

RITUAL IN THE CHENOBOSKION GOSPEL OF PHILIP

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The discovery of a "Gospel According to Philip" created a stir among scholars. They were already familiar with a gospel by that name mentioned by Epiphanius¹ as well as one implied in the second century writing called *Pistis Sophia*.² However, neither the supposed citation found in Epiphanius, nor the expected contents suggested by *Pistis Sophia* occur in the present Gospel of Philip.³ This gospel found in Chenoboskion represents an entirely "unknown gospel."⁴

Discovered in 1945 or 1946, the gospel is clearly associated with the already well-known Gospels of Truth and Thomas. The Gospel of Philip displays a literary style which is both similar to and different from these gospels. It is not presented in the long commentary style of the Gospel of Truth, nor is it a string of Logia attributed to Jesus as in the Gospel of Thomas. It is similar to the Gospel of Thomas in that many citations and allusions to the New Testament are found; and it is similar to the Gospel of Truth in that lengthy theological speculation is found. The citations and allusions of Philip relate generally to Matthew and John, but never to Mark. This is most likely the case because the Gospel of Mark was never popular enough to be translated into any Coptic dialect until the fourth century.⁵

The Gospel of Philip is written in the Coptic language, the acutely Hellenized form of the classical Egyptian Demotic. Further, it is written in the Sahidic dialect, with strong sub-Achmimic influences.⁶ The New Testament text in the Southern Dialect is a more important witness to the Greek text than is the Boharid, and for that matter than most of the extant Greek texts. Scholars agree that the Sahidic New Testament is an earlier witness than the most important Greek manuscripts.⁷ Hence, the Gospel of Philip is important because it is an early witness to the nature of the Sahidic New Testament.

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¹Epiphanius, *Panarion*, XXVI, 13. Ed. by J. P. Migne. Vol. 41, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graece* (Paris: 1863).

²Ed. by George Horner (London: SPCK, 1924).

³See H.-Ch. Puech, "Gnostic Gospels and Related Material" in Edgar Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, Ed. by Wilhelm Schneemelcher, English trans. ed. by R.Mc.L. Wilson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), p. 277.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵Arthur Vööbus, *Early Version of the New Testament*, Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile (Stockholm: 1954), p. 223.

⁶Walter Till, *Das Evangelium nach Philippus* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1963), p. 5.

⁷Vööbus, *Early Version of the New Testament*, p. 239.

Relationship of the Gospel of Philip to other early Christian literature is clear in a large number of places. It has already been mentioned that there are a number of allusions to and citations of New Testament material. There are relationships also to the *Excerpta ex Theodoto*, writings of the Apostolic Fathers⁸ and early Christian apologists like Justin and Irenaeus.⁹

The importance of the Gospel of Philip, of course, depends upon a certain date for the writing. Calligraphy indicates that the Coptic text was written in the early fourth century.¹⁰ But all indications point to an underlying Greek text, which must be dated in the second century. Translation modes and fluidity in expression of the New Testament passages indicate that the Gospel was being translated from Greek at the same time as the New Testament was undergoing a similar process. This period was the second century.

There are also other considerations for proposing a second century date. Transmission formulas found in several places in the Gospel indicate not only an interest in the proper "apostolic succession" in the transmission of tradition, but also serve as natural dating devices. For example, Logion 47 (110,6-7) states: "The apostles who were before us called (him) thus." In Logion 95 (122,16-18) another transmission formula is used: "For the Father anointed the Son, and the Son anointed us." In Justin's *I Apology* a similar phenomenon is noted: "For the apostles in the memoirs composed by them, which are called the Gospels, have thus delivered to us what was enjoined to them." And, in I Clement XLII:1,2 another similar transmission formula is found: "The Apostles have preached the Gospel to us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ (has done so) from God." These sayings provide adequate information for the suggestion that a period of time has lapsed, and the similarity to Justin's usage of such devices indicates that the Gospel of Philip is not a great deal later.

