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# A CULT-MYSTERY IN *THE GOSPEL OF PHILIP*

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## I. Introduction to the Problem

THE Nag-Hammadi Scriptures, now fully translated and available, afford fertile material for research on the interfaces of Gnosticism and mystery religions. One of these writings, *Gos. Phil.*, poses a considerable challenge to current interpretations of Gnosticism. Therefore the text might be investigated in terms of other possible religious affiliations.

The authors of the "Final Document" of the Messina Colloquy on Gnosticism write that Gnosticism starts "methodologically with a certain group of systems in the second century A.D."<sup>1</sup> "Gnosis" is defined here as "knowledge of the divine mysteries reserved for an elite."<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the "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 to be awakened and actualized)."<sup>3</sup> It seems that this divine tripartition could serve as a clue to further discoveries, but the authors do not follow this lead.

Wrestling with the problem of defining mystery religions, P. Lambrechts suggests two criteria: limited membership and secrecy.<sup>4</sup> To talk

<sup>1</sup>*Le Origini dello Gnosticismo. Colloquio di Messina 13-18 Aprile 1966. Testi e Discussioni.* (Studies in the History of Religions, Suppl. *Numen* 12; ed. U. Bianchi; Leiden: Brill 1967) XXVI. The authors of the "Final Document" are G. Widengren, C. Colpe, U. Bianchi, H. Jonas, and J. Daniélou.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.* The volume *Gnosis and Gnosticism. Papers read at the Seventh International Conference on Patristic Studies (Oxford, September 8th-13th, 1975)* (ed. M. Krause; Leiden: Brill, 1977) loyally keeps up this distinction. No justification is offered as to why the papers are separated into three categories: Gnosis, Gnosticism, Gnosis and Gnosticism. The labels seem utterly arbitrarily chosen and bear little relevance to the content of the papers.

<sup>3</sup>*Le Origini*, XXVII.

<sup>4</sup>P. Lambrechts, "Over Griekse en Oosterse mysteriegodsdiensten; de zgn. Adonismysteries," *Mededeelingen van de Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Wetenschappen*.

about "public mysteries" is a contradiction in terms, he contends.<sup>5</sup> Lambrechts also deems it necessary to differentiate between literary mysteries and cult-mysteries,<sup>6</sup> the latter being characterized by "the material fact of initiation and secret ritual."<sup>7</sup> Drawing this distinction, however, Lambrechts excludes ritual from the former type, the literary mystery.<sup>8</sup> This would agree with the familiar view which separates cultic action and theoretical knowledge, a view found in most traditional studies of late antiquity religions.

The "Final Document's" definition of *gnosis* might be amplified by Lambrechts's general characterization of mystery religions. Moreover, the "Document's" identification of *knower—known—means of knowledge* in *gnosis* has a widened significance and potential when seen in conjunction with Lambrecht's definition of cult-mystery as "material fact of initiation and secret ritual." Here one must ask, what are the practical ("material") aspects of the means of knowledge in *gnosis*? I suggest that *Gos. Phil.* provides an instructive case in a consideration of Gnostic practice.

## II. *The Secret Sacrament of the Bridal-Chamber*

The dualism presented in *Gos. Phil.* is, essentially, only an apparent one; it can, the text instructs, be overcome by means of right insight and correct action. Great stress is placed on the "overt" vs. the "hidden": visibility and openness characterize appearances in this material world while, in contrast the "other aeon" remains, for most people occluded and unavailable.

While in this material world, the knowledgeable ones are able to gain access to the hidden things of aeon-quality. An example: the Father gave the Son a hidden name. "Jesus" is the hidden, "Christ" the revealed name.<sup>9</sup> "Those who have his name, know it, but they do not speak it. But those who do not have it, do not know it. But truth brought names into existence in the world because it is not possible to teach it without names."<sup>10</sup>

Here one notices, first, that those who have the name keep it secret. Second, that names and epithets are necessary vehicles for the truth. Not repudiated, they are required teaching-devices. Further on

*Letteren en Schone Kunsten van Belgie, Klasse der Letteren*, 16/1 (Brussel: Paleis der Academien, 1954) 3, 8.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 6-8.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 4-5. (Here Lambrechts supports himself on Festugiere's theory.)

