

The Actuality of Sacrifice

Past and Present

Edited by

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PART 3

Early Christianity and Rabbinic Literature



Sacrifice in ‘Gnostic’ Testimonies of the Second and Third Centuries CE

Riemer Roukema

In the earliest Christians writings, many of which have been collected in the New Testament, the theme of sacrifice (mostly *θυσία*, sometimes *προσφορά*) occurs regularly. As an introduction and foil to my study of sacrifice in the ‘Gnostic’ branch of early Christianity, I will give an impression of the different ways in which this theme is found in other early Christian testimonies, dating from the first century CE.

First, we find references to the various sacrifices prescribed in the Mosaic books. In the New Testament, the Mosaic sacrifices are mentioned both in a neutral or descriptive and in a critical way.¹ Secondly, one of the reasons why these sacrifices are sometimes referred to critically is that according to Christians they have been superseded by Jesus’ death, which they interpreted as the supreme sacrifice, mainly for the forgiveness of sins.² As a consequence, the former sacrifices are considered to have become superfluous. Thirdly, in a metaphorical sense the early Christians are exhorted to present themselves as a living sacrifice to God, which is called their spiritual worship (Rom 12:1, *λογικὴν λατρείαν*), and to offer spiritual sacrifices to God (1 Pet 2:5, *πνευματικὰς θυσίας*), which may consist of prayer, praise, thanksgiving, and good works.³ Fourthly, the devotion to Jesus Christ could lead to the readiness for martyrdom. The apostle Paul already referred to martyrdom in sacrificial language, since he might be ‘poured out as a libation’ over the sacrifice and the offering of the Philippians’ faith (Phil 2:17, *εἰ καὶ σπένδομαι ἐπὶ τῇ θυσίᾳ καὶ λειτουργίᾳ τῆς πίστεως ὑμῶν*).⁴ In the fifth place, we find references to idol offerings (*εἰδωλόθυτα*) and to discussions and guidelines concerning the question whether Christians should abstain from the pagan offerings either totally or in

1 Neutral and descriptive: e.g. Matt 5:23–24; Luke 1:8–11, 2:22–24; Acts 21:23–26; 24:17; critical: e.g. Matt 9:13; 12:7 (Hos 6:6); Acts 7:48–51 (Isa 66:1–2); Heb 8:7; 10:1–4, 11.

2 E.g. in Matt 26:28; John 1:29; 19:32–36; Rom 3:25; 1 Cor 5:7; Eph 5:2; Heb 8–10; 1 Pet 1:19; 2:24; 1 John 1:7; Rev 1:5; 5:6; 7:14. Cf. Denaux’s contribution to this volume.

3 Cf. Phil 2:17; 4:18; Heb 13:15–16; Rev 8:3–4.

4 Cf. 2 Tim 4:6; Rev 6:9.

most cases.⁵ It is remarkable in this context that Paul juxtaposes the pagan idol offerings and the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 10:14–22; 11:20). This does not mean that Paul has an explicitly sacrificial understanding of the Eucharist, but in view of the later, sacrificial terms, this comparison of the Lord's Supper with pagan sacrifices deserves to be mentioned in the sixth place.⁶

Before presenting the 'Gnostic' testimonies, I need to make another preliminary remark. The terms 'Gnostic' and 'Gnosticism' have been much debated in the last two decades, and for this reason, they should be used between quotation marks. Only a few groups of those who are called 'Gnostics' nowadays are known to have used this term as a self-designation, whereas for most of the so-called 'Gnostics', this cannot be sustained. In 1958, Hans Jonas published his book *The Gnostic Religion*, but today the idea expressed by this title cannot be maintained anymore. In the last decades, ample attention has been paid to the divergences of writings that traditionally were called 'Gnostic'. Scholars such as Michael Williams (1996), Karen King (2003), and Ismo Dunderberg (2008) prefer not to use the terms 'Gnostic' and 'Gnosticism' anymore because for many readers they evoke the opposition to good orthodox Christianity, but it appears to be difficult to totally do away with the terms. In this paper, I will still use them, even without quotation marks, after having warned that there never was one 'Gnostic' religion, but at the most a wide range of many different authors and groups who were in some way interested in obtaining salvific gnosis. In different ways these groups distinguished between the true transcendent God from whom human souls originate and the inferior Creator and his rulers who are responsible for creating the material world and bodies. Many of these groups revered, in one way or another, Jesus Christ, but there are also writings in which explicit Christian elements are absent, such as Hermetic treatises and books that have a Jewish flavor. In this paper, however, I will restrict myself to writings that refer to Jesus or Christ as Savior.

