justin, Valentinus looked within himself to dreams and visions to deepen his gnosis. He traced his own spiritual process, in fact, to a vision in which a newborn infant appeared to him and said, "I am the Logos."²¹ Like Justin, Valentinus sought spiritual illumination in the Scriptures; but where Justin wrestled with their moral, philosophical, and historical dimensions, Valentinus claimed to explicate their "deeper meaning" through secret traditions known only to initiates like himself.²² My first two books, written before *The Gnostic Gospels*, attempt to show how Valentinian Christians interpreted the New Testament Gospel of John and the letters of Paul.²³

When gnostic and orthodox Christians disagreed, each reached back to the Scriptures that they revered in common, and each claimed the Scriptures' support. But gnostic and orthodox Christians read the same Scriptures in radically different ways; to borrow the words of the nineteenth-century poet William Blake, "Both read the Bible day and night; but you read black where I read white!"

The majority of orthodox Christians in the first and second centuries, like most Jews and Christians ever since, read the Scrip-

tures as Justin did, primarily as practical guides to moral living. They read the Genesis story, in particular, as *history with a moral*: that is, they regarded Adam and Eve as actual historical persons, the venerable ancestors of our race; and from the story of their disobedience, orthodox interpreters drew practical lessons in moral behavior. Tertullian, for example, took Genesis 3 as an opportunity to warn his "sisters in Christ" that even the best of them were, in effect, Eve's co-conspirators:

You are the devil's gateway . . . you are she who persuaded him whom the devil did not dare attack. . . . Do you not know that every one of you is an Eve? The sentence of God on your sex lives on in this age; the guilt, of necessity, lives on too.²⁴

In other contexts, Tertullian can derive from the story different moral lessons: for example, to warn against gluttony, because "eating led to Adam's fall,"²⁵ or to urge believers to marry only once, since God made for Adam "only one wife."²⁶ Orthodox Christians who disagree with one another over the interpretation of Genesis disagree primarily on the question of *which* moral to draw from it: for example, where Clement sees God's blessing on marriage and procreation in Paradise,²⁷ the fourth-century Christian ascetic Jerome will insist, as we shall see, that Adam and Eve were originally meant to be virgins, and were joined in marriage only after they sinned and were expelled in disgrace "from the Paradise of virginity."²⁸

Gnostic Christians, on the other hand, castigated the orthodox for making the mistake of reading the Scriptures—and especially Genesis—literally, and thereby missing its "deeper meaning." Read literally, they said, the story of creation made no sense. Are we to believe that Adam and Eve actually heard God's footsteps rustling in the garden of Eden, as the text suggests, when it says that Adam and Eve hid themselves, for "they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day" (Genesis 3:8)? Or did God lie when he warned Adam and Eve, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for on the day you eat of it you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:17), though they went on to live for hundreds of years? To whom was God speaking when he said, "Let us make man in our image" (Genesis 1:26)? And why did God try to keep from Adam and Eve the knowledge that he admits could make them "like one of us" (Genesis 3:22)?

Certain gnostic Christians suggested that such absurdities show

that the story was never meant to be taken literally but should be understood as spiritual allegory—not so much *history with a moral as myth with meaning*. These gnostics took each line of the Scriptures as an enigma, a riddle pointing to deeper meaning. Read this way, the text became a shimmering surface of symbols, inviting the spiritually adventurous to explore its hidden depths, to draw upon their own inner experience—what artists call the creative imagination—to interpret the story. Irenaeus describes various gnostic interpretations of the creation story and then complains that “while they claim such things as these concerning the creation, every one of them generates something new every day, according to his ability; for, among them, no one is considered mature [or “initiated”] who does not develop some enormous fictions.”²⁹ Consequently, gnostic Christians neither sought nor found any consensus concerning what the story meant but regarded Genesis 1-3 rather like a fugal melody upon which they continually improvised new variations, all of which, Bishop Irenaeus said, were “full of blasphemy.”³⁰