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 11 (my emphases).

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 5.

<sup>9</sup>*The Gospel of Philip in The Nag Hammadi Library* (ed. J. M. Robinson; San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977) (131-51), p. 134 (56).

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 133 (

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 134 (

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one reads, "Truth, which existed since the beginning, is sown everywhere. And many see it as it is sown, but few are they who see it as it is reaped."<sup>11</sup> Spread out under various names, truth in its heavenly essence is reserved for those present at the harvest, or, perhaps, for those who perform the harvesting.

*Gos. Phil.* states that one must acquire divinity while still on earth: "Those who say that the Lord died first and (then) rose up, are in error, for he rose up first and (then) died. If one does not first attain the resurrection will he not die? As God lives, he would be (already) dead."<sup>12</sup> Elaborations of this message emphasize that it is necessary for the believers to rise in the flesh.<sup>13</sup>

The idea of "visibility" vs. "hiddenness" shows up again, "There are some things hidden through those visible."<sup>14</sup> This passage might be compared to the following:

It is not possible for anyone to see anything of the things that actually exist unless he becomes like them. This is not the way with man in the world: he sees the sun without being a sun; and he sees the heaven and the earth and all other things, but he is not these things. This is quite in keeping with the truth. But you (sing.) saw something of that place and you became those things. You saw the Spirit, you became spirit. You saw Christ, you became Christ. You saw (the Father, you) shall become Father. So (in this place), you see everything and (do) not (see) yourself, but (in that place) you do see yourself— and what you see you shall (become).<sup>15</sup>

Some reflection is necessary at this point. "The like influences the like"; this rule rhymes well with mystery philosophical ideas. But the passage claiming that things are "hidden through those visible" reveals thought related to the assertion that the truth is represented by many names. The next step, however, the acquisition of divine identity, seems to require that the distinction between subject and object be abolished. So, there may, in effect, be no difference between the receiver and the perceived, simply because the usual separation of the world and the aeon no longer holds. If identification with the divine is thus obtained, while the believer remains in the flesh, this identification enables him to behave as if he had already left this world. To turn, for a moment, to the formula of identity, *knower—known—ans of knowledge*, one could argue that the two former elements are now merged. What, then, about the third step?

*Gos. Phil.* values the sacrament of the bridal-chamber above all others; it is the supreme secret. The marriage of this world is a

bid., 133 (55).

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"mirrored bridal-chamber."<sup>16</sup> An image, this bridal-chamber "consists of a (defilement of) the form."<sup>17</sup> A fuller explanation is that,

Truth did not come into the world naked, but it came in types and images. One will not receive truth in any other way. There is a rebirth and an image of rebirth. It is certainly necessary that they should be born again through the image. What is the resurrection? The image must rise again through the image. The <bridegroom> and the image must enter through the image into the truth: this is the restoration. It is appropriate that those who do have it not only acquire the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, but that they have acquired it on their own.<sup>18</sup>

The resurrection comes about in the restoration of the unity of the sexes through the sacrament of the bridal-chamber. It is telling that the prerequisite for this sacrament is the *image*, i.e., the union of marriage. The "mirrored bridal-chamber" mentioned above is identical with worldly marriage, and, thus, earthly union seems to mark the first, *required* step before one may enter into the "spiritual" union.

