

Gnostic Prophecy: The Case of Marcus the Magician and his Women

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Περίληψη: Σύμφωνα με τον Ειρηναίο, ο Μάρκος, ηγέτης μιας βαλεντινιακής λατρευτικής κοινότητας, καθιστούσε γυναίκες προφήτιδες μέσω μιας τελετής μύησης που περιλάμβανε τη γαμήλια ένωση με τους «αγγέλους» τους. Το άρθρο αυτό καταδεικνύει ότι η προφητεία είναι ένα αναγνωρισμένο φαινόμενο στον Βαλεντινιασμό, καθώς και ότι η οργάνωση της τελετής μύησης από τον Μάρκο και ο τρόπος τέλεσής της είναι συνεπείς με την κεντρική βαλεντινιακή έννοια του «νυφικού θαλάμου». Δεδομένου ότι ο Μάρκος δρούσε στη Μικρά Ασία, προτείνεται ότι η δική του εκδοχή Βαλεντινιασμού είχε πιθανόν διαμορφωθεί από μια παράδοση εκστατικών μορφών λατρείας εκείνης της περιοχής. Από μια ευρύτερη άποψη, ο συσχετισμός της έννοιας του νυφικού θαλάμου με εκστατικές μορφές προφητείας εντάσσει τη μαρκιανή λατρεία σε ένα πρότυπο κοινό σε πνευματοληπτικές λατρείες σε όλο τον κόσμο, στο οποίο οι μνημένοι, ειδικά γυναίκες, καταλαμβάνονται από πνεύματα που γίνονται αντιληπτά ως συζυγικοί τους σύντροφοι, αποκτώντας έτσι μια νέα ταυτότητα. Κατά συνέπεια, η ανθρωπολογική έννοια της πνευματοληψίας μπορεί να προσφέρει μια νέα διάσταση στη βαλεντινιακή και τη γνωστική λατρεία γενικότερα.

Abstract: According to Irenaeus, the Valentinian cult leader Marcus initiated women to be prophets by joining them matrimonially to their “angels.” The paper shows that prophecy is a recognised phenomenon in Valentinianism, and that Marcus’ staging of the initiation to practicing it is consistent with the central Valentinian concept of the “bridal chamber.” Since Marcus operated in Asia Minor, it is suggested that his version of Valentinianism may have been shaped by a tradition of ecstatic cult forms native to that region. In a wider perspective, the association of the bridal chamber concept with ecstatic forms of prophecy makes the Marcasian cult conform to a pattern found in possession cults all over the world, where initiates, especially women, acquire a new identity by being possessed by spirits who are imagined as their marital partners. In consequence, the anthropological concept of possession may offer a new perspective on Valentinian and Gnostic cult in general.

Λέξεις κλειδιά: Ειρηναίος, Μάρκος, Βαλεντινιασμός, προφητεία, πνευματοληπτικές λατρείες.

Key words: Irenaeus, Marcus, Valentinianism, prophecy, possession cults.

Among the many unforgettable Volos conferences organized by Dimitris Kyrtatas, not the least memorable one took place in 2003, devoted to prophecy and ecstasy in the ancient world. Dimitris had the gift of finding conference themes that both stimulated curiosity about important general questions and inspired the participants to present materials from their own special fields of research. On that particular occasion, I took the opportunity to discuss a topic from the research on Valentinianism I was engaged in at the time: the account of Marcus “the Magician” made by Irenaeus as part of his presentation of the Valentinian heresy in Book I of his *Against the Heresies*. As is well known, Irenaeus’ account highlights the emotional aspects of Marcus’ ritual practices, with more than just hints of eroticism and seduction. Whereas the account is clearly to be read on the backdrop of Irenaeus’ general desire to discredit the heretics by ascribing to them immoral conduct as well as doctrinal errors,¹ the prominence given to prophetic enthusiasm in the account also raises the question of the place of prophecy and other emotionally charged practices in Valentinian communities beyond the particular circles of Marcus and his followers.