Following the previous enumeration, I will now investigate in which ways Christian-'Gnostic' testimonies refer—or do not refer—to the theme of sacrifice.

1 Sacrifices Offered to the Rulers of the Material World

In 'Gnostic' texts, animal sacrifices are generally related to the inferior Creator or to his rulers and angels. In the treatise *On the Origin of the World* (Nag

⁵ Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25; 1 Cor 8–10; cf. Rev 2:14, 20.

⁶ See, e.g., 1 Clement 44:4; Didache 14; Ignatius of Antioch, *Philadelphians* 4; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* IV.17.5–18.6.

Hammadi Codex II, 5.123.5–12), we read about the situation on earth after the rulers belonging to the Creator had been cast down there:

When the seven rulers were cast from their heavens down to the earth, they created for themselves angels, numerous and demonic, to serve them. These angels taught people much about error, magic, potions, idolatry, bloodshed, altars, temples, sacrifices (ΘΥCΙΑ), and libations (CΠONΔΗ) to all the demons of the earth.

TRANS. MEYER 2007, 218

This passage reminds us of 1 *Enoch* 8, which tells that the fallen angels taught the people how to make weapons and decorations, and about incantations and astrology, but sacrifices and libations are not mentioned there. It is clear that in *On the Origin of the World* the sacrifices and libations taught by the rulers' angels are presented as negative phenomena that led humanity to error and ignorance.

According to a lacunal passage of the Valentinian *Gospel of Philip* (Nag Hammadi Codex II, 3.54.33–55.1), 'when the human being is saved, there are no sacrifices (ΘΥCΙΑ) anymore'. After a lacuna, we read that 'animals were offered to (ΝΕΥΤΑΛΕ . . . ΕΞΡΑΙ) the powers'.⁷ These powers are the angels subjected to the inferior Creator.

Another enigmatic passage of the *Gospel of Philip* (62.35–63.4) says that:

God is a man-eater. For this reason the human being is [sacrificed] (CΕ[ΑΥ]ΑΤ) to him. Before the human being was sacrificed, animals were being sacrificed, since those to whom they were sacrificed were not gods.

CF. TRANS. ISENBERG 1989, 167

The specialist scholars do not agree which god is meant here. Is he the true God to whom humans are sacrificed in baptism, so that metaphorically he is like a man-eater, as Schenke (1997, 322–23) thinks?⁸ In my view, this is unlikely, since in that case the true God would first have demanded animal sacrifices, whereas according to the passage cited above, animals were sacrificed to

7 The conjectures and translations of different scholars vary. Here I follow Schenke 1997, 20–21, 201. On the basis of different interpretations of the lacuna and of the prefix ΝΕΥ, M. Scopello and M. Meyer, in Meyer 2007, 163, translate: 'For if people come to salvation, sacrifice will [stop] . . . and animals will not be offered up.'

8 He refers to the *Gospel of Philip* 55.4–5, 'The human being was offered up to God dead, and the human being came alive', which he interprets with regard to baptism (Schenke 1997, 202); see section 3.

the powers who were the angels of the inferior god. Therefore the god who demands animal and human sacrifices rather denotes the inferior god, the ruler of this world, as Ménard (1967, 165–66) and Meyer (2007, 170) assume. That this god is a man-eater probably means that the inferior Creator who is revered in the early ‘Catholic’ church is believed to exhort martyrs to sacrifice their lives to him (see section 4).

2 Nonsacrificial and Sacrificial Interpretations of Jesus’ Death

In comparison with the sacrificial understanding of Jesus’ death in the New Testament and in other early Christian literature, it is remarkable that in many Gnostic testimonies this sacrificial interpretation is absent.