Lest this statement seem too strong, one must have more of the context for the passage about the "mirrored bridal-chamber:"

As for the unclean (spirits), there are males among them and there are females. The males are they which unite with the souls which inhabit a female form, but the females are they which are mingled with those in a male form, through one who was disobedient. And none shall be able to escape them, since they detain him if he does not receive a male power or a female power—the bridegroom and the bride. *One receives them from the mirrored bridal-chamber.*<sup>19</sup>

Only by acquiring male or female power, respectively, may the female or male human being delude the evil powers. "Spiritual" power asserts itself exclusively in earthly marriage. The passage, "It is certainly necessary that they should be born again through the image,"<sup>20</sup> now emerges with added significance. To obtain the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit *on one's own*, marks the transition from being a Christian to becoming Christ.<sup>21</sup> Resurrection cannot come about by proxy. Correctly performed, the bridal-chamber sacrament assures full identity with the divine entity.

A special group of believers are those who pray in Jerusalem while awaiting the kingdom. According to *Gos. Phil.* these are familiar with the bridal-chamber, and "the Holy of the Holies" is identified with this sacrament.<sup>22</sup> The gospel further delves into esoteric interpretations of

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 139 (65).

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 140 (67).

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 139 (65) (my emphases).

<sup>20</sup>See n. 16.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid. Christ came to repair the division of the sexes, i.e., of Adam and Eve; 142 (70).

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 142 (69).

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marriage in this world and in the other realm, "Whereas in this world the union is one of husband and wife—a case of strength complemented by weakness—in the aeon the form of the union is different, although we refer to them by the same names."<sup>23</sup> The worldly name hides the real mystery from the curiosity of outsiders. A marriage of the world may have veiled qualities, but the undefiled marriage is a "true mystery."<sup>24</sup> Further, "No one shall be able to see the bridegroom with the bride unless (one become) one."<sup>25</sup>

Even if the mystery belongs to the day and to the light,<sup>26</sup> it still remains hidden.<sup>27</sup> This cryptic utterance makes sense only if one understands it from the initiate's viewpoint. The knowledgeable ones have transformed themselves and they no longer belong in this world but in the aeon where everything is revealed. They enter the aeon "by means of lowly types and forms of weakness."<sup>28</sup> Finally,

If anyone becomes a son of the bridal-chamber, he will receive the light. If anyone does not receive it while he is in these places, he will not be able to receive it in the other place. He who will receive that light will not be seen, nor can he be detained. And none shall be able to torment a person like this even while he dwells in the world. And again when he leaves the world he has already received the truth in the images. The world has become the aeon, for the aeon is fullness for him. This is the way it is: it is revealed to him alone, not hidden in the darkness and the night, but hidden in a perfect day and a holy light.<sup>29</sup>

The third element, the *means of knowledge*, has now become more visible. Going through the "lowly and weak" image, the earthly marriage, the believers acquire the pure union, the true, sacramental bridal-chamber. The task demands practical application; *gnosis* is linked with a secret initiation-ritual closed to outsiders. The gospel's own insistent claim to the effect that types and names are needed to reach salvation, ought to be taken literally. Only through cultic means may the triple identification occur between *knower—known—means of knowledge*. Practice alone annuls the divisions of the two, seemingly opposed, worlds. Of course, in this process, any distinct identity for each of the three entities is abolished. This result makes matters complicated for scholars who, traditionally, need to keep subject and object apart. In the true bridal-chamber, though, divisions based on this-worldly grammars and laws of perception no longer hold any claim.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 145 (76).

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 149 (82).

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 150 (84).

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 150 (85).

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 151 (86).