The Volos conferences took place happily unencumbered by the need to document the proceedings in the form of a subsequent publication. In consequence, my 2003 paper was never put in print. Rereading it today, I find that apart from the nostalgic value it holds to myself and possibly to others who hold the conference in good memory, it still offers some ideas that may be of interest to current research on ancient Christian groups. For that reason, I have decided to make the paper available now, though it has been somewhat reworked so as better to reflect my present thinking on the subject and to take into account new publications.

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In his survey of the various Valentinian Gnostics in Book I of his *Against the Heresies*, Irenaeus devotes special attention to a character called Marcus (ch. 13). The bishop of Lyons describes this man, who apparently was active in Asia Minor in the third quarter of the second century, as a charlatan and a seducer of women – especially, and worst of all, leading astray Christian women from good families.² In the present context, however, Irenaeus’ account is interesting above all because it gives us a glimpse of the phenome-

¹ In *Haer.* 1.6.3–4, he makes a general charge of immorality against the Valentinians: since they are spiritual by nature, ethical considerations are irrelevant to them. His accusations of sexual misconduct seem to be partly based on the information about Marcus he later presents in detail in 1.13. The theme of licentiousness is introduced already with the followers of Simon Magus, the originator of all heresies (1.23.4). For such accusations as a heresiological *topos*, see Knust, *Abandoned to Lust*, especially 143–63.

² The basic work of reference on Marcus is Förster, *Marcus Magus*.

non of prophecy as it was practiced within one of the so-called gnostic groups of early Christianity. “Gnosticism” is not a movement usually associated with prophecy, but rather with intellectual speculation, myth-making, and allegorical exegesis; this makes Irenaeus’ report especially intriguing since it raises new questions about what Gnosticism was actually about. Besides, the report is interesting in itself in so far as it contains a specimen of mantic ecstasy that may be compared with similar phenomena occurring in other contexts among the religions of Antiquity.

Now to the report itself. To begin with, Irenaeus describes a certain number of tricks performed by this Marcus, and which earned him the epithet “the Magician” (*Haer.* 1.13.2). He sets forth a cup containing water mixed with wine, intones a lengthy invocation over it, addressed to a power called Charis, “Grace,” and while he does this, the contents of the cup turn purple and red: this is Charis making herself present by dropping her blood into the cup. He also hands out cups already filled to the women present, Irenaeus says, and tells each of them to pronounce a formula of thanks and then to pour her cup into a much larger vessel he has. And lo and behold! The larger vessel overflows from that which is poured into it from the smaller one!

We shall not dwell here on these “miracles” themselves, which were perhaps brought about by means of certain chemical reactions,³ but instead go on to the part where Marcus teaches his female devotees to prophesy:

It is likely, however, that he has a *daimon* to help him, too, by means of which he appears both to be able to prophesy himself and to enable the women he finds worthy of sharing in his Grace to prophesy as well. For he concerns himself in particular with women, and especially with the elegantly attired, the ones in purple robes, and the very rich. These he often seeks to lead astray.

He flatters them, saying: “I wish to make you share in my Grace, because the Father of the All continually beholds your angel before his face. The place of the Greatness is within us; we must make ourselves one. First, receive from me and through me Grace. Prepare yourself as a bride expecting her bridegroom, that you may be what I am, and I what you are. Let the seed of light be deposed in your bridal chamber. Receive from me the bridegroom; make room for him and find room in him. See, Grace has descended upon you. Open your mouth and prophesy!”

But if the woman replies, “I have never prophesied before and I don’t know how to prophesy,” he makes invocations a second time so as to stupefy his deluded victim, saying to her: “Open your mouth and speak, no matter what, and you shall prophesy.”

³ Suggested already by the anonymous heresiological author [Hipp.] *Ref.* 6.40.3; cf. Förster, *Marcus Magus*, 70–72.

She, however, puffed up and easily cajoled by these words, her soul overheated by the thought that she would prophesy, and her heart pounding excessively, becomes audacious and begins to utter silly things and whatever empty and frivolous words come to her mind, heated up as she is by an empty spirit. ...