According to the Valentinian *Gospel of Truth* (Nag Hammadi Codex 1, 3.18.22–24), Jesus was nailed to a tree because he was persecuted by error, i.e., by the inferior Creator. This tree recalls the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Paradise (Gen 2:9). The comment reads that, by being nailed to a tree, ‘he became fruit of the knowledge of the Father’ (*GTr* 18.24–26; trans. Meyer 2007, 37). Thus Jesus’ death gives gnosis, knowledge, to those who eat this fruit, i.e., who are in communion with him and discover him within themselves (*GTr* 18.30–31). The second passage that refers to Jesus being nailed to a tree explains that ‘he published the Father’s edict on the cross’ (*GTr* 20.25–27). This edict is ‘the living book of the living’, ‘the book that was written in the Father’s thought and mind’ (*GTr* 19.35–20.1) and reveals the true gnosis. It is in this context that we read that ‘the merciful, faithful Jesus was patient and accepted his sufferings to the point of taking up that book, since he knew that his death would be life for many’ (*GTr* 20.10–14). These last words remind us of the sacrificial interpretation of Jesus’ death in the canonical Gospels. The Gospel of Matthew, for example, says that Jesus came to give his life as a ransom for many, and that his blood is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins (Matt 20:28; 26:28). In the *Gospel of Truth*, however, Jesus’ death, that would be life for many, reveals the true knowledge of the Father instead of bringing about forgiveness of sins (cf. Ménard 1972, 100).

Another Valentinian interpretation of Jesus’ cross is given by Theodotus. We know his views thanks to Clement of Alexandria, who made excerpts from his teaching. Theodotus considers the cross as a sign of the boundary between the material world and the heavenly *pleroma*; likewise, the cross separates the unbelievers from the believers. By means of this sign of the cross, the heavenly Jesus carried the spiritual seeds on his shoulders and led them into the *pleroma* (*ExcTh* 42:1–2). We see that Theodotus allegorically interprets Jesus bearing the

cross as Jesus leading the divine sparks that were hidden in the true believers, i.e. the Valentinian Gnostics, back to the heavenly *pleroma* from which they originated. In this view, there is no trace of the sacrificial interpretation of Jesus' death that was confessed in the early 'Catholic' church.

Such a trace may be found, however, in the treatise entitled *Melchizedek* (Nag Hammadi Codex IX, 1.6.22–7.5), notwithstanding the damaged condition in which the manuscript has been preserved. In this writing, the angel Gamaliel proclaims Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to the high priest Melchizedek, as a consequence of which Melchizedek is summoned to carry out his priesthood in conformity with the model of Jesus Christ. According to Pearson's reading (2007, 601), Gamaliel says about Jesus Christ:

I have come to [reveal] to you the truth (...) among [the brethren]: he included himself [in the] living [offering] ([πρo]cφο[ρa]), together with your offspring. He [presented the offering (πρo]cφορa)] for the] All. [For] it is not [cattle that] you will offer up [for sins] of unbelief, [and for the] ignorant things and all the evil [deeds] that they do, for they (i.e., animal sacrifices) do [not] reach the [Father of the All...]

This means that Jesus Christ offered Melchizedek's offspring—apparently the true believers—and himself to the highest God, the Father of the All. The author of *Melchizedek* seems to know the Epistle to the Hebrews, which also presents Melchizedek as a high priest of the Most High God (Heb 7:1; cf. Gen 14:18).⁹ However, contrary to this epistle, no reference is made to the blood of Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross, poured out in order to provide eternal redemption (cf. Heb 9:11–14; 10:10, 19–22 and Funk, Mahé, and Gianotto 2001, 137–40). Like Theodotus, however, the author of *Melchizedek* suggests that the effect of Jesus' offering himself to the true God was that the true believers are led to this God, the highest Father.

Perhaps it is in this sense of Jesus' offering to the true God that the *Dialogue of the Savior* (Nag Hammadi Codex III, 5.121.20–122.1) reads, in a prayer about the disciples' heavenly ascent:

Through your offering (πρo]cφορa) the chosen will enter. Through their good works they have freed their souls from blind bodily limbs, so that they may come to be forever.

CF. TRANS. MEYER 2007, 302

⁹ See Denaux on the Letter to the Hebrews in this volume.