### III. Restricted Membership

*Gos. Phil.* takes care to distinguish the true believers from mere pretenders. Examining the text, one discerns its esoteric bent as such distinctions are made. In one of the gospel's first paragraphs one finds,

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 he 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. A Gentile does not die, for he has never lived in order that he may die. He who has believed in the truth has found life, and this one is in danger of dying, for he is alive. Ever since Christ came the world is created, the cities adorned, the dead carried out. When we were Hebrews we were orphans and had only our mother, but when we became Christians we had both father and mother.<sup>30</sup>

Since the Gentiles can never become Hebrews they remain excluded from the mystery, the gospel might logically conclude. Here, the criterion of restricted membership turns up. It is further amplified: "A bridal-chamber is not for the animals, nor is it for the slaves, nor for the defiled women; but it is for the free men and virgins."<sup>31</sup>

Another passage maintains that names used in the world are deceptive.<sup>32</sup> The gospel distinguishes between those who merely hear, as opposed to those who possess insight beyond names and epithets. Understanding by hearing alone is insufficient. Thus, condemnation is due to those who, "borrowing" the name of Christ, fail to receive the Holy Spirit as a gift in baptism.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, people who profess faithfulness so that they may be guarded against attacks by unclean spirits, merely show that they do not harbor the Holy Spirit.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore the gospel claims that, "Those who think that sinning does not apply to them are called free by the world. Knowledge of the truth merely makes such people arrogant, which is what the words 'it makes them free' mean."<sup>35</sup> Freedom in the aeon has nothing to do with this worldly freedom.

Throughout, tenets of secrecy and exclusivity prevail; Lambrechts's criteria for mystery religions have been met.<sup>36</sup> But the gospel also seems to insist on the identity of *knower—known—means of knowledge*,

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 132 (52).

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 141 (69). "Animals" probably refers to people governed by their lower instincts.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 132-33 (53).

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 139 (64); see n. 19.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 139 (65-66).

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 146 (77).

<sup>36</sup>See n. 4.

the definition of "gnosis in Gnosticism," according to the Messina document. The text presents further puzzles, as well, precisely in its insistence on separating the apparent from the hidden, the form from the formless, the image from the angel. However, acquisition of salvific knowledge depends on nothing less than the collapse of those distinctions. Evidence for an ultimate rejection of a division between the human and the divine can be seen in this passage: "God is a man-eater. For this reason men are (sacrificed) to him. Before men were sacrificed animals were being sacrificed, since those to whom they were sacrificed were not gods."<sup>37</sup> God consumes man because man is essentially divine, i.e., fit food for God. In a related vein:

(If he) [i.e., Adam] ate the (fruit of the other tree, that is to say, the) fruit of the (tree of life, the one which) bears men, (then the gods would) worship man. (For in the beginning) God created man. (But now men) create God. That is the way it is in the world—men make gods and worship their creation. It would be fitting for the gods to worship men!<sup>38</sup>

The task for the believer is to create the aeon in this material world. Cultic means are required to achieve this: the bridal-chamber restores the unity of the sexes and heals the break between the human and the divine. *Gos. Phil.*'s confident tone might surprise investigators who are apt to expect gloomy descriptions of the sad lot of the fallen soul on this earth. How, then, may one fully comprehend this sacrament-centered gospel, so permeated with airs of superiority and stubborn convictions of full salvation in the earthly world?

#### IV. Previous Interpretations

In an early article on *Gos. Phil.*, E. Segelberg asks, regarding the bridal-chamber, "What exterior form can have expressed this high mystery? It can hardly have been anything carnal. *Gos. Phil.* has a fairly well-defined encratic character."<sup>39</sup> This view agrees with that of H. M. Schencke, who maintains that the gospel rejects marriage as a defilement.<sup>40</sup> Another early commentator, R. McL. Wilson, dealing with a rather incomplete translation of the gospel, shows extreme caution with regard to the bridal-chamber. He notices that the mirrored bridal-chamber is the earthly counterpart to the final union in the Pleroma, but he avoids any evaluation of the earthly marriage as the image of the upper one.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 138 (62-63).

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 143 (71-72).

<sup>39</sup>E. Segelberg, "The Coptic-Gnostic Gospel according to Philip and Its Sacramental System," *Numen* 7 (1960) 189-200, see p. 198.

<sup>40</sup>H. M. Schencke, "'Das Evangelium nach Philippus'. Ein Evangelium der Valentinianer aus dem Funde von Nag Hammadi," *TLZ* 84 (1959) 1-26, see p. 5.