Gnostic Christians did not invent this technique of allegorical interpretation; on the contrary, pagan and Jewish teachers had used such methods for many generations to interpret venerated but puzzlingly archaic texts. Certain Stoic philosophers, for example, had suggested that the Homeric poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which formed the basis of Greek education, should not be read simply *literally* as accounts of ancient battles or of the gods' conflicts and amours. Such allegorists claimed that whoever looked beyond their obvious meaning and read them symbolically could find hidden in them the deeper truths of natural philosophy. Certain Jewish teachers, too, prominently including Jesus' contemporary the wealthy and educated Philo of Alexandria, applied allegorical exegesis to the Scriptures to discover the deeper meaning that they believed lay “beneath the surface.”

Philo interprets the Genesis creation accounts in various ways. Sometimes he reads it as history with a moral, and he warns people against disobeying God, and warns men, in particular, against women, whose creation from Adam's side ended the first man's lofty and solitary communion with God and was, for Philo, “the beginning of all evils.” But Philo also can interpret the story allegorically, as myth with meaning—that is, as a story containing profound truths hidden in symbols. In his ingenious *Allegorical Interpretation*, Philo takes Adam and Eve as representing two elements within human nature: he says that Adam represents the *mind (nous)*, the nobler,

masculine, and rational element, which is “made in God's image”;³¹ and Eve represents the body or *sensation (aisthesis)*, the lower, feminine element, source of all passion.³² (The scholar Richard Baer shows, too, that Philo's view of men and women follows a similar—and predictable—pattern.)³³

Gnostic interpreters, equally fascinated with the story of Adam and Eve, found in the Garden of Eden a wild flowering of interpretations. Yet many of these gnostic interpretations, however diverse they appear, share a common—and entirely *unorthodox*—premise. For orthodox interpreters, both Jewish and Christian, tend to emphasize the distinction between the infinite God and his finite creatures—a distinction expressed, for example, by the twentieth-century Jewish theologian Martin Buber's description of God as “wholly other,” which means, above all, other than human. Even the mystics of Jewish and Christian tradition who seek to find their identity in God often are careful to acknowledge the abyss that separates them from their divine Source. When the Dominican monk Meister Eckhart (c. 1260-1328 C.E.), for example, failed to do so and preached instead that “our whole perfection and blessing depends upon our stepping across the estate of creaturehood, and on getting at last to the Cause that has no cause”³⁴—that is, attaining “God [who] lies hidden in the soul's core”³⁵—his boldness so outraged the archbishop of Cologne that he succeeded in obtaining a papal bull condemning Eckhart's writings as heresy. And when the Jewish theologian Martin Buber sought to explore the sources of religious experience, he characterized the Jewish devotee's relationship to God as “I and Thou”; but no orthodox Jew, any more than an orthodox Christian, could say, with the Hindu devotee, “I am Thou.”³⁶

But gnostic interpreters share with the Hindu and with Eckhart that very conviction—that the divine being is hidden deep within human nature, as well as outside it, and, although often unperceived, is a spiritual potential latent in the human psyche. According to Ptolemy, a follower of Valentinus, the story of Adam and Eve shows that humanity “fell” into ordinary consciousness and lost contact with its divine origin.³⁷ Another follower of Valentinus, the author of the *Gospel of Philip*, says that human beings fell into the error of projecting divinity onto beings external to themselves, and so created religion:

In the beginnings, God created humanity. But now humanity creates God. This is the way it is in the world—human beings

invent gods and worship their creation. It would be more fitting for the gods to worship human beings!³⁸