Furthermore, after an appearance of Jesus Christ described in the *Letter of Peter to Philip* (Nag Hammadi Codex VIII, 2.138.18–19), Peter says in a discussion about suffering, ‘He—i.e. the Lord—suffered for us’ (trans. Meyer 2007, 592),¹⁰ as a consequence of which the apostles also have to accept suffering. However, after a subsequent confession of Jesus’ crucifixion, burial, and resurrection, Peter clarifies that Jesus is a stranger to this suffering (*LPPh* 139, 15–22), which means that he did not suffer in reality.

Another conception of Jesus’ supposed death is given by Basilides of Alexandria. Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 1.24.4) transmits the tradition that in Basilides’ view Jesus had not been crucified at all, since Simon of Cyrene had taken his place. Basilides apparently deduced this from the Gospel of Mark, which first introduces Simon of Cyrene and subsequently says that they brought ‘him’ to Golgotha and crucified ‘him’ there (Mark 15:21–24). The context shows that ‘him’ refers to Jesus, because previously it is written, ‘They led him out to crucify him’ (Mark 15:20), which unmistakably refers to Jesus. For Basilides, however, it was important to show that the firstborn Son of the highest God had not suffered, because as a truly divine being he could not suffer, let alone that his death was a sacrifice for the remission of sins.

A similar tradition is found in the *Second Discourse of the Great Seth* (Nag Hammadi Codex VII, 2.55.16–56.19). In a revelation in which Christ looks back on his earthly life, he says:

Though they punished me, I did not die in actuality but only in appearance (...). I suffered only in their eyes and their thought (...). The death they think I suffered they suffered in their error and blindness. They nailed their man to their death. Their thoughts did not perceive me, since they were deaf and blind. By doing these things they pronounce judgment against themselves. As for me, they saw me and punished me, but someone else, their father, drank the gall and the vinegar; it was not I. They were striking me with a scourge, but someone else, Simon, bore the cross on his shoulder. Someone else wore the crown of thorns. And I was on high, poking fun at all the excesses of the rulers and the fruit of their error and conceit. I was laughing at their ignorance.

TRANS. MEYER 2007, 480

This text does not say, however, that Simon of Cyrene was actually crucified instead of Jesus; still, Christ denies that he suffered under the torture. Instead,

10 The version in Codex Tchacos 1.7.2 reads: ‘He died for us’.

the physical body of Jesus ('their man') was crucified, but Christ himself had then already withdrawn from it and had been exalted to his Father (cf. Meyer 2007, 475).

Next, Christ retells the Gospel of Matthew's description of the crucifixion and its consequences (Matt 27:45–53) in these terms:

The flame of the seven authorities was extinguished, the sun of the powers of the rulers set, darkness overcame them, and the world became impoverished. They bound this one with many bonds and nailed him to the cross, and they secured him with four bronze nails. He ripped the temple veil with his own hands. An earthquake shook earth's chaos, for the souls of the dead were released and resurrected, and they walked out in the open. They laid aside ignorant jealousy and lack of insight by the dead tombs, and they put on the new person. They had come to know the blessed, perfect one of the eternal, incomprehensible Father and the infinite light. That's what I am.

SDGRS 58.18–59.9; TRANS. MEYER 2007, 481

This means that the crucifixion of Jesus' body and Christ's exaltation were believed to have a tremendous effect. The authorities and rulers of the earth, who served the inferior god, lost their power, and a resurrection of souls took place. These souls became new persons and came to know the exalted Christ and his Father. We see that in this view of salvation the idea of sacrifice plays no part at all.

A most original view of Jesus' death can be found in the *Gospel of Judas* (Codex Tchacos 3). After an incomplete passage that deals with sacrifices to Saklas, again the inferior god, Jesus says to his disciple Judas, 'But you will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice (κναρῶςιασε) the man who bears me' (*GJud* 56.17–20; trans. Meyer 2007, 768). Probably this means that Judas will exceed all other people in evil, since he will even sacrifice Jesus' physical body to the inferior god, by handing him over to his adversaries who will bring about his death. In this view, the death of Jesus' body has no salvific effect whatsoever, since his true celestial identity was not bound to this body (cf. *GJud* 36.11–17; see Painchaud 2006, 557–58; DeConick 2007, 125–39).