<sup>41</sup>R. McL. Wilson, *The Gospel of Philip* (New York: Harper and Row 1967) 171



F. M. Grant offers a bolder interpretation. As he sees it, the bridal-chamber carries both actual and eschatological significance.<sup>42</sup> Therefore one cannot assert that there is any real difference between the human and the spiritual marriage. Salvation might indeed be an equivalent to marriage, the latter then being the archetype of salvation.<sup>43</sup>

More recently, H. G. Gaffron values *Gos. Phil.* above what he calls "vulgar" Gnostic sources like *Pistis Sophia*, *The Books of Jeu*, *Ap. John* and others.<sup>44</sup> Perversely, Gaffron's understanding of Gnostic sacramental values defeats his own argument: "When sacraments are necessary for the process of salvation, the step is not too great towards tying the salvation exclusively to the sacraments and to increase their singularity and secret character beyond limits."<sup>45</sup> If *Gos. Phil.* demonstrates a great concern with sacraments, how can the scholar's high estimation of the gospel hold? He calls the bridal-chamber a cultic-sacramental act, a *mysterion*, "mystery."<sup>46</sup> Is this a deplorable concession for him? In order to get out of his embarrassing predicament Gaffron decides that the bridal-chamber is a sacrament given at the moment near death.<sup>47</sup>

J. E. Ménard offers a more carefully argued interpretation. He thinks that Gaffron reduces the eschatological dimension of the bridal-chamber, and says that the Gnostic and the image must be united here on earth before death. Stressing the actualized aspect of salvation, Ménard warns that if one overlooks this part, "one ignores the real value of the sacrament as well as the image."<sup>48</sup>

"The symbols and the images are sacraments," Ménard writes,<sup>49</sup> implying that the truth can be rendered accessible solely through the images. To receive a sacrament means that one has obtained the truth present in the symbols. Ménard observes the gospel's strong use of language, for example, in stressing the verb *ἔσθαι*, "it is necessary": one *must* receive the bridal-chamber here in order to obtain it in the beyond.<sup>50</sup> There is a double significance to the image, according to Ménard. First, it is an image of the angel, i.e., the Gnostic himself. Second, it is a synonym for the *typos*, "type," the mode of revelation

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<sup>42</sup>F. M. Grant, "The Mystery of Marriage in the Gospel of Philip," *VigChrist* 11 (1961) 129-40, see p. 136.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>44</sup>H. G. Gaffron, *Studien zum koptischen Philippusevangelium unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Sakramente* (Theol. Diss., Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms University, Bonn, 1969) 75, 286.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>48</sup>J. E. Ménard, "'L'Évangile selon Philippe' et 'L'Exégèse de l'Âme,'" *Les Textes de Nag Hammadi* (ed. J. E. Ménard; Leiden: Brill, 1975) 56-67, see 64.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 63.

of the hidden.<sup>51</sup> If the Gnostic has been united with his angel, duality exists no more. In addition, the manner in which the revealed shows itself is commensurate with its heavenly reality. Ménard is on the track of some new lines of interpretations here, because the mode or the manner of revelation says something about possible practical appropriation.

In her studies on Valentinian Gnosis, E. Pagels makes several observations pertinent to the issue at hand. In her first book she says, "The Valentinians, then, far from intending to do away with 'images', understand 'images' and symbols as the *only* means of pointing to or signifying a reality which is essentially ineffable."<sup>52</sup> The pneumatics recognize the symbolic significance inherent in psychic worship.<sup>53</sup> This observation might suitably illuminate the bridal-chamber mystery in *Gos. Phil.*, for the "pneumatic can receive the 'perfection' of the 'marriage' already in the cosmos. . . ."<sup>54</sup>