Among other importances of a document of this date are the following: 1) importance of the Gospel of Philip as an early witness to the Greek text of the New Testament; 2) importance in reconstructing the history of the early Christian community; 3) historical importance of the rites used.

THE RITES IN THE GOSPEL OF PHILIP

"Rite" has been chosen to designate the activities in the Gospel of Philip rather than "Sacrament," which is used by both Ménard and

⁸R. Mc. L. Wilson, *The Gospel of Philip* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), pp. 3, 4.

⁹W. J. Stroud, *The Problem of Dating the Chenoboskion Gospel of Philip*. Unpublished ThD dissertation (Denver: The Iliff School of Theology, 1970), Chapter IV, Part 2 *et passim*.

¹⁰W. C. Till, "Die Edition der Koptisch Gnostischen Schriften," Ch. 11 in W. C. van Unnik, *Evangelien aus dem Nilsand* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Heinrich Scheffler, 1960), p. 156.

Segelberg.¹¹ This choice is important because the activities are not specifically discussed within a theological context. One clue to the meaning of these rites is their identification with the word "mystery", which is used in both sacramental and pre-sacramental contexts. The word *mysterion* is found to occur eight times in the Gospel of Philip.

Most frequently it is used in connection with what appears to be the highest rite: the Bridal Chamber. In 134,1 the "mysteries" of the Bridal Chamber are "perfected in the day and in the light." In 112,31 the mystery of marriage is claimed a great one. This saying is related to 130,2 and 6 which describe the earthly marriage as a mystery, then asks how much more so is the heavenly marriage. 119,4 reads: "If I may utter a mystery the Father of all united with the virgin who came down." The bridal chamber is a "mystery" in the sense of a secret rite, and not clearly a sacrament.

Further, these secrets have been given a symbolic interpretation. 132,20 reports that mysteries are revealed as types and images, and that mystery is part of the heavenly world. In 104,15 it is classified along with those things belonging to Christ. In 118,9 the initiate puts on "the light in mystery in union." 115,28 relates that the Lord did everything in a mystery, and the author specifically lists the five mysteries. The highest rite, the bridal chamber, is frequently identified with mystery, and the other for rites are only once so identified. Mystery, then seems to refer to the secrecy of these rites rather than their sacramental status.

The Gospel of Philip describes five rites: Baptism, Chrism, Eucharist, Redemption, and the Bridal Chamber. With the exception of Redemption, each of these is represented by the usual transliteration of their Greek names. The Coptic word "Sote" is used to specify Redemption, and has been identified by Segelberg as the equivalent of the Greek *Apolytrōsis*. Segelberg further notes that these five sacraments are not peculiar to the Gospel of Philip, but are also found in Gospel of Thomas, Logion 19: "For there are five trees in Paradise . . . Whoever knows them will not taste death."¹² Collaboration for this reading in the Gospel of Thomas is found in the Gospel of Philip, Logion 91: "But the tree of life is in the midst of the garden and the olive tree from which the chrism is made by him for the resurrection."

BAPTISM

Several passages demonstrate the practice and meaning of Baptism. This rite was clearly administered through immersion (120,30-

¹¹Ménard, *L'Evangile Selon Philippe*. Eric Segelberg, "The Coptic-Gnostic Gospel According to Philip and Its Sacramental System," *Numen*, VII, 1960, pp. 189-200.

¹²Segelberg, "The Coptic-Gnostic Gospel According to Philip and Its Sacramental System," p. 191.

24), and is accompanied with the proclamation, "I am a Christian" (112,22-25). There is the implication that the body is divested of earthly clothing (123, 23-24). On one occasion Baptism is done "in his name" (Logion 89) suggesting a primitive passage, but for the most part it is done in the name of the Trinity (115,19-21).

This Baptism is probably self-administered as Segelberg notes. 115,19-21 which contains the Trinitarian formula also suggests that they "have obtained them (the names) for themselves," substantiating a self-administered Baptism.