These interpretations of Jesus' death show that Gnostics of different groups could not believe that for the salvation of humanity the true God needed the physical, sacrificial death of the Savior. Therefore they reinterpreted this event in various other terms.

3 Spiritual Sacrifices

Although Gnostics were unwilling to accept the sacrificial, salvific meaning of Jesus' physical death, they were not opposed to spiritual sacrifices of prayer, thanksgiving, good works, and of oneself.

The Valentinian teacher Ptolemy wrote to his disciple Flora that the Mosaic commandments concerning offerings (*προσφοραί*), circumcision, the Sabbath, fasting, Passover, the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, and the like have a symbolic, spiritual meaning (*PtFl* 5:8). He clarifies that

the Savior commanded us to offer offerings (*προσφοράς προσφέρειν*), but not dumb beasts or incense: rather, spiritual praises and glorifications and prayers of thanksgiving, and offerings in the form of sharing and good deeds.

PTFL 5:10; trans. Layton 1987, 312

Two very fragmentary pages of the treatise *Melchizedek* (Nag Hammadi Codex IX 1) clearly deal with the theme of sacrifices, but unfortunately it is extremely difficult to reconstruct the train of thought. Yet in the end, some lines are clearly readable, in which Melchizedek exclaims:

I have presented myself to you as an offering (*προσφορα*), together with those who are mine, to you yourself, O God, Father of the All, with those whom you love, who came forth from you who are holy and [living].

MELCH 16, 7–11; TRANS. PEARSON 2007, 603

In these words, Melchizedek apparently testifies to having learned from the angel Gamaliel, who instructed him (see section 2 above), that the true sacrifice is that he was to offer himself and those who belonged to him to God in a spiritual way (Funk, Mahé, and Gianotto 2001, 152–53).

The *Gospel of Philip* may also refer to this spiritual sacrifice. As a conclusion of the passage on animal sacrifices in the *Gospel of Philip* quoted in section 1, we read that, contrary to the animals that were offered up alive and died as sacrifices: 'The human being was offered up to God dead, and became alive' (*GPh* 55.3–5). This enigmatic saying may refer to baptism. In that case, it means that the human being offered to God in baptism was dead, but received life (Schenke 1997, 202). Such a spiritual sacrifice may also be alluded to in *Gospel of Philip* 59.27–31, which reads,

The apostles said to the disciples, 'May our entire offering (προσφορα) obtain salt.' They called [Sophia] 'salt'. Without it no offering [is] acceptable.

TRANS. ISENBERG 1989, 159

Schenke (1997, 280) suggests that this passage concerns the neophytes presenting themselves to God. Leviticus 2:13 LXX prescribes that 'every gift of your sacrifice (θυσία) shall be salted with salt', which is quoted in Mark 9:49 ('each sacrifice shall be salted with salt') according to most manuscripts. Thus this saying might refer to the new Christians' offering of themselves to God. In this context, the apostles are said to wish them Wisdom, for which they used the term 'salt', since otherwise their offering was not acceptable to God (cf. Ménard 1967, 153).

4 Martyrdom as Sacrifice

Whereas early Catholic Christians were generally inclined to consider martyrdom as the ultimate sacrifice of one's life to God—even though many of them were not really ready for this—Gnostics did not always agree (Koschorke 1978, 134–37). The *Testimony of Truth* (Nag Hammadi Codex IX,3) contains a passage, many lines of which have been transmitted fragmentarily, that still clearly criticizes the readiness of Christians to accept martyrdom. The author says:

Foolish people have it in their minds that if they simply make the confession, 'We are Christians,' in words but not in power, and ignorantly give themselves up to a human death, they will live. But they are in error and do not know where they are going or who Christ really is. Instead, they are hastening toward the principalities and the authorities. (...) If [God] really wanted a human sacrifice (θυσια), he would be conceited. (...) [These people] are [hollow] martyrs who bear witness only [to] themselves. In fact, they are sick and cannot get themselves up. But when they are full of passion, this is their motivating idea: 'If we give ourselves up to death for the sake of the name, we will be saved.'