Some gnostics adopted a pattern of interpretation similar to Philo's but changed the content. Instead of characterizing human psychodynamics, as Philo had, in terms of an interaction between *mind* and *sensation*, gnostics pictured it in terms of the interaction of *soul* and *spirit*—that is, between the *psyche* (ordinary consciousness, understood to include both mind and sensation) and the *spirit*, the potential for a higher, spiritual consciousness. Many gnostics read the story of Adam and Eve, consequently, as an account of what takes place within a person who is engaged in the process of spiritual self-discovery. The gnostic text called *Interpretation of the Soul*, for example, tells how the soul, represented as Eve, became alienated from her spiritual nature, and so long as she denied that spiritual nature and distanced herself from it, she fell into self-destruction and suffering. But when she became willing to be reconciled and reunited with her spiritual nature, she once again became whole; the gnostic author explains that this process of spiritual self-integration is the hidden meaning of the marriage of Adam and Eve: "This marriage has brought them back together again, and the soul has been joined to her true love, her real master,"³⁹ that is, to her spiritual self. Many other gnostic texts reverse the symbolism; the majority of the known gnostic texts depict Adam (not Eve) as representing the psyche, while Eve represents the higher principle, the spiritual self. Gnostic authors loved to tell, with many variations, the story of Eve, that elusive spiritual intelligence: how she first emerged within Adam and awakened him, the soul, to awareness of its spiritual nature; how she encountered resistance, was misunderstood, attacked, and mistaken for what she was not; and how she finally joined with Adam "in marriage," so to speak, and so came to live in harmonious union with the soul.⁴⁰ According to the gnostic text called *Reality of the Rulers*, when Adam first recognized Eve, he saw in her not a mere marital partner but a spiritual power:

And when he saw her, he said, "It is you who have given me life: you shall be called Mother of the Living [Eve]; for it is she who is my Mother. It is she who is the Physician, and the Woman, and She Who Has Given Birth."⁴¹

The *Reality of the Rulers* went so far as to say that when Adam was warned by the creator to disregard her voice, he lost contact with the spirit, until she reappeared to him in the form of the serpent:

Then the Female Spiritual Principle came [in] the Snake, the Instructor; and it taught [them], saying, "What did he [say to] you [pl.]? Was it, 'From every tree in the Garden shall you [sing.] eat; yet—from [the tree] of recognizing evil and good do not eat'?"

The carnal Woman said, "Not only did he say 'Do not eat,' but even 'Do not touch it; for the day you [pl.] eat from it, with death you [pl.] are going to die.'"

And the Snake, the Instructor, said, "With death you [pl.] shall not die; for it was out of jealousy that he said this to you [pl.]. Rather your [pl.] eyes shall open and you [pl.] shall come to be like gods, recognizing evil and good." And the Female Instructing Principle was taken away from the Snake, and she left it behind merely a thing of the earth.⁴²

An extraordinary gnostic poem called *Thunder: Perfect Mind* depicts the spirit, manifested variously as Wisdom and as Eve, speaking as follows:

I am the first and the last.
I am the honored one and the scorned one.
I am the whore and the holy one.
I am the wife and the virgin.
I am the bride and the bridegroom,
and it is my husband who begot me.
I am knowledge and ignorance. . . .
I am foolish and I am wise. . . .
I am the one whom they call life [Eve]
and you have called Death. . . .⁴³

The *Secret Book of John* suggests that Adam's experience as he awakened to Eve's presence prefigures that of the gnostic who, sunk into a state of oblivion, suddenly awakens to the presence of the spirit hidden deep within. The *Secret Book* concludes as Eve, the "perfect primal intelligence," calls out to Adam—to the psyche (and so, in effect, to you and me, the readers)—to wake up, recognize her, and so receive spiritual illumination:

I entered into the midst of their prison, which is the prison of the body. And I said, "Whoever hears, let him arise from the deep sleep." And he wept and shed bitter tears. Bitter tears he wiped from himself, and he said, "Who is it who calls my name, and whence has this hope come to me while I am in the chains of this prison?" And I said, "I am the intelligence [*pronoia*] of the pure

life; I am the thinking of the virginal spirit. . . . Arise and remember . . . and follow your root, which is I . . . and beware of the deep sleep."⁴⁴