Pagels nicely exposes Irenaeus's tendentious interpretations of Valentinian eschatology as represented by Theodotus:<sup>55</sup> the psychics are not excluded from salvation *qua* psychics, but the psychic element, common to all, must yield to the pneumatic one. So the question is not one of "Gnostic nature," or lack of it, but it concerns the rising from the psychic to the pneumatic level. Those who remain on the psychic stage, according to Valentinian theory, can be compared to the mere "borrowers" of Christ's name.<sup>56</sup> *Gos. Phil.* seems, then, to take a more rigorous stand, favoring the elitist Gnostics. Nevertheless, the idea of the necessity of advancing from the first to the second stage is discernible in *Gos. Phil.* precisely in its strong emphasis on the prerequisite of images for the attainment of truth.

K. Koschorke, noticing e.g., that *sarx*, "flesh," is positively evaluated, perceives the non-dualistic attitude of *Gos. Phil.*<sup>57</sup> However, even as he recognizes the necessity of images,<sup>58</sup> he has, on a previous page,

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 61.

<sup>52</sup>E. Pagels, *The Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis: Heracleon's Commentary on John* (SBLMS 17; Nashville: Abingdon, 1973) 119.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 121.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 95; cf. p. 75. It is worth noticing that *Gos. Phil.* does not use the terminology "pneumatics" vs. "psychics", but "Hebrews" vs. "Christians." On p. 95 Pagels continues: "the psychics who are saved must await their perfection as an eschatological event." See also, Pagels's "The Valentinian Claim to Esoteric Exegesis of Romans as Basis for Anthropological Theory," *VigChrist* 26 (1972) 241-58.

<sup>55</sup>E. Pagels, "Conflicting Versions of Valentinian Eschatology: Irenaeus' Treatise vs. the Excerpts from Theodotus," *HTR* 67 (1974) 37-53.

<sup>56</sup>See section III above.

<sup>57</sup>K. Koschorke, "Die 'Namen' im Philippusevangelium. Beobachtungen zur Auseinandersetzung zwischen Gnostischem und kirchlichem Christentum," *ZNW* 64 (1973) 307-322; see esp. p. 313.

<sup>58</sup>K. Koschorke, *Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum. Unter*

exhibited the all too common disdain for Gnostic ritual.<sup>59</sup> That means that Gnosticism which relies on cults and sacraments is *no longer* Gnosticism.<sup>60</sup> Sadly, Koschorke supports Gaffron's treatment of Gnostic ritual by characterizing the latter's analysis as "meisterhaft."<sup>61</sup> The gift received in the sacrament of the bridal-chamber can be lost, according to Koschorke, and this then brings about a feeling of "Heilsunsicherheit."<sup>62</sup> But since the crucial point of the sacrament is its transformative power, I would rather conclude that confirmed Gnostics would not find themselves in such a danger. Therefore, with a view to Pagels's work, one might say that only those stuck on the psychic level would have reason to doubt their salvation.

Returning, now, to the issue of mystery religions, one may consult H. M. Schencke's argument for a distinction between Gnosticism and mystery religions. The suggestion, which seems to have acquired the status of an axiom, is that a Gnostic becomes, in the other realm, something he essentially already is. On the other hand, the mystery-devotee goes through a genuine transformation; he becomes something entirely new.<sup>63</sup>

This claim, supported by e.g., K. W. Tröger,<sup>64</sup> needs to be scrutinized in view of the investigation so far. First, the assertion rests on a definition of Gnosticism that seems too theoretical. According to this understanding, the Gnostic already possesses divine nature and only needs to be philosophically re-awakened. The mystic, on the other hand, supposedly requires outward means toward divinization, and his transformation is a total one.