TTR 31.22–32.5, 32.19–22, 33.24–34.6; TRANS. PEARSON 2007, 618

We see that the author thinks that martyrs expect to be with Christ after their death, whereas in fact they will go to the powers of the inferior god. He is

convinced, however, that the true God did not want such sacrifices.¹¹ Several patristic testimonies confirm that this was the position of Gnostics concerning martyrdom.¹² Probably the statement in the *Gospel of Philip* 62.35–63.2 quoted in section 1, ‘God is a man-eater. For this reason the human being is [sacrificed] (σε[υω]ωτ) to him’, also refers to the idea that martyrs will only reach the inferior god.

The *Gospel of Judas* (Codex Tchacos 3.38.1–18, 24–26) contains a mysterious passage about a dream of Jesus’ disciples, in which they saw a great house with an altar (ΘΥCΙΑCΤΗΡΙΟΝ) on which twelve priests, invoking the name of Jesus, sacrifice even their own children or wives and lead sinful lives. Jesus answers his disciples,

It is you who are worshipping¹³ at the altar you have seen. That one is the god you serve, and you are the twelve men you have seen. And the cattle that are brought in are the sacrifices (ἄθυγια) you have seen—that is, the many people you lead astray before that altar.

GJUD 39.18–40.1; CF. TRANS. MEYER AND WURST 2007, 197, 199

After some more words on the sins of the priests, Jesus probably says, ‘Stop sacrificing’ (*GJud* 41.1–2), although the word ‘sacrificing’ has not been fully preserved (ΘΥ[CIACE . . .]). Most subsequent lines of this page are lost.

It is not fully clear what Jesus’ interpretation of the dream really means. Some scholars suppose that it criticizes the Eucharistic practice of the Catholic Church, according to which the Eucharist was celebrated as a sacrifice to God (Van der Vliet 2006, 148–58; Rouwhorst 2011, 620–24; cf. Van den Kerchove 2008, 313–24). The difficulty of this view is that it remains enigmatic in which way the priests of the church presented their children and wives as offerings on the altar. Other scholars think that Jesus’ interpretation alludes to the bishops who exhorted their flock to accept martyrdom in periods of persecution (Painchaud 2006, 566–67; Pagels and King 2007, 43–75; Van den Kerchove 2008, 325–29; Marjanen 2010, 213). If this view is correct, the *Gospel of Judas* criticizes contemporaneous church leaders for driving their people, even their children and wives, to martyrdom.

11 Van Os (2009, 370–74) suggests that this passage does not criticize martyrdom but the church’s view of baptism, but his argument does not convince me.

12 Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* III.18.5, IV.33.9; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* IV.16.3; Tertullian, *Scorpiace* 1.5; Eusebius of Caesarea, *Church History* IV.7.7.

13 Contrary to the quoted translation, I do not render ἄνωγοι by ‘presenting the offerings’, since Crum (1939, 567–68) does not give this meaning.

This interpretation has been criticized, however, since it is questionable whether children were submitted to martyrdom (Van Os 2009, 374–78).¹⁴ Even though, in the mid-third century, Cyprian of Carthage (*Epistles* 6.3.1, 76.6.2) mentions children and women who underwent martyrdom, this testimony may be considered too late to serve as historical background to the *Gospel of Judas*, which is dated to the second century CE. Personally, I still think that the interpretation concerning martyrdom fits best. The author of the *Gospel of Judas* may have known cases in which even children and wives of church leaders were killed in persecution. If this interpretation is correct, the altar seen in the dream does not refer to the table in a house church, but has a metaphorical meaning, which refers to the idea of sacrificing innocent people to the inferior god who does not accept being denied in persecutions organized by the local authorities.

The position emerging from the *Letter of Peter to Philip* (NHC VIII, 2.138.15–28) is different. In a discussion about suffering, the apostles ask,

‘If even our Lord suffered, how much more are we to suffer?’ Peter answered and said, ‘He suffered for us, and we must also suffer for our smallness.’¹⁵ Then a voice called to them and said, ‘I often told you that you must suffer. You must be brought to synagogues and governors so that you will suffer. But the one who will not suffer also [will] not . . .’

TRANS. MEYER 2007, 592

Here the page ends, and the following lines on the next page are lost for the most part.¹⁶ In any case, this letter is clear about the necessity that at least Jesus’ apostles have to accept suffering, and thus, one may conclude, possibly martyrdom as well.