Gnostic Christians who projected such "bizarre inventions" onto Genesis ignored matters of practical morality—or so Bishop Irenaeus charged, and at first glance one must agree. For while their contemporary Christians were drawing moral injunctions from Genesis, certain gnostic Christians seemed to be merely improvising myths on the story of Paradise. Some gnostics dared go further: instead of blaming the human desire for knowledge as the root of all sin, they did the opposite and sought redemption through gnosis. And whereas the orthodox often blamed Eve for the fall and pointed to women's submission as appropriate punishment, gnostics often depicted Eve—or the feminine spiritual power she represented—as the source of spiritual awakening.⁴⁵

Yet many gnostic Christians struggled with the same urgent ethical questions that preoccupied their orthodox contemporaries: Should Christians avoid marriage or embrace it? Are Christians, like Jews, commanded to "be fruitful and multiply"? What kind of relationship is possible, or desirable, between Christian men and women?

When gnostic Christians asked themselves these questions, however, they often approached them differently than did their orthodox contemporaries. Instead of formulating a set of community rules, some gnostic Christians sought instead to discover and articulate—precisely through the "bizarre inventions" of gnostic myth—the internal sources of desire and action. What fascinated them was psychodynamics, or, as they might have put it, pneumatopsychodynamics: the interaction between the *pneuma*, the spiritual element of our nature, and the *psyche*, that is, the emotional and mental impulses. The Valentinian author of the *Gospel of Philiph*, speaking in mythic language, said, for example, that death began when "the woman separated . . . from the man"⁴⁶—that is, when Eve (the spirit) became separated from Adam (the psyche). Only when one's spiritual or ordinary consciousness, becomes integrated with one's spiritual nature—when Adam, reunited with Eve, "becomes complete again"⁴⁷—can one achieve internal harmony and wholeness. According to this Valentinian author, only the person who has "remained" the psyche with the spirit becomes capable of withstanding

physical and emotional impulses that, unchecked, could drive him or her toward self-destruction and evil. Irenaeus was wrong, then, to suggest that gnostic Christians ignored moral issues. But they sometimes engaged them in a way that encouraged each person to explore his or her own internal experience, believing that each one could discover the spirit within. Commenting on their method, Irenaeus said sarcastically that "they imagine that, by means of their obscure interpretations, each of them has discovered a god of his own!"⁴⁸ But what especially bothered Irenaeus was that gnostic Christians engaged moral issues in ways that made them seem indifferent—or worse, insubordinate—to the community ethics that the bishops sought to impose upon all believers alike.

Meanwhile certain radical gnostics, far from criticizing the bishops for being too severe, criticized them instead for being too lenient. One such gnostic Christian, the author of the *Testimony of Truth*, sided with the ascetics and railed against both orthodox and gnostics alike who endorsed marriage and procreation and who worshiped the God who had created such impurities. This radical teacher dared to tell the story of Paradise from the serpent's point of view, and depicted the serpent as a teacher of divine wisdom who desperately tried to get Adam and Eve to open their eyes to their creator's true—and despicable—nature:

For the serpent was *wiser* than any of the animals that were in Paradise. . . . But the creator cursed the serpent, and called him devil. And he said, "Behold, Adam has become like one of us, knowing evil and good."⁴⁹

Then he said, "Let us cast him out of Paradise lest he take from the tree of life and live forever" (Genesis 3:22). Who is this God, who calls evil "good" and good "evil"?

What kind of God is this? First, he envied Adam that he should eat from the tree of knowledge. . . . And secondly he said, "Adam, where are you?" And God does not have foreknowledge, since he did not know this from the beginning. And afterwards, he said, "Let us cast him [out] of this place lest he eat of the tree of life and live forever." Surely he has shown himself to be a malicious envier. And what kind of God is this? Great is the blindness of those who read, and they did not know it.⁵⁰

What church leader would not have bridled at a critic who turned the Genesis account upside down, and who blasted all Chris-

tians who married or conducted ordinary business for being ignorant, false, and foolish? The same gnostic author attacked the martyrs themselves as "empty martyrs, who witness only to themselves,"⁵¹ and castigated their leaders as "blind guides,"⁵² who were at best immature and at worst liars.