From then on she considers herself a prophetess and is grateful to Marcus for letting her share in his own Grace. And she attempts to repay him, not only by giving him of her money – and in this way he has collected great wealth—but also by letting him enjoy her body, since she wishes to be united with him in every way so that she may enter with him into the One. (Iren. *Haer.* 1.13.3)

In a study of Irenaeus' report on the activities of Marcus it should be pointed out at the outset that what it describes may be seen as a kind of initiation ritual, in which new adherents of the charismatic teacher are enabled to attain the position of prophets within the community.⁴ Having gone through what Irenaeus describes, the woman in question henceforth considers herself to be a prophetess. A little later (1.13.4), Irenaeus also tells us that during their regular meetings, held in connection with a meal,⁵ the Marcosians throw lots to decide who will prophesy during the meeting. Thus, prophecy was also a regular feature of Marcosian worship, and the report we have just heard must be a description of how Marcus dealt with the “first-timers” who had never done that sort of thing before. We are not told, however, whether this kind of initiation procedure was imposed on all the converts, or only on the ones who needed special incitement. Moreover, the Marcosian groups were composed of men as well as of women, according to what Irenaeus himself tells us, and it is a little puzzling that Irenaeus describes the initiation as if it involved only women – but Irenaeus may have had his own reasons for highlighting this aspect.

Finally, we are not told anything about other rituals of initiation that we know were a standard feature of Valentinian practice, i.e. baptismal initiation (the *apolytroxis*), and it must remain an open question here whether the prophetic initiation we have heard about *replaced* baptismal rituals, whether it was some kind of *second level initiation* taking place after that of baptism, and separately from it, or whether it was actually *part of a more extensive ritual sequence* that included baptism but of which Irenaeus fails to inform us.

These unsolved questions aside, let us try to place the facts described by Irenaeus in a wider context. First, although the phenomenon of prophecy in Valentinianism has been

⁴ “. . . un rito di iniziazione ai misteri della profezia”: Mantovani, “Rituale eucaristico e redenzione,” 878; cited in Joncas, “Eucharist Among the Marcosians,” 105–6. Also cf. Förster, *Marcus Magus*, 121, who points out that this interpretation was already suggested by F. Münter in 1790.

⁵ For the discussion about whether this ritual meal qualifies as a Eucharist, see, most recently, Thomassen, “The Eucharist in Valentinianism,” 1846–49.

rarely commented upon and may appear to be out of character with a movement which is often described as a philosophical “school,” it is nevertheless a fact that prophecy is mentioned in the sources as a feature of Valentinian community life. Thus, Clement of Alexandria notes in his *Excerpts from Theodotus* that, “The Valentinians say that the Spirit which each of the prophets received individually for his ministry is poured out upon all those who belong to the Church. That is why the signs of the Spirit – healings and prophesyings – are accomplished by the Church” (*Exc.* 24). The Valentinian Nag Hammadi tractate *The Interpretation of Knowledge* as well states that “the prophetic gift” manifests itself within the community, though it concedes that this gift, like other individual accomplishments such as intellectual understanding and the power of speaking, is not something that has been granted equally to all the members: “Someone has a prophetic gift? Share it without hesitation! Do not approach your brother with jealousy ...” (NHC XI, 15:35–38).

Valentinian views on the phenomenon of prophecy were grounded in a particular theory about communication between the transcendent Pleroma of aeons and earthly humans. This communication is mediated by “angels.” According to the standard Valentinian narrative, angels were sent out in company with the Saviour by the Pleroma in order to redeem Sophia, the aeon who had gone astray. The emitted Saviour and his retinue of angels are to be understood as an outward manifestation of the Pleroma, which forms a unity, personified by the Saviour, as well as a multiplicity of aeons, represented by the angels. In joyful response to this manifestation, Sophia brought forth an ensemble of “images,” also known as a “spiritual seed.” They are installed in an intermediate region situated between the Pleroma and the cosmos called the Ogdoad, or “the Middle,” and form another link in the chain of communication between the Pleroma and corporeal humans.