In the *Secret Book of James* (Nag Hammadi Codex I, 2.4.31–5.35) Jesus also exhorts his disciples not to be afraid of suffering and to disdain death, so that they will live.

We see that according to these testimonies, part of the Gnostics criticized the view that a Christian should be ready to sacrifice himself in martyrdom. Other Gnostics agreed, however, that a violent death might be the consequence

14 Van Os (2009, 378–84) suggest that the dream deals with infant baptism, since baptism was considered to represent a sacrifice of one’s life to God.

15 The *Letter of Peter to Philip* in Codex Tchacos 1.7.2–3 reads: ‘we must also suffer for mankind’.

16 The following lines in Codex Tchacos 1.7 are lost completely.

of their religious conviction, but in such texts we find no explicit references to the concept of sacrifice.

5 Attitude toward Idol Offerings

In early Catholic Christianity, any involvement in idol offerings was forbidden (see Acts 15:20, 29), although Paul had allowed that if one did not know whether food had been offered to idols, one was free to eat it (1 Cor 10:25–30). Gnostic guidelines on how to behave in relation to idol offerings have not been preserved, so in this respect we have to rely on the testimonies of the church fathers. According to Justin Martyr (*Dialogue with Trypho* 35.1–6) and Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 1.6.3, 24.5, 26.3, 28.2), ‘heretics’ such as Basilides of Alexandria felt free to eat food offered to idols since they were convinced that this would not harm them. This may imply that such Gnostics also felt free to participate in ceremonies in which food was offered to idols. We might call this a ‘liberal’ attitude toward idol offerings, contrary to the early Catholic interdiction to participate in such ceremonies or even to eat the food sacrificed to idols. It cannot be excluded, however, that Justin and Irenaeus exaggerated the heretics’ liberal attitude toward idol offerings (Le Boulluec 1985, 131). Interestingly, one testimony of an intra-Gnostic debate seems to confirm that at least some Gnostics did not care about idol worship. In the *Testimony of Truth* (Nag Hammadi Codex IX, 3.56.1–9), the disciples of someone who ‘completed the course of Valentinus’ are criticized. Considering the context (Nag Hammadi Codex IX, 3.57.6–8) the Gnostic teacher Basilides of Alexandria is meant here (cf. section 2). Of his disciples it is said that ‘they have [worship of] idols’, which may imply sacrifices to idols. After these words, the manuscript has a lacuna of circa six lines.

We may conclude that at least part of the Gnostics were convinced that participation in idol offerings did not harm them spiritually, a view held by some Corinthians who were criticized by Paul (1 Cor 8:4–13; cf. 10:14–22; Roukema 2010). Other Gnostics, however, did not share this liberal standpoint concerning idol worship, since it appears that the author of the *Testimony of Truth* criticized it.

6 Sacrificial Understanding of the Eucharist?

In our introduction and in section 4 we briefly referred to the early Catholic view that the bread and wine of the Eucharist were an offering or sacrifice to

God. As far as I know, a sacrificial understanding of the Eucharist is not found in early Gnostic testimonies. The *Gospel of Philip* deals with the Eucharist on several occasions but without interpreting it as an offering or sacrifice. Once, the author gives a sacramental interpretation of the three offering places in the temple (he calls them: the holy, the holy of the holy, and the holy of holies) by applying them to the rituals of baptism, redemption, and the bridal chamber (Nag Hammadi Codex II, 3.69.15–28). The Eucharist is not mentioned here, but it has been maintained that it is included in the ritual of the bridal chamber (Schmid 2007, 117–28). However this may be, it would go too far to derive a sacrificial understanding of the Eucharist from this passage.

When Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 1.13.2) describes the Eucharistic practice of the Valentinian Mark, surnamed the Magician, he does not suggest that for Mark the Eucharist was a sort of sacrifice. Elsewhere, Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* IV.18.4) explains the Church's sacrificial understanding of the Eucharist and scorns the heretics for not presenting the pure offering to the Creator as the Church does, because they say that there is another Father beyond the Creator, and because in their view this world is the result of a fall and of ignorance and a passion; so why would one offer the fruits of this fallen world to the highest Father? Probably Irenaeus projected his own sacrificial view of the Eucharist onto the Gnostics and subsequently concluded that for them it would be irrational to offer the gifts of creation to the God who was not the Creator of this world.