This type of reasoning lacks consideration of what the identity *knower—known—means of knowledge* essentially encodes. The subject is the *knower*, the object the *known*, and the *means of knowledge* are the necessary practical activities accompanying the "theoretical" knowledge. Schencke's scheme carries with it a notion of automatic salvation, i.e., by so-called "Gnostic nature." But if one stresses, instead, the practice, matters appear in a different light. One could then interpret *Gos. Phil.* as saying that by emphasizing the sacramental act, the celebrants cling to neither individual personality nor ultimate goal, but instead, concentrate on the *means* toward achieving salvation. *Gos. Phil.* challenges the

besonderer Berücksichtigung der Nag-Hammadi-Traktate "Apokalypse des Petrus" (NHC VII, 3) und "Testimonium Veritatis" (NHC IX, 3) (Leiden: Brill, 1973) 187-88.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 143.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., n. 66, referring to *Pistis Sophia* (my emphases).

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., n. 65 (see . 44, above, for reference to Gaffron's work).

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 227 n. 21, and "Die 'Namen' . . ." 321.

<sup>63</sup>H. M. Schencke, "Hauptprobleme der Gnosis. Gesichtspunkte zu einer neuen Darstellung des Gesamtphänomens," *Kairos* 7 (1965) 114-23; see esp. p. 117.

<sup>64</sup>K. W. Tröger, *Mysterienglaube und Gnosis in Corpus Hermeticum XIII* (TU 110; Berlin: Akademie, 1971) 169-70 n. 3.

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long-lived definition of Gnosticism which rests solely on the individual's theoretical insight.

E. von Ivanka offers the following criticism of Schencke's understanding: "The human being surely 'becomes' something different in the mystery religions. . . . But that which makes his transformation possible, is precisely the *knowledge* about his real, own self. . . . The Gnostic, too, becomes something else, . . . insofar as he wakes up to his own, true self . . . and returns to the place that he was never really removed from . . ."<sup>65</sup>

Von Ivanka's stress on knowledge is both instructive and obstructive. For it conjures up, again, theoretical knowledge alone as sufficing. I would suggest that one might as well turn the statements around, saying that neither the Gnostic nor the mystic become different. This is because the correct cultic application of the knowledge abolishes any distinctions between this world and the beyond. By practice the knowledgeable one simply turns earth into heaven.

C. A. Keller, referring to *Gos. Phil.*, warns again reliance on theoretical aspects:

Since the world is composed of error and ignorance, language too is fraught with the same weaknesses. All language, including the religious and even the Gnostic language belongs to the world and therefore flows finally into error. Attempting to give an exhaustive definition of the Gnostic attitude to the world, one ought to particularly pay attention to this sharp statement: language alone cannot convey the Gnostic experience.<sup>66</sup>

By relinquishing language, the proponents of *Gos. Phil.* have deftly evaded the dualistic view cherished by many scholars of Gnosticism.

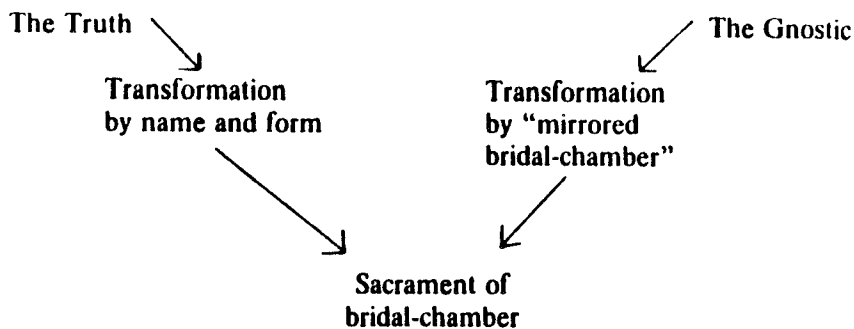
#### V. Conclusion

The full-fledged Gnostic in *Gos. Phil.* transforms himself into a unified, resurrected being in the bridal-chamber. The latter marks the merging of image and angel. Also, the heavenly truth must be transformed: name and form alone make the truth accessible. Transformation is two-fold, then, so that both earthly and heavenly entities

<sup>65</sup>E. von Ivanka, "Religion, Philosophie und Gnosis: Grenzfall und Pseudomorphosen in der Spätantike," *Le Origini dello Gnosticismo*, 317-22, see pp. 317-18.