This apparatus may be used to explain the prophetic inspiration of the ancient prophets as well as the outpourings of the spirit in contemporary Christian communities. As we saw, the passage from the *Excerpts of Theodotus* quoted above regards these forms of prophecy as instances of the same phenomenon. In the same vein, the *Tripartite Tractate* from Nag Hammadi Codex I explains that the Hebrew prophets were inspired by the spiritual powers dwelling in the intermediate region of “the Logos” (that tractate’s name for Sophia) to proclaim the future arrival of the Saviour (NHC I, 97:15–23, 111:13–23).⁶ Here, we must understand that the mode of existence of the Logos/Sophia and her spiritual offspring in their intermediate region is one of a state of expectation: they have been granted a vision of the Saviour and his angels and in consequence possess the assured hope of a future union with them. That, however, will happen only after the spiritual seed has been sent down to experience life as corporeal humans in the cosmos and the Saviour himself has descended to earth in order to redeem them. Thus, the

⁶ Thomassen and Painchaud, *Traité Tripartite*, 415–16.

“Middle” is intermediary not only in a local, but also in a temporal sense; it represents a temporary stage of preparation for the ultimate consummation. Within this salvation historical economy, the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures are accorded the role of heralds of the coming redemption. They are the mouthpieces of the eschatological hope entertained by Sophia and her seed – without, however, being themselves aware of the true source and the precise meaning of their prophetic inspiration.

Prophecy as practiced in Valentinian communities is based on the same model of Pleroma, angels, and spiritual images. Despite the apparent identification of the two instances of prophecy suggested by *Exc.* 24, however, there are obvious differences between them.⁷ Prophetic inspiration as a part of Valentinian worship takes place at a stage in the salvation economy where the arrival of the Saviour has already taken place and the eschatological consummation is in the process of being realised. The unification with the Saviour and his angels is no longer just a hope for the future; due to the descent of the Saviour into this world, the “images” are now able to experience directly the union with their angelic counterparts. This union is what the Valentinian sources generally refer to as “the bridal chamber.” This is not to be understood as a distinct ritual, but as the name for a soteriological idea that can be applied to a range of ritual practices, including baptism and Eucharist.⁸ In these rituals, the union of the individual carriers of the spiritual seed with the angels as whose images they came into being is symbolically enacted, in anticipation of the integration of the seed into the Pleroma that will take place once the body has been left behind after death. The application of the idea to prophetic performances is explicitly attested only for Marcus and his group, but there is no doubt that it conforms to the general model of Valentinian soteriology. Prophecy in Valentinian communities must in any case have involved a notion of inspirational communication with the aeons of the Pleroma, for whom the angels act as mediators, although the precise nature of this communication may not always have been conceived in the erotic terms favoured by Marcus.

The practices of Marcus and his group also invite some further types of comments. It may be significant, for instance, that Marcus operated in Asia Minor, an area strongly associated with charismatic prophecy, and especially with female prophets, being the birthplace of Montanism.⁹ This connection is further strengthened by the fact that Irenaeus reports (*Haer.* 1.13.7) that followers of Marcus were also active, and disturbingly successful, in the region of his own episcopacy, i.e. Lyons and the Rhone

⁷ It should be noted that Valentinian views on the Hebrew prophets are not uniform. Certain sources seem to attribute their prophetic utterances entirely to inspiration by the Demiurge ([Hipp.], *Ref.* 6.35.1–2; *Exc.* 50.3, 59.2), whereas Iren. *Haer.* 1.7.3 allows for some of the prophecies to derive from Sophia though mediated by the Demiurge; cf. the reference given in the previous note.

⁸ As I have argued in Thomassen, *Spiritual Seed*, Part IV.

⁹ Suggestions in this direction have been made by Turcan, *Les religions de l’Asie dans la vallée du Rhône*, 80–81; Blanchetière, “Le montanisme originel,” *RSR* 53 (1979) 15.