Chrism immediately follows Baptism (117,9-14), a condition which apparently prevailed at the time of Tertullian.¹³ In this passage from Tertullian are found rites of Baptism, Anointment, Signing, and Laying on of Hands. The latter is clearly missing from the Gospel of Philip, but in connection with Signing, Segelburg holds that Logion 49 (110-26-35) refers to the sign of the Cross. He offers some reconstruction to substantiate this:

If thou sayest "I am a Christian"
May I obtain this *sign*. This
one which the archonts cannot
endure.

The reconstruction is appropriate, following the work of H. M. Schenke.¹⁴ If this reconstruction is correct, then the Gospel of Philip reflects three of the four concepts found in Tertullian's discussion.

EUCCHARIST

One of the Eucharistic passages in the Gospel of Philip involves a rather "traditional" setting, that of John 6:53. Logion 98 (122,36-123,2) suggests the elements of the Eucharist as practiced by this community: "So it is also with the bread and the cup and the oil, even if there be something higher than these." Here the oil has nothing to do with Chrism, but possibly with the *apolytrosis* or Redemption. Just as the Chrism is associated with Baptism, Redemption is associated with the Eucharist. Segelburg notes that the oil used in connection with Redemption was probably blessed in the Eucharistic prayer. If this is the case, this places the practice within the context of the early church where blessing of the oil of *apolytrosis* and that of Chrism takes place within the Eucharist.¹⁵

Logion 100 (123,15-21) shows that the contents of the Eucharistic

¹³*Ibid*, p 194

¹⁴Hans Martin Schenke, "Das Evangelium nach Philippus Ein Evangelium der Valentinianer aus dem Funde von Nag-Hamadi," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* LXXXIV (1959), pp. 1-26. Die Arbeit am Philippus-Evangelium," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* XC (1965), pp 322-331.

¹⁵Segelburg, *op cit*, p. 195

chalice are a mixture of wine and water: "The cup of prayer contains wine and water, since it is appointed as the type of blood for which *thanks is given (eucharistein)*. The blessing of the bread and the cup is done by an ambiguous "holy man":

The holy man is holy altogether, down to his body. For if he has received the bread he will make it holy, or the cup, or anything else that he receives, purifying them.

There is nothing in the context of this passage to suggest that there is only one holy man, moreover all the members of the community could be holy men, or it could be just the senior members of the community. Baptism and Chrism are self-administered, so it stands to reason that Eucharist would be self-administered.

CHRISM

Logion 111(125,35-126,11) gives the best example of Chrism. There are six characteristics of Chrism in this passage: 1) The ointment is fragrant (125,26 contrast 126,7), 2) The ointment is self-administered (126,4), 3) the odor of the ointment has spiritual strength for those standing outside so that they also receive the benefits (126,5), even though this is only temporary (126,7), 4) The Anointment is conceived in the act of selflessness of the Good Samaritan (126,7-8), 5) Anointment is an act of love (126,11), 6) Love through the Chrism overcomes sins (126,11).

REDEMPTION

The Gospel of Philip provides very little information on the rite of Redemption. Segelburg suggests that the rite is to be identified with the *Euchelaion* of the Byzantine Church in distinction to the performance of extreme unction in the Roman Church.¹⁶ Logion 9 supplies most of the information about the rite: "Christ came to ransom some, to save others, to redeem others." In the absence of evidence from the document itself, it could be suggested that Redemption is probably in reference to the mythologizing of the redemptive process itself. As such it represents the Gnostic way of reconciling the mythic Jesus with the historical Jesus, a process found in Jewish-Christian Gnosticism. Bousset notes that in Jewish-Christian Gnosticism such things as the Christian hymn to Jesus who overcame Hades has no other meaning than the translation of a myth to the historical figure of Jesus.¹⁷ In the Gospel of Philip the work of the historical Jesus is transferred to a mythological redemptive process in Logion 9.