<sup>66</sup>C.A. Keller, "Das Problem des Bösen in Apokalyptik und Gnostik," *Gnosis and Gnosticism*, 70-90, see esp. p. 86.

show themselves in a compatible manner. These matters are depicted in the chart below:



Parallels of transformation take place for both the Truth and the Gnostic. The distance between the two is bridged by being turned into communicating transformations so that the Gnostic can meet with the Truth in the ritual action of the sacrament. Far from being negatively evaluated, the Truth's change is necessary; this is the only way it can become evident. In the same vein, the Gnostic's transformation into a divine entity marks no blasphemous overconfidence, but is a prerequisite for salvation *here* as well as in the other realm.

The mystery-cult character of the message in *Gos. Phil.* now starts to emerge. Returning to Lambrechts's definitions, one senses that the material fact of the secret initiation ritual demands recognition in a measure unanticipated by most traditional research in Gnosticism. However, since Lambrechts has already placed Gnosticism in the literary category,<sup>67</sup> it is necessary to take issue with his view at this point. Initially, it would seem meritorious to have distinguished the literary mystery from the cult-mystery, but now Lambrechts appears as yet another proponent for the hardly bridgeable division of cult and thought. Only the cult-mysteries are "genuine mysteries"<sup>68</sup> for Lambrechts, since these embody religious ritual. Lambrechts's methodological assumption marks only a first step, then, which still contains value judgments (e.g., "genuine") inherent in theories such as his. For *Gos. Phil.* can, in fact, make sense as a cult-mystery, *even* as the gospel stays within the broad category of Gnosticism.

The bridal-chamber, a method or practice, designed to convey the divine aeon onto the concrete environment, creates the conditions for salvation in the present. Refusing to see mere lamentable degeneration in the sacramental process, one may, *contra* Gaffron, gain some insight

<sup>67</sup>Lambrechts, "Over Griekse en Oosterse," 5.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, 4-5.

into positively evaluated practice in Gnostic as well as in mystery religions. *Gos. Phil.*, fully confident in the efficacy of the image, the "mirrored" bridal-chamber, asserts a more optimistic view of world and man than one generally associates with Gnostic systems. The Creation, as such, might have originated, and persists still, in misunderstanding and ignorance. Nevertheless, true believers know how to use the vehicles of this world in order to transcend it. This transcendence implies, essentially, a collapse of a dualistic world-view.

It is high time to take into account cultic elements in definitions of Gnosticism. Excessive attention has been paid to the items, *knower* and *known*, but not enough to the significance of the *means of knowledge*. This last element offers an opportunity to relate Gnosticism to the mystery religions. Avoiding old traps bearing designations like "purely theoretical knowledge," "salvation by pneumatic nature," etc., the student of these religions needs to wrestle with definitions like those presented by Lambrechts. Far from representing any dry literary mystery,<sup>69</sup> *Gos. Phil.* concentrates on the salvific value of symbolic action. An exotic and elitist interpretation of Christianity, the gospel testifies to what one might tentatively call a "Gnostic mystery-cult."

Finally, I would challenge the translator W. W. Isenberg's description of the bridal-chamber in his introduction to the gospel. He says that in the reunion, "a person receives a foretaste and assurance of the ultimate union with an angelic, heavenly counterpart."<sup>70</sup> On the basis of the present interpretations, I would rather conclude that the celebrant obtains not just an appetizer, but the full course.

<sup>69</sup>U. Früchtel, in her work *Die kosmologischen Vorstellungen bei Philo von Alexandrien* (Leiden: Brill, 1968), calls Philo's philosophy a "Schreibtischmysterium" (p. 112). This designation would rhyme well with Lambrechts's "literary mystery."

<sup>70</sup>*Gos. Phil.*, 131.