Church leaders like Irenaeus who confronted the followers of Valentinus must have found them almost as maddening as the more radical gnostics, but for different reasons. Valentinian Christians agreed with the bishop that practicing good works and sexual restraint was good for those they called "the many" but claimed these were optional for spiritual Christians like themselves.⁵³ Irenaeus complained that these gnostic positions were hard to pin down; they were as wildly inconsistent as their interpretations of the Scriptures. Irenaeus admitted that some Valentinians lived exemplary lives as celibates, but others, he said, only pretended piety to cover their secret licentiousness.⁵⁴ On the other hand, Clement of Alexandria praised the Valentinians he knew in Egypt because they, unlike most other "heretics," *approved of marriage*.⁵⁵

Where *did* the Valentinian gnostics stand, then, on the questions that divided their Christian contemporaries—whether, for example, Christians should marry or remain celibate? One certainly would have expected to find a clear answer in their writings; for marriage (or, as the *Gospel of Philip* calls it, "the mystery of marriage") figured as a primary theme of their whole theology. Valentinian rituals apparently culminated in the sacrament they called the "bridechamber."⁵⁶ Yet astonishingly, in spite of all this, their writings on such practical questions as their attitude toward marriage remain so ambiguous that various scholars have convincingly argued opposite cases. The prominent Dutch scholar Gilles Quispel insists that the Valentinians virtually *required* marriage of gnostic Christians, and that they celebrated marriage—between gnostics, at any rate—as a sacrament, embodying the divine harmonies of masculine and feminine energies in the divine being.⁵⁷ The younger American scholar Michael Williams argues, on the contrary, that Valentinian Christians, like medieval Catholic mystics, used sexual imagery only to contrast actual marriage, which they considered to be "polluted," with heavenly marriage to Christ.⁵⁸

The remarkable collection of sayings we know as the *Gospel of Philip* may offer us clues to sort out such contradictions, for its author challenged the way that most people set up moral questions in the first place. Christians then, as now, ordinarily assumed that certain

acts are good and others bad; but they furiously debated *which* acts—marriage or celibacy, for example—belong to which category. The gnostic author of the *Gospel of Philip* rejects this whole way of thinking. As this author sees it, no act in itself—and specifically neither celibacy nor marriage—is necessarily good or bad. Instead the moral significance of any act depends upon the situation, intentions, and level of consciousness of the participants. This author characterizes such terms as "good" and "bad," like other pairs of opposites, as merely mental categories that necessarily imply one another:

Light and darkness, life and death, right and left, are brothers of one another. They are inseparable. Because of this, the "good" are not good, nor the "evil" evil, nor is "life" life, nor is "death" death.⁵⁹

For "the names given to things in the world are very deceptive,"⁶⁰ especially when one mistakes the names for reality. The author traces this deception directly back to the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve first sought to gain knowledge through such deceptive categories, by partaking of the "*tree of the knowledge of good and evil*." Then the law, based on the same categories, continued the same process of deception:

The law was the tree. . . . For when [the law] said, "Eat this, do not eat that," it became the beginning of death.⁶¹

Leaders of the church who confronted such Valentinians among their congregations must have recognized themselves—and their "simpleminded" moralism—as the target of such criticisms; but they were not the only targets, for these gnostic Christians would have been equally critical of the advocates of asceticism. The *Gospel of Philip* suggests that those who say that celibacy is good err as much as those who pronounce marriage good—and those who call either bad err equally. It may be no accident, then, that not one of the extant Valentinian texts unequivocally endorses marriage over celibacy, or the opposite. The author of *Philip* implies instead that what each person should do depends upon each person's intention and level of consciousness. The same author compares the gnostic teacher to a householder who is responsible for the care of children, slaves, cattle, dogs, and pigs:

[being] a sensible person, he knew what each one should eat. . . . Compare the disciple of God; if he is a sensible man, he understands what discipleship is all about. . . . He will not be

misled by the physical appearance of anyone, but will look at the condition of each one's soul, and so speak to each one.⁶²

Yet the author of *Philipp* warns that gnostic Christians are not to think of themselves as exempt from sin:

Those who think that sinning does not apply to them are called "free" by the world. Knowledge of the truth makes such people arrogant. . . . It even gives them a sense of superiority over everyone else.⁶³

The author goes on to quote and interpret Paul's letter to the Corinthians, saying,

"Love builds up" [1 Corinthians 8:1b] . . . in fact, one who is really free through knowledge is a servant for the sake of love to those who have not yet been able to attain to the freedom of *gnosis*.⁶⁴

But how was the gnostic Christian to deal with the actual experience of evil—and, in particular, evil found within himself or herself? Orthodox Christians often attempted to prescribe rules for the whole community, but the author of *Philipp* suggests that one can deal with evil only in oneself:

As for ourselves, let each one of us dig down after the root of evil which is within one, and let one pluck it out of one's heart from the root. It will be plucked out, if we recognize it. But if we are ignorant of it, it takes root in us and produces its fruit in our heart; it masters us. . . . it is powerful because we have not recognized it.⁶⁵

The author advises, then, that each person practice self-examination and look for such potential sources of evil as envy, lust, anger, in his or her own intentions, words, and acts. What transforms one spiritually, according to the *Gospel of Phillip*, is continual self-awareness and acknowledging the evil within oneself wherever one finds it.⁶⁶ This suggests that Valentinian Christians indeed may have rejected the bishops' commands, ignored community regulations, and followed their inner guidance, insisting that moral acts are essentially private matters that every person, or at least every mature person, must deal with independently.

Such independence, as we have seen, threatened church unity and discipline. Bishop Irenaeus charged that Valentinian Christians were concerned only for their own spiritual advantage, indifferent to the church as an institution. He accused them of "having no

respect for others" (does he mean for the bishops in particular?) and for "thinking that they are better than any one else."⁶⁷

But what bothered Irenaeus even more than the gnostics' rejection of moral absolutism or their violation of church discipline was that gnostic readings of Genesis threatened the message of freedom that had made Christianity so powerfully compelling to so many converts. This debate over Genesis revealed a major disagreement among second-century Christians, a disagreement whose outcome would shape church doctrine ever after.

As we have seen, the majority of Christian converts of the first four centuries regarded the proclamation of moral freedom, grounded in Genesis 1-3, as effectively synonymous with "the gospel." As Justin interpreted Jesus' message, it celebrated not only Christian freedom from domination by sexual passion, and from such passions as greed and hatred, but also from external domination by the Roman state. Clement of Alexandria praised Christian freedom to choose even death rather than yield to the oppressive weight of Roman social custom. Bishop Methodius, writing years later in Asia Minor, envisioned the whole of human history, ever since Eden, as a progressive evolution of human freedom, which culminates in the greatest freedom of all—the life of voluntary renunciation.⁶⁸ Gregory of Nyssa spoke for the whole tradition when he said, "The soul directly reveals its royal and excellent quality in that . . . it is governed and ruled autonomously by its own will."⁶⁹

Most orthodox Christians agreed with many of their Jewish contemporaries that Adam's fatal misuse of this freedom was so momentous that his transgression brought pain, labor, and death into an originally perfect world. Yet Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Clement also agreed that Adam's transgression did not encroach upon our own individual freedom: even now, they said, every person is free to choose good or evil, just as Adam was.