In the fourth century CE, Epiphanius of Salamis asserts that the groups he calls 'Stratiotics and Gnostics' offer the male semen to the Father of the All, saying, 'We offer (ἀναφέρομεν) unto you this gift, the body of Christ' (*Panarion* 26.4.6; trans. Layton 1987, 207). Although the information that some people consumed the male sperm and female menstrual blood is confirmed by the Gnostic texts *Pistis Sophia* 147 and *2 Jeou* 43, the reliability of Epiphanius' information about this sacrificial prayer is doubtful (cf. Grant 1981).

It appears that the available texts do not allow the conclusion that Gnostics had a sacrificial understanding of their Eucharistic practice.

Conclusion

We saw that according to Gnostics, animal and other material sacrifices were not offered to the true God, but to the inferior Creator and his rulers. It seems that here an essential difference between Gnostics and Catholic Christians can be pointed out: whereas for both persuasions animal sacrifices are obsolete after Christ, for Christians these sacrifices have been commanded by the

true God in the past, be it with a hidden spiritual meaning.¹⁷ Gnostics take these animal sacrifices in a literal sense, but reject them as belonging to the Creator-god.

Barring a rare exception, Gnostics generally did not prohibit eating food offered to idols, since in their view this did not harm them. Gnostics were unwilling to accept that Jesus' death was a sacrifice that served to provide remission of sins for humanity. As far as Gnostics accepted martyrdom as a consequence of their convictions, we could not find a sacrificial interpretation of the violent death that they might have to suffer. It appeared impossible to find a reliable Gnostic testimony to a sacrificial understanding of the Eucharist. We did find, however, Gnostic testimonies to the idea of spiritual sacrifices consisting of praise, prayer, and of one's own life, to be dedicated to the highest God.

Addendum: The Philosophical Context

In addition, I will briefly give attention to the philosophical context to which the Gnostic views are related. The Gnostic reluctance to accept material sacrifices in the worship of the true God is paralleled by the Pythagorean philosopher Apollonius of Tyana and by the Syrian Neoplatonic philosophers Porphyrius and Iamblichus (cf. Stroumsa 2009, 56–61). In the first century CE, Apollonius held that one ought to sacrifice nothing material and not even words to the highest God, since one should honor him with silence and pure thoughts. He advocates offering the elevation of one's soul as a holy sacrifice (θυσίαν ἱεράν) to the highest God.¹⁸ About 271 CE, these words are quoted approvingly by Porphyrius in his work *On Abstinence*. Writing around 300 CE, Iamblichus distinguishes two sorts of sacrifice (θυσία):

the one type will be simple and immaterial and purified from all taint of generation (γενέσεως), that which relates to unpolluted souls, whereas the other is filled with bodies and every sort of material business, that which is proper to souls which are not pure nor released from all generation. And so I postulate two sorts of sacrifice; the one which is that of men who are entirely purified, which would only arise rarely, as Heraclitus says, in the case of one or of some small, easily-counted number of men; the other being material and corporeal and based on alteration, as is suited to those still in grip of the body.

ON THE MYSTERIES V.15; TRANS. CLARKE, DILLON, AND HERSHBELL 2003, 251, 253

17 See Poorthuis's contribution to this volume.

18 In Porphyrius, *On Abstinence* 11.34.2–3, and Eusebius of Caesarea, *Preparation to the Gospel* IV.11–12.

Gnostics would fully agree with this distinction and undoubtedly ranged themselves among the small number of unpolluted souls who opted for immaterial sacrifices. At the same time, Iamblichus acknowledges that material sacrifices to the lower gods and good demons are admitted for matters concerning the body and that one may even sacrifice bodies to these gods. In his view, the lower gods could be pleased by material sacrifices (*On the Mysteries* v.15–19). Christian Gnostics would say that the Creator revered in the Church is such a lower god. This means that their views echoed contemporaneous philosophical opinions regarding the hierarchy of a high God and lower gods and demons. Contrary to Iamblichus, however, the Gnostics did not acknowledge the goodness of the lower gods. Gnostics considered these lower gods—the inferior Creator and his rulers—as mediocre powers at best, or they abhorred their pernicious influence on the material world and on humanity.

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