Valley, a region where Montanism also appears to have had an impact.¹⁰ As is well known, tight communication existed between these two regions in Antiquity. Apparently, therefore, Marcosian prophetic Valentinianism was disseminated along the same lines of communication as Montanism, and was able to feed on the same kind of (female) receptivity to prophetic charisma as Montanism did, a proclivity to ecstatic forms of religious experience that was culturally stronger in those regions, it would seem, than in others. It remains unclear, however, what further inferences can be made from such generalisations about the religious mentality prevailing in those regions.

The phenomena described by Irenaeus may also be approached from the more general perspective of the history of ancient religious ideas and ritual practices. Thus, the pattern of drinking, accompanying invocations, being filled with an external power, and with prophetic or oracular speech as a result, can be found in various contexts in Antiquity.¹¹ The cups prepared by Marcus, and whose contents he caused to turn red, were filled, Marcus claimed, with the blood of Charis, and were drunk by the initiates. The mediums attached to Greek oracles also regularly had a drink in order to be filled with the god; in some instances the blood of a bull was ingested for this purpose. In a Jewish context, drinking is a favourite metaphor for the appropriation of Wisdom. Philo of Alexandria, for instance, speaks about how Wisdom “rains down” as and is drunk by humans, filling them with a *sobria ebrietas*. In this context, Wisdom is sometimes called Charis, as we find with Marcus, and Marcus as well speaks about Charis as “raining down” (ἐπομβρούειν).¹² So, in terms of the history of religions, Marcus seems to represent a meeting-point between Jewish traditions about the descent of Wisdom into humans and Greco-Roman ideas and practices of oracular possession.

For the remainder of this paper, however, I shall cast my net even wider, and take a brief look at Marcus and his female devotees from a global cross-cultural perspective. It seems to me that interesting points of comparison may be gained by regarding the phenomenon described by Irenaeus from the point of view of the general category of “possession,” as studied in particular by I. M. Lewis in his now classic book *Ecstatic Religion*. The idea that a supernatural power “takes over,” or “fills” the personality of a person is of course extremely widespread, as are the psychological phenomena that this idea seeks to explain. Whether such phenomena are called “inspiration” or “possession” is to a large extent a matter of sociological perception and legitimacy – “inspiration” denotes something which is socially acceptable, and hence “good,” whereas “possession” often has negative connotations and lacks legitimacy in society at large. (The relationship is analogous to that of “religion” and “magic,” as well as to that of “gods” and

¹⁰ Eus. *HE* 5.3.4; Trevett, *Montanism*, 53, 58–59.

¹¹ Cf. Förster, *Marcus Magus*, 80–81, 113–16.

¹² Förster, *Marcus Magus*, 114–15.

“demons.”) Lewis usefully distinguishes between “central” and “peripheral” cults in making this point.¹³

Now, it is a remarkable fact, as Lewis points out, that all over the world the participation of women in peripheral possession cults is very widespread. Among the more well-known ones are the *sar*, or *zar*, cult found in large parts of Africa and the Middle East and the *candomblé* and voodoo varieties prevalent in Latin America, but one might also include the dancing possession called tarantism from European history and be reminded of the maenads of Dionysos in Antiquity. Lewis, writing in 1971, interpreted all these phenomena as oblique forms of social protest: By assuming a different personality than their own, by exchanging their low social status with a more exalted one based on an alternative cosmology, by acquiring a new and powerful voice through the medium of ritualised possession, the participants in such cults compensate for their lack of status, recognition, and participation in a society dominated by a male elite. Such an interpretation is made more credible by the fact that it is not only women that are attracted to such cults, but also low-status (“downtrodden”) categories of men. The explanatory force of the model with regard to specific cases, however, is often difficult to assess, and especially when the evidence is as scant as in the case of the prophetesses of Marcus. It is quite possible that the ideology and practices of Marcus offered a welcome outlet for women who considered themselves socially oppressed –and/or felt neglected by their husbands – but we cannot infer this as a fact without invoking a circular argument.