¹⁶*Ibid.* p. 197

¹⁷Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*, trans by John E Steely, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970) p 271

THE BRIDAL CHAMBER

Ménard notes that the rite of the bridal chamber is the most important "sacrament" of the Gospel of Philip, *and* as such it is "very Valentinian."¹⁸ There are three reasons for such a conclusion; 1) The Bridal chamber is the last one listed in the catalog of rites in Logion 68 (115,27-30), 2) In Logion 125 (132, 22-23) the Bridal chamber is called the "holy of the holy one",¹⁹ the innermost room of the mythical houses "for places of offering in Jerusalem," introduced in Logion 76. In Logion 76 (117, 22-23) Baptism is identified with the "holy," Redemption in 117, 25-26 with the "holy of the one," and the Bridal chamber with the "Holy of the holy ones" in 117,24-25. 3) The amount of space devoted to a discussion of the Bridal chamber indicates its primacy.

Logion 122 (129,34-130,27) shows that the bridal chamber is not carnal, as Segelberg has noted.²⁰ 130,6 and 7 read: "It is not fleshly but pure, and does not belong to the desire but to the will." The Gospel of Philip does not deprecate the flesh. The author's attitude to the flesh is well represented in Logion 62 (114,4-6): "Be not fearful of the flesh, nor love it. If thou fear before it, it will become master over thee. If thou love it, it will swallow and paralyse thee." The flesh is to be accepted without emotion.

Logion 122 displays several characteristics of the Bridal chamber which should be noted. 1) Marriage in this world is a mystery, but it is used as an illustration of the greater mystery. 2) Marriage is not to be exposed in the earthly sense, but much more will the other marriage be revealed to the initiates only in the Bridal chamber. 3) There is a suggestion of connection with the Chrism (130,21) or if Segelburg is correct²¹ the oil of Redemption is an accompaniment of the Bridal chamber. 4) The final rite is revealed only to those who become as the bridegroom with the bride.

Grant notes that the secrecy of the bridal chamber is related not only to the earthly marriage, but also to the "secret holiness of the temple in Jerusalem."²² In Logion 125, cited above, Grant holds that this represents a future eschatology motif in the Gospel of Philip, although a better answer may be suggested by Bousset in relation to Gnostic usage of traditions. The Gnostics, in their doctrine of Redemption treated the historical occurrence as an event of present significance. Mythologizing on the part of the Gospel of Philip has the effect of

¹⁸Ménard, *op cit.* p. 50.

¹⁹Apparently an error, since the passage goes on in terms of "the holy of the holy ones."

²⁰Segelberg, p. 198.

²¹Segelberg, p. 197.

²²Robert M. Grant, "The Mystery of Marriage in the Gospel of Philip," *Vigiliae Christianae* XV (1961), p. 136.

destroying historical time.²³ There is also a revelatory aspect to the rite of the Bridal chamber. Logion 127 (134,4-7) describes the rite of the Bridal chamber in terms of Light: "If anyone becomes a son of the Bridal chamber he will receive the light. If anyone does not receive it while he is in this world, he will not receive it in the other place." In order to have the truth revealed to an individual, he must become receptive to that revelation. To the son of the Bridal chamber, the truth is revealed because through this final initiation he supplies the necessary conditions for reception of the revelation.

As the revelation is necessary for salvation, the archetype of salvation is the Bridal chamber. Grant comes to a similar conclusion as he notes that the initiation into the Bridal chamber is not for everyone, but just the few who will be saved. Hence admission to the Bridal chamber is tantamount to salvation.

CONCLUSION

These rites which are specifically mentioned in the Gospel of Philip have their historical counterparts in structured Christianity. Baptism and the Eucharist share most elements with that of traditional Christianity, while the Chrism is still practiced in some parts of the world. Redemption has its counterpart in the *Euchelaion* or healing service of the Byzantine Church, and perhaps in a much evolved form in the Extreme Unction of the Roman Catholic Church. The Ritual of the Bridal Chamber has been somewhat demythologized in orthodox Christianity, and in Catholic groups may remain as the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony.

²³Stroud, *The Problem of Dating the Chenoboskion Gospel of Philip*, Ch. III.

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