These same church leaders unanimously denounced the gnostics for denying what the orthodox considered to be humanity's essential, God-given attribute, free will. For Irenaeus, the story of Adam and Eve proclaimed "the ancient law of human liberty."⁷⁰ Most other Christians also agreed with their Jewish contemporaries that the point of the creation story was that God bestowed upon every person the gift of moral freedom. Certain Christians, from Paul through Augustine, may have noted what this implied socially: that slavery is not a natural condition, as Aristotle had taught, but an artificial and sinful human invention.⁷¹ (Yet neither Paul nor August-

tine advocated abolishing slavery; instead, both, like the Stoic philosophers, urged slaves to use their moral freedom to overcome the hardships of servitude.)⁷² For Clement of Alexandria, moral freedom is our glory; that we are made in the image of God really means that we have what he calls *autexousia*, a term often translated as "free will," but, more accurately, "the power to constitute one's own being."⁷³

But gnostic Christians qualified—and some denied—this optimistic message of freedom. Certain radical gnostics ridiculed the orthodox claim that human beings have free will or, for that matter, any power to constitute their own destiny. The *Reality of the Rulers* depicted Adam, prototype of humanity, as a kind of victim, morally and physically crippled from the start. Betrayed and deceived by the forces of evil, created as a by-product of their desires and jealousies, Adam was helplessly caught within a battle of spiritual forces and could only hope that the powers above would defeat his tormentors and release their human prisoner from his cosmic confinement.

Valentinus and his followers did not go so far as to deny that human beings have free will; but they believed its role to be far more limited than orthodox Christians imagined. Human beings—or some of them, at least—may have moral freedom, they said, but human free will—even Adam's—was never so great as to bring suffering upon humanity, or to allow us to evade it altogether.⁷⁴ On the contrary, suffering is built into the structure of the universe itself. Followers of Valentinus expressed this conviction in a *precreation* myth that hinted that something else besides human sin—events far more primordial and powerful—already had cast a shadow of suffering over human existence. This was the story of Wisdom, whose "fall" occurred long before Adam's and long before he was created. As Ptolemy's disciples told the story, before the beginning of time there existed in the primal aeon only the primordial Source of all being, what they called the abyss, the depth, or primal origin, progenitor of all that was to come into being. After existing for immeasurable ages in a state of profound rest, this Source wanted other beings to know and love him; and so he brought forth from himself "the beginning of all things"⁷⁵ and projected this into his only companion, the primordial Silence, like sperm into a womb. The Silence conceived, so to speak, and brought forth a pair of emanations of divine being, the primordial Mind together with his counterpart, Truth—the first masculine, the second feminine, according to the gender of their Greek names. This pair, structured as a dynamic

relationship between masculine and feminine energies, then brought forth a second pair, Logos and Life; and they, in turn, brought forth Humanity and the Church. Each pair of complementary divine energies brought forth others until the divine being reached its "fullness." Last of all, the youngest of these pairs consisted of What-has-been-willed together with his feminine counterpart, Wisdom (Sophia). In this way the Valentinians expressed their conviction that it is wisdom to live in harmony with "what [the Father] has willed."

But Wisdom belied her name and acted foolishly. Because she longed to know the Father, she rejected her place in the scheme of things, severed her relationship with What-has-been-willed, and plunged herself into a desperate search to understand the nature of her divine Source. As Irenaeus told her story,

when she could not achieve her purpose, both because of the enormous depth and the incomprehensible nature of the Father, she stretched herself forward, and was in danger of being absorbed into His sweetness and dissolved into His absolute essence, until she encountered the Power that sustains and preserves all things, called "the Limit" . . . the power by whom, they say, she was restored and supported. Then, having with great difficulty been brought back to herself, she became convinced that the Father is incomprehensible.⁷⁶

Then the Father, wanting to spare others from suffering as Wisdom had, sent a sixteenth pair of masculine and feminine energies, Christ and the Holy Spirit, to reveal to the other aeons that although none but the primal Mind could possibly comprehend God, all other beings, too, come from him, "in whom we live and move and have our being," and are to rejoice and celebrate together in this paradoxical knowledge.

When Wisdom was restored to her place within the divine being, she left her sufferings behind her. Followers of Ptolemy said that these sufferings—the fear, confusion, grief, and ignorance she suffered in her search for God—had to be excluded from the divine being. Yet Wisdom joined herself with Christ to recover the residual spiritual energy left in these experiences. Together, she and Christ set out to transform those sufferings: they turned her fear into water, her grief into air, her confusion into earth, and her ignorance into fire. Then they used these elements of suffering to create the present universe.⁷⁷

The orthodox insisted that Adam and Eve inherited a perfect

world and brought upon it, through their misuse of free will, all the harms known to humankind. But the Valentinians believed that human beings, though they undoubtedly received a measure of freedom to make moral choices, are not free—nor ever were—to avoid suffering, from which the very universe itself was made. The orthodox church offered “good news” of human power and freedom; but the Valentinians, more like Buddhists, saw acceptance of suffering as the first prerequisite for spiritual understanding.

We may infer from the sophistication of many of their writings that Valentinian Christians tended to be people of education and privilege. If so, they may have been able to take their personal freedom for granted, as many people in the Roman Empire could not. And we may also infer that they knew from experience the limits of human freedom. For their myths suggest that even those who are gifted with freedom—moral and intellectual, of course, as well as social or political—must remain acutely aware of the limits of freedom and of the ways in which even the freest of human beings remain dependent upon what is beyond human power. The gnostics' vision was a dark one, pervaded by suffering; yet it was, nevertheless, a religious vision, in which ultimately everything depended upon what they called the will of the Father, that mysterious Source, the “abyss,”⁷⁸ who, according to the *Gospel of Truth*, “discovered [his own] in himself, and they discovered him in themselves, the incomprehensible, inconceivable one, the Father, the perfect one, the one who made the all.”⁷⁹

But orthodox Christians of the second and third centuries, from Justin and Irenaeus through Tertullian, Clement, and the brilliant teacher Origen, stood unanimously against the gnostics in proclaiming the Christian gospel as a message of freedom—moral freedom, freedom of the will, expressed in Adam's original freedom to choose a life free of pain and suffering. In the name of that moral freedom, Justin and Origen, among many others, chose to endure torture and death. Still others, in the name of that freedom, renounced all that the majority of their contemporaries believed made life worthwhile—home, family, wealth, and public reputation. So long as Christianity remained a persecuted movement, the majority of Christian preachers proclaimed the plain and powerful message of freedom that appealed to so many people within the Roman world—perhaps especially to those who had never experienced freedom in their everyday lives.

Finally, in the name of that freedom, as the Valentinians must

have noted with irony, the orthodox suppressed gnostic teaching, and rejected their subtle reflections on the scope and limits of human choice. For as the churches, scattered throughout the world, became increasingly institutionalized, their leaders attempted to strengthen them against the pressures of persecution by joining them into a common doctrine and discipline. Irenaeus boasted that each group, however vulnerable on its own, belonged to a movement that was *universal*, or, in the Greek term, “catholic.”⁸⁰ To the bishops, nonconformists and dissidents, even when they seemed to be sincere Christians intent on striking out on their own spiritual paths, were dangerous to the movement. The bishops may have been right; as Tertullian said, gnostic Christians agreed only to disagree. While certain groups demanded celibacy of all members, others may have encouraged people to decide these matters privately. Furthermore, some gnostics ridiculed those who died as martyrs, while others advocated martyrdom; a third group, like the Valentinians, urged people to accept martyrdom only if their sole alternative was to deny their faith in Christ. Equally divisive were the gnostic Christians who revered Eve, or the divine spirit they took her to represent, and accorded to their women members respect and participation increasingly denied to women in the institutionalized churches of the second and third centuries.⁸¹

Above all, their opponents charged that these dissident Christians challenged what the majority regarded as the fundamental theme of the Christian gospel: that human beings, created by God and endowed with moral freedom, received in baptism the power to live transformed lives, the power to overcome evil and death. Let us turn next to see how some of the boldest of these orthodox Christians actually put the “angelic life” into practice.