Issues of gender politics and social exclusion apart, the cross-cultural phenomenon of possession does in any case offer some interesting parallels to our material. Thus, it is a fact that the image of a sexual union is one the most widespread ways of representing the relationship between a human subject and a possessing spirit. The image can be found in rituals performed among the Dayaks of southern Borneo, where possession is imagined quite graphically as a coition between two deities, the Hornbill of the upper world and the Watersnake of the lower world.¹⁴ And wherever varieties of shamanism is found, the relationship between the shaman and his or her spirit is represented as a marriage. In Ethiopian *zar* and Brazilian *candomblé* the same imagery is used with reference to the ecstatic experiences of ordinary cult members, and in Haitian voodoo even marriage certificates are issued recording the mystical union of a *loa*, or spirit, with a human woman or (less frequently) a man.¹⁵

This comparative material, which has been indicated here only in the briefest manner, leads us to appreciate that what Irenaeus described in his report on Marcus and his followers need not be seen as a freak aberration in the practice of religion, but rather

¹³ Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*, chapters Five and Six.

¹⁴ Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*, 58–59.

¹⁵ Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*, 59–63.

as an example of something very common and easily recognisable.¹⁶ The union of the human person with his or her angel, which is such a central feature of the Valentinian doctrine of *apokatastasis*, i.e. the return to and the restoration of spiritual oneness, here proves capable of being expressed in terms which are similar to the ones used to describe spirit possession in a great variety of cultures. The marriage and spiritual union of the Valentinian devotee with his or her angel as presented by Marcus is conceptually and psychologically comparable to that of the Voodoo cult member with his or her *loa*. In both cases, union with a superior being, conceived as a conjugal relationship and experienced in a state of ecstatic transport serves to redefine the self of the initiate.

From here we can go on to ponder the significance of this observation for Valentinianism generally. Should we think that Marcus' combination of the Valentinian concept of the bridal chamber with the enthusiastic practice of prophecy represents an idiosyncratic invention on the part of the cult leader himself? Or is it possible that the experience of ecstatic rapture was an integral part of Valentinian worship already before Marcus and that such forms of experience may even have given rise, or contributed, to the idea of a spiritual marriage with angels in the first place? And, in a general vain, should experiences of ecstasy and possession by higher powers be accorded a more important place in ancient "Gnosticism" than we have been used to think? Greater sensitivity to that dimension of Gnostic religious practice in the future will certainly not be misplaced.

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Postscript 2021. Since the original version of this paper was written, some further observations may be added that strengthen the case for ecstatic experiences as a feature of Valentinianism. One such element is the hymn written by Valentinus himself, which gives voice to a visionary perception of how all things hang together: "I see how all depends on spirit ..." ([Hipp.] *Ref.* 6.37.7). That hymn is the only preserved sample of Valentinus' psalm-book, which seems to have been in general use in Valentinian communities.¹⁷ Communal chanting is of course a ritual activity that is apt to induce emotional fervour and to create a sense of transport to higher levels of reality. It is regularly employed in the possession cults referred to above.¹⁸ Singing hymns of praise is also the continual occupation of the Valentinian aeons, by which they manifest their unbroken unity with their Father.¹⁹ Like prophetic performances, the collective singing of

¹⁶ "All over the world, we find this conception of a spiritual union, paralleling human marriage, used to image the relationship between a spirit and its regular devotee" (Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*, 59).

¹⁷ Tert. *Carn.* 17.1; Orig. *Enarr. in Job* PG 17:80A; Canon Muratori lines 81–85.

¹⁸ Cf. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*, 53.

¹⁹ This is laid out in particular detail in the *Tripartite Tractate* 62:33–71:7.

hymns was clearly perceived as a way to experience union with the transcendent community of aeons.

Finally, a section in the tractate called *The Interpretation of Knowledge* (NHC XI,1), suggests, though the text is badly mutilated, that the members of the Valentinian *ekklesia* are connected to the aeons of the Pleroma, described as their “roots,” in such a way that they make proclamations and “produce fruits” that resemble the particular aeons in which the individual members are rooted.²⁰ This seems to be another example of “possession” as a feature of Valentinian ritual practice.

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²⁰ NCH XI, 19:16–37. Cf. Funk, Painchaud, Thomassen, *L’Interprétation de la Gnose*, 153–